

“Simply by Reacting?”: The Sociology of Race and Invisible Man’s Automata

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The final event in Invisible Man prior to its epilogue is among the novel’s most puzzling and cryptic: the narrator dreams that a band of men, led by the communist Brother Jack, castrate him and hang the “blood red parts” on a nearby New York area bridge, which suddenly begins to walk, “clang[ing] doomfully.”<sup>1</sup> This strange episode, often overlooked in readings of the novel, becomes difficult to ignore when we consider its position in the narrative, following the hectic riot sequence, and implicitly providing the narrator with his final motivation for going underground, to the setting of the prologue and epilogue. The image of castration that leads to the sudden animation of the iron bridge seems poised to provide closure to one of the novel’s most striking series of motifs, which highlight animation, automatism, and the examined body. From the mad veteran’s declaration that the narrator is a “walking zombie ... [a] mechanical man!” (IM, 94), through a series of electrified and apparently dancing black bodies and mechanical automaton dolls, to this perplexing final walking bridge, the novel’s uncanny and discomfiting images suggest a persistent underlying concern with the dynamics of automatism and perception. The narrator’s last words to his castrators, “Now let’s see you laugh, scientists!” (570, original emphasis) points us toward the set of discourses and social formations against which the novel is aimed, but which critical accounts of the novel have only begun to address.

The most important scientist to whom the novel responds is arguably Gunnar Myrdal, author of the 1944 sociological study, An American Dilemma, which played a key role in what has recently been called the “long civil rights era.” As this period has been recast in recent historical accounts by Nikil Pal Singh, Carol Horton, and others, both the general social-scientific construction of the “Negro Problem” and Myrdal’s study in particular were deeply influential in shaping new discourses of racial liberalism for the post-war period.<sup>2</sup> Through Ellison’s explicit and sustained responses to Myrdal in Invisible Man, we understand anew that the villains of the novel—those with the “peculiar disposition of the eyes” that causes the protagonist’s invisibility—are not the overt racists whose potential membership in a lynch mob lies just below the surface, but rather the progressive and liberal whites who purport to be anti-racist, while nonetheless harboring unconscious assumptions about “the Negro” and framing him as a problem to be compartmentalized and solved (IM 1).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Ellison’s 1944 review of An American Dilemma, when viewed alongside new evidence from Ellison’s manuscripts, places the novel’s controversial anti-communism—and Ellison’s related disagreements with Richard Wright—under the sign of a more general resistance to a mid-century technocracy that would purport to define and solve social problems by manipulating them from afar.

Ellison accomplishes this critique in the literary register through a series of innovative depictions of automata that participate in a key perceptual dilemma: is the object before me a conscious and fully human being, or not? A widely exploited trope in early cinema—from The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari and Metropolis to White Zombie and Modern Times—the figure of the automaton, mannequin, or robot, and its attendant dilemma, became central to a wide range of representations of subhumanity in the twentieth century. In the wake of developments including behaviorist psychology, Taylorist industrial practices, and the advent of mass-mediated

propaganda, a new attention to the body and to the malleability and manipulability of behavior freighted this figure with political significance. Particularly with the advent of discourses of the “mass man” and of totalitarianism in the early post-War era, the human automaton becomes the figurative expression of a margin of a “free” and democratic community. While the human automaton has long been used in the creation of uncanny or comedic effects, Ellison uses the figure in an innovative and influential way, satirizing and critiquing the political consequences of new scientific discourses that were central to a new approach to racism in the United States. As I will discuss below, Ellison leverages what Stanley Cavell identifies as the ethical dimension of this perceptual dilemma of the automaton throughout his major novel.<sup>4</sup> This ethics of perception has been largely overlooked by the rich exegeses of the text that have focused on the African American cultural heritage and linguistic strategies that Ellison also embraces, just as it has been by admirable studies that have connected Ellison with a variety of important mid-century discourses.<sup>5</sup> At stake for this reading of Ellison is how such scientific discourses purport to “count” African American voices as part of a democratic community, and yet in fact place those voices under erasure.<sup>6</sup> By using the figure of the automaton as a narrative break through which to open discussions of action and reaction, agency and determinism within the context of the “Negro problem,” Ellison exposes several of post-War racial liberalism’s pitfalls, at the same time that he sets the terms through which subsequent literary texts represent the possibility of resistance in the face of disciplinary institutions, scientific determinism, and disenfranchisement. Through readings of Ellison’s essays and manuscripts, as well as the novel’s factory hospital scene, depictions of the Brotherhood, and its Sambo doll scene, this article will demonstrate that African American automata are a driving force behind Ellison’s satire and perhaps the most sustained point of access to the political in Invisible Man.

## I.

The narrator of Invisible Man has his closest brush with a scientific approach to race in what the novel calls the “factory hospital,” after he has been in a traumatic accident working in the paint factory of which the hospital is a part. He lies strapped to a bed, as the doctors standing above him hold a long discussion about his “case” (IM, 235). While the lab-coated, shock-administering doctors would seem at first glance to be psychologists, there are several reasons to see sociologists as the object of Ellison’s satire in this pivotal scene. In the discussion, one doctor asserts, “it would be more scientific to try to define the case. It has been developing some three hundred years” (IM, 237). This statement signals that the scientists are not speaking about the narrator as an individual, but rather as a product of the historical forces that have conditioned and determined him, suggesting the sociological mode of analysis that came to dominate discussions of the race question in the mid-century period. Further indicating that sociologists are the intended target of Ellison’s satire in this scene, his drafts of the novel have one confused character identify the scientists as “socialists, sociolosts, sociologists? I don’t know.”<sup>7</sup> This slippage between a setting that belongs to psychology and a discussion that pertains to social structures and politics signals that this scene’s satire reaches beyond the now-commonplace jibe at the mental institution as a site of normalizing discipline. This duality in the scene indicates that the dynamics of automatism and misinterpretation surrounding the shock treatment contains instead a suggestive response to the epistemological limitations of sociology.<sup>8</sup>

While the sociology of Robert Park and the Chicago School more generally has been discussed at great length with regard to the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in Invisible Man, the most significant sociological text for understanding the novel’s approach to

politics, Gunnar Myrdal's An American Dilemma, has yet to be fully explored.<sup>9</sup> An American Dilemma set many of the terms of debate and horizons of success for the civil rights struggle, and it was notably the first white-authored study not to attribute a de facto inferiority to African Americans.<sup>10</sup> This multi-year study was prompted by the 1935 Harlem riots,<sup>11</sup> which provoked the Carnegie Foundation to fund an investigation into the "Negro Problem and Modern Democracy," to be led by Myrdal with research assistance from a great many African American sociologists and intellectuals.<sup>12</sup> Myrdal's large-scale sociological study pointed out the contradictions of life in the Jim Crow South, and the titular dilemma, is in short the contradiction between the "creed" of American equality and the racist practices of the segregation era. The resulting book, which was released in 1944, pinned its hopes for change on discerning and exposing this contradiction.<sup>13</sup>

While Ellison found points worthy of praise in his then-unpublished 1944 review of An American Dilemma, he finds in the main that African Americans continue to play the role of the object in the study; they are, through the very methods used to confront the problem, denied any measure of autonomy or agency in this descriptive text. According to Ellison, Myrdal concludes that "the Negro's ... opinions on the Negro problem are, in the main, to be considered as secondary reactions to more primary pressures from the side of the dominant white majority," suggesting that, at best, African Americans' ideas are a direct and unreflective effect of social inequality.<sup>14</sup> This charge is borne out through the study: even as Myrdal troubles to cite a wide range of African American intellectuals, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Ralph Bunche, and others, the text gives little credence to what it refers to as "Negro popular theories," defined as "consciously thought-out, though not necessarily logical or accurate system of ideas held by a large group of people," a rubric under which he places the spectrum of African

American political positions from NAACP activism to Garveyism.<sup>15</sup>

Ellison offers a particularly powerful rejoinder to Myrdal's statement about political ideas as "secondary reactions":

but can a people ... live and develop for over three hundred years simply by reacting? Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them? Men have made a way of life in caves and upon cliffs; why cannot Negroes have made a life upon the horns of the white man's dilemma?<sup>16</sup>

Ellison's critique implies that the methods employed by even a sympathetic sociologist like Myrdal can fail, in the main, to understand such an important aspect of the problem as more than a kind of reaction formation. His mention here of "making a way of life in caves" suggests that this active relationship to one's environment should be thought of as a human universal. Through the absurd image of a "way of life on the horns of the white man's dilemma," Ellison suggests that the African American's existence for whites—that is, their reactions to conditions imposed by a white power structure—seems to him to constitute the extent of a white sociology's knowledge of the Negro.

More recent Marxist criticisms of Myrdal have taken a different tack, suggesting a different mode of corrective to ideologies of postwar racial liberalism. In Race and the Making of American Liberalism, Carol Horton draws attention to the "structural, class-rooted developments [that] were simply off the radar screen of the postwar liberal mind."<sup>17</sup> Horton claims that "postwar liberalism contained an internal contradiction that would sabotage its credibility and potential," by posing discrimination alone as the main barrier to national progress.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Ellison sharply criticizes Myrdal's "running battle with Marxism" and the

absence of “class struggle” in the study’s analysis, and he even wonders aloud whether the ultimate goal of such a study is the “more efficient exploitation of the natural and human resources of the South,” such that the collection of scientific data is a tool of class domination.<sup>19</sup>

While the economic and “structural” elements of the race question do not exactly constitute a blind spot for Ellison’s review, the novel’s approach to anti-communism leads him to put his faith in cultural and creative forms of political action that might be able to bring about new forms of recognition for African Americans. Such recognition functions as a prerequisite, for Ellison, to the kinds of structural analysis and redress that Horton rightly deems as urgent and important facets of racial politics.

To illustrate this difference in approach, let us take Ellison’s and Myrdal’s diverging interpretations of the zoot suit. Ellison’s well-known discussion of 1940s African American dance and fashion memorably prophesizes that, “perhaps the zoot suit conceals profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical frenzy of the Lindy-hop conceals clues to great political power.”<sup>20</sup> Myrdal, on the other hand, will bring no such finesse to his interpretation of the zoot suit in An American Dilemma, reading it instead as a “misguided attempt to gain status by conspicuous consumption,” noting that pieces of “cast-off clothing [from which most zoot suits were assembled] may not go well together ... [and] may look foolish or odd on Negroes because of the different skin color and features” (962-3). While Ellison may wax a bit lyrical on the political significance of the fashion item, Myrdal lets the possibility of such political significance pass him by entirely.

Despite its impassioned and suggestive objections to Myrdal’s methodology, Ellison’s review article on Myrdal’s An American Dilemma would not be published until 1964, when it was collected in Shadow and Act. The essay had been rejected from its originally intended

venue, the Antioch Review, as what Ellison called “a mess of loose ends,” and it seems, from the essay’s somewhat contradictory conclusions, that Ellison had attempted to treat more problems than could be addressed adequately in an essay of that length.<sup>21</sup> In the light of the essay’s rejection—which occurred around the same time Ellison turned toward fiction writing for the rest of the decade—it becomes clear that Ellison continues to deal with the same problems in his fiction. Ellison’s critique, in the essay, of the sociological approach to race seems difficult to separate, then, from his inclusion of the factory hospital scene in his novel, and particularly the scientist’s mention of a “case [that] has been developing for nearly three hundred years” (IM, 237). This “three hundred years” echoes provocatively Ellison’s charge to Myrdal in his review—“can we develop over three hundred years simply by reacting?”—and it likewise strips the narrator of his personal identity by viewing him only in terms of the forces supposed to have shaped him.

This discussion of “reaction” as a limiting epistemological perspective develops a critique of a sociological approach to the “Negro Problem” along a path that echoes critiques of scientific modernity performed by Ellison’s contemporaries. While his discussions of scientific production as a tool of class domination coincide with the main thesis of Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment, he holds perhaps a greater affinity with Martin Heidegger. Heidegger’s critique of modern Western science and philosophy in Being and Time holds that both enterprises understand “Being” only as substance, and that to ask the question of Being is to recognize different modes of being: in addition to being as substance, there is also the being of equipment, and most importantly the being of Dasein, or human existence. This latter is the site of culture (what Heidegger calls inhabiting a “world”), of anxiety and care, and of inter-subjective connection.<sup>22</sup> In his seminal essay on scientific modernity, “The Age of the World-

Picture,” Heidegger argues that the assumption that the world can be measured as substance alone has dominated the worldview of our era, an observation that proves particularly relevant to scientific projects like Myrdal’s. The project of science, for Heidegger, is to create and manipulate an ever-more-accurate picture of the world as substance: the ideal of science is to “set up nature to exhibit itself as a coherence of forces calculable in advance.”<sup>23</sup> To be “calculable in advance” is to be treated as a simple substance, and Ellison’s essay on Myrdal seems to make precisely this point, that it is only something sub-human that would simply react.<sup>24</sup> While scientific studies proved to great advantage in court cases like *Brown vs. Board*, they could also have negative effects. The observation and prediction of behaviors (as in behaviorist psychology), the statistical analysis of the relationships between family structure, income, and mental illness, and overly deterministic views of the shaping power of institutions, all contribute to a reductive vision of the subjects under question, what Mark Seltzer has provocatively called “statistical persons.”<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the narrator, as a “case that has been developing three hundred years,” is not a democratic subject, but rather an object to be measured from a distance, a problem to be solved through the one-sided administration of a cure.

The factory hospital scene in Invisible Man will ultimately condense the dynamic of action and reaction discussed in the American Dilemma review into an examination of the protagonist’s body under jolts of electricity. When the scientists in the factory hospital ultimately give the narrator the shock treatment, they identify his jitters and hops along with the electric current as dancing. “Get hot,” they tell him, saying, “they really do have rhythm, don’t they?” (IM, 237). This moment plays within a similar scene of interpretation, as these scientists pretend to postulate a cultural observation, in the form of a stereotype, in what ought only to be a physiological reaction to the electric current. The exclamation, “they really do have rhythm,”

ties a caricature of the narrator's culture to a physiological reaction, and the scientists in the factory hospital inhabit the same short-circuit through which African American culture and political views can be understood as pathologies (IM, 237). This pattern of simple action and reaction bears comparison to the automaton bank the narrator finds later in the novel.<sup>26</sup> He describes its operation: "if a coin is placed in the hand and a lever pressed upon the back, it will raise its arm and flip the coin into the grinning mouth" (IM, 319). By making the narrator dance at the flip of a switch, the ECT-administering doctors are using the narrator's shock treatment for entertainment in the same way a child might use such a bank for a moment of laughter.<sup>27</sup> That this application of electricity causes laughter in the doctors and likely a feeling of mild horror in the reader recalls an earlier disagreement between Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud about how we perceive automata. Freud pointed to realistic automata as a source of the feeling of the "uncanny," while Bergson identified humans' resemblance to machines the wellspring of all comedy. This disagreement points to a deep-seated confusion that automata provoke, when the decision to treat something as a person or as a thing carries profound ethical consequences. That the doctors do not count the narrator as fully human amplifies, in the register of satire, Ellison's critique of Myrdal.

With the factory hospital scene, as Ellison chose to shape his fiction, the treatment seems not, ultimately, to have the effect those scientists desired, namely that "society [should] suffer no traumata on his account" (IM, 236). The narrator becomes, in spite of the treatment, something of a troublemaker for the rest of the novel; rather than being calmed and neutralized, put happily out of sight and mind from a white America that might wish him out of existence. The lasting consequence of this scene, for the purpose of the novel's plot, is that the narrator forgets his name: a result that exemplifies the doctors' decision to treat him as a mere symptom of American

history.

## II.

A strong continuity holds between Ellison's figurations of automata in his critiques of scientific management of the race question and the metaphors that surround his participation in a "scientific" communist party, one that suggests a re-framing of current debates about the novel's anti-communism. In asserting that the main object of critique is the party's scientism, Ellison's anti-communism itself takes on a less important role in our understanding of the novel.<sup>28</sup> Ellison's habit of continuing to favor Marxist modes of analysis, even after his break with the Communist Party in 1943, shares more in common with the post-War Trotskyites like David Bell, Norman Mailer, and Irving Howe, whom Andrew Ross characterizes as "protective of what they saw as the privilege of artistic 'freedom' over and against political 'discipline,' temperamentally unsuited to the steadily committed life of the organized 'professional revolutionary.'"<sup>29</sup> The drafts of Invisible Man suggest, however, that whatever Ellison's "temperament," he wanted to radically alter the Communist Party's approach to political change, an approach that had been tainted by a technocratic ideology that elsewhere pervaded the culture of the 1940s and 1950s.

In the decade following World War II, intellectuals who defined American identity against the concept of "totalitarianism" often figured the scientific state control of society as the primary link between a eugenic fascism and a scientifically Marxist communism.<sup>30</sup> The successful implementation of wartime cinematic propaganda, in the U.S. and Nazi Germany, and the popularity of novels like Aldous Huxley's Brave New World and George Orwell's 1984 in the United States, all made Americans newly anxious about the prospect of what Theodor

Adorno would call the “the administered world,” and the automaton would later become the cinematic and literary focal point for this anxiety, in films such as Invasion of the Body Snatchers.<sup>31</sup> Ellison’s automata, however, would focus this image not on the question of an inscrutable Communist Other, but on the Other which the African American would present to the white American expert.

Invisible Man depicts its protagonist’s initiation into the Brotherhood as a process of learning a “scientific terminology” and “speaking as a scientist” (IM, 306). Even the Brotherhood’s abandonment of the Harlem district is deemed a “scientific necessity,” and the novel makes around two dozen other mentions of science and scientists in connection with the Brotherhood (IM, 503). At the moment of his greatest infatuation with the Brotherhood, the narrator describes the situation:

The world was strange if you stopped to think about it; still it was a world that could be controlled by science, and the Brotherhood had both science and history under control. [...] The organization had given the world a new shape, and me a vital role. We recognized no loose ends, everything could be controlled by our science. Life was all pattern and discipline; and the beauty of discipline is when it works.” (IM 382)

This encapsulation of the party line presents the narrator’s embrace of the party as tied closely to control, mastery, and objective certainty: “everything could be controlled by our science.”

Indeed, the Brotherhood, in introducing the narrator to Marxism, tells him to forget his economics and his sociology that he learned at the university; not because, as the narrator might hope, he will not need them any more, but because the party’s Marxism provides an even more precise, and more complete, objective picture of the world (IM, 305). Taken together with the

infatuation with discipline, the narrator's participation in the party, as "pattern and discipline," takes on an automatic quality: it becomes another mode of objectification, and the party's potential for collective action is undermined by a hierarchical, secretive, and capricious managing class.

Of course, anxiety about party discipline would indeed have tapped into a large set of anxieties in the post-War U.S.: the dialectic between behaviorist and deterministic theories of the self and representations of totalitarian others as automata was, at this point, reaching a point of crisis. Andrew Hoberk has astutely noted that Ellison's *Brotherhood* would also have tapped into the cultural discourse of the "organization man," an anxiety of the newly enlarged post-World War II professional-managerial class.<sup>32</sup> This anti-conformity discourse arguably became one of the defining features of the literature of the 1950s, and a very strong point of continuity with the literatures of the 1960s, which often expressed similar sentiments about conformity in more outrageous ways. Surely, discourses about totalitarianism, particularly Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, played some role in the wide spread of the anti-conformity discourse in the 1950s. Even before the Eichmann trial and Arendt's own later declaration of the "banality of evil" in 1963, earlier discourses on mob psychology (for example, Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd* and Georg Simmel's *The Metropolis and Mental Life*) gave way to analyses of the conformist individual who would follow the crowd, such as Erich Fromm's 1941 *Flight from Freedom*. Numerous discourses of American identity in the 1950s bear the marks of this new international situation, and we can read the "organization man" discourse as actively excluding the aspects of American culture that might be seen to resemble the mob psychology and the perceived conformity that made German fascism possible. In this sense, *Invisible Man* partakes in both the "organization man" discourse as well as the new anti-fascist and anti-communist

sentiment in the U.S. at the time. All three of these contexts are evoked in the dramatic irony of the narrator's infatuation with discipline and in the Brotherhood's instrumental treatment of the protagonist.

This connection with an "organization man" discourse, while convincing through much of the novel, loses some of its explanatory power when the Brotherhood's discussions turn to the question of race. A professed anti-racism is central to Brother Jack's character in the novel, and this anti-racism draws the narrator toward the party's "real democracy."<sup>33</sup> When, for instance, the Brothers ask the narrator to sing, because they say, "all colored people can sing," Jack attempts to silence them and becomes angry at the instance of stereotyping (IM, 312). This moment marks Ellison's satire of him as an explicitly anti-racist avatar of a new racial liberalism, even though the narrator will at one point attempt to reduce Jack to the other white racist figures he encounters (when he suggests sardonically that he be called "Marse Jack" [IM, 473]). When the Brotherhood "sacrifices" the Harlem district, inciting and then abandoning a riot, the narrator sees a problem that persists despite this professed anti-racism: he asks, "what did [the Brotherhood] know of us [African Americans in Harlem], except that we numbered so many, worked on certain jobs, offered so many votes, and provided so many marchers for some protest parade of theirs?" (IM, 507). In this moment, the party's instrumental treatment of the Harlem district—as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself—takes the form of the count, and they are numbered only as manipulable bodies. Suggesting Heidegger's notion of a "world-picture," the narrator claims the Brotherhood was "all a swindle, an obscene swindle! They had set themselves up to describe the world," which is to say that they had cultivated an objective distance from history in order to try to manipulate it in a "scientific" manner (IM, 507).

The final scene before the epilogue, in fact, continues this association between the

sociologists' scientism, the Brotherhood, and the narrator's automatism. The fact that it is a dream sequence, following the narrator's escape from the riot, seems to allow for the inclusion of an even stranger portrayal of the relationship between man, scientist, and automatism, than has been allowed elsewhere in the novel. In a clear parallel with the scene in the factory hospital, the narrator finds himself prostrate, surrounded by men standing over him—this time, the main characters from his past, including Jack, Norton, Tobitt, Ras, and Bledsoe, rather than just the psychiatrists. In the dream, the men castrate him, fulfilling the suggested prescription of one of the doctors in the factory hospital scene midway through the novel. Jack asks the narrator how it feels “to be free of one's illusions,” and the narrator sees his “blood-red parts” hanging in the arch of a high, metal bridge (IM, 569). As he points to the bloody spectacle, he tells them, “there hang not only my generations wasting upon the water [but] your universe, and that drip-drop upon the water is all the history you've made... Now laugh, you scientists. Let's hear you laugh!” (IM, 570). His insistence that these men are “scientists” cements the connection, in the novel's fabric of repeated motifs, between the science of the psychiatrists and that of the Brotherhood. In the image cited above, the bridge from which the narrator's genitals hang begins to walk, “striding like a robot, an iron man, whose iron legs clanged doomfully as it moved” (IM, 570). As a dream of castration anxiety, it may suggest that the narrator's fear is particularly well founded, since the whites in the novel ascribe an unrealistic power or life force to the African American phallus. The suggestive image of the giant robot might also convey a mood of totalitarian horror, wherein the version of the narrator that the scientists create is also an ominous, inhuman, and destructive monstrosity.

The political consequences of the party's objectification of African Americans are most strongly expressed in a conversation between Jack and the narrator that would be cut from the

final version of the novel:

“Look” I said, “but aren’t my people part of history?”

“Yes and no,” [Jack] said. “A people may exist during a historical period and still not be of that period, just as the Indians are still with us but not a part of present day historical movements. [...] They must be able to effectively accept or reject the basic issues of its time, and thus it must learn to act.”

“But don’t we act?” I said.

“Yes, but not always historically,” he said eagerly, “I refer to decisive action. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that the Negro people react rather than act—insofar as they express themselves after those events which profoundly [affect] their destiny have occurred.”<sup>34</sup>

This portion of the conversation between Jack and the narrator may ultimately have been deleted for its similarity to what has become one of the most widely-cited passages in Black Boy, Richard Wright’s statement that African Americans “lived somehow in [Western civilization] but not of it.”<sup>35</sup> In Wright’s powerful turn of phrase, the semantic difference between being “in” and “of” Western civilization signals a mode of alienation, or even of double consciousness, the modifier “somehow” carrying the weight of the senselessness of history. In this passage, however, the difference between being “in” and “of” history is in the final analysis an epistemological difference between ways of seeing and understanding history. Ellison here poses the question of whether agency is an effect of our ways of seeing: seeing someone as “existing during” rather than “being of” a period is a judgment about whether those people have access to forms of power, naturally, but it is also a judgment about where to look for agency. Where an old-fashioned history of “great men” has many times undergone criticism for

overlooking the role of social movements, one would likely point precisely to a Marxist history for a lens through which we would “see” a much wider variety of forms of historical agency and collective action.<sup>36</sup> It would seem, then, that it is an overly rigid definition of an organized proletarian class that restricts the Brotherhood’s understanding of African American agency. This scientific understanding of historical agency can give us a stronger purchase on the meaning of the novel’s repeated mention of “plunging outside history” (IM, 377). The “history” outside of which the protagonist plunges is, in the light of this context, clearly the insistently scientific history of a prognosticating dialectical materialism. Moreover, this quotation provides another deep point of continuity between Ellison’s critique of the social sciences discussed in conjunction with the novel’s factory hospital scene. Ellison’s then-unpublished review of Gunnar Myrdal’s An American Dilemma becomes, in this fragment, the basis for the novel’s critique of the Brotherhood. Here, it is the distinction between “acting” and “reacting” that echoes strongly with the language of that review, which shows that, in Ellison’s understanding, it is both the sociologists like Myrdal, as well as the Communist Party, whose limited grasp of African American culture causes them to perceive and represent African Americans as passive bystanders in history, rather than as different kinds of historical agents.

It is this dynamic of interpretation and historical agency that frames the novel’s central figuration of automatism, the Sambo doll scene. This scene takes place on the street corner, where the narrator encounters his former colleague in the Brotherhood, Tod Clifton, selling paper and cardboard bouncing dolls called “boogie woogie Sambo.” After the narrator recognizes Clifton and tries to approach him, his unlicensed operation happens to be raided by the police, and Clifton is shot after he resists arrest. This suggestive and widely cited scene has been remarked upon for the eerie reciprocal relationship between Clifton and his doll: like the

doll, Clifton bounces with his legs, and his face and arms remain stiff, and his staring eyes do not recognize his friend as he makes a repetitive and outlandish sales pitch for the dolls. Previous readings of the scene have noted how the novel uses this uncanny moment to complicate the relationship between African Americans and objects (through a compelling illustration of the Marxian concept of reification), and as a representation of African American “animatedness,” but neither of these readings satisfactorily address the scene’s function for the plot or its wider significance for the novel.<sup>37</sup>

Clifton’s importance in the earlier scenes of the novel has to do with his susceptibility to other ideologies. Ras the Exhorter, the novel’s parodically reductive representative of black nationalism, seeks out Clifton, and his susceptibility to Ras’s seduction takes the form of a locked gaze: after a dose of rhetoric from Ras, “Clifton looked at Ras with a tight, fascinated expression, pulling away from [the narrator]” (*IM*, 372). The possibility that Clifton could be swayed so easily from a party Marxist position to a Black Nationalist one, then, evokes a totalitarian conformity, the possibility of becoming a mass man. Later, by selling these dolls in the street, Clifton participates in his own denigration in a profoundly unsettling way, suggesting that he might be susceptible to any kind of mental manipulation.

It is after the encounter with Ras that Clifton suggests that he might need to “plunge outside of history” and the Sambo doll episode takes on an explicitly political valence when the narrator reconsiders this earlier statement (*IM*, 377). He judges that Clifton had “fallen outside of history,” but is made uneasy, thinking Clifton “knew that only in the Brotherhood could we make ourselves known, could we avoid being empty Sambo dolls” (*IM*, 434). This metaphor of emptiness suggests that the narrator believes what Jack has said about agency at this point: that only within the white-organized proletarian class can African Americans act “historically.”<sup>38</sup>

When the narrator encounters Clifton selling Sambo dolls on the street, he finds a dilemma in which he suspects that Clifton has, indeed, ceased being a rational agent, and the passages in which this encounter is described produces a singular and strange effect. Between the narrator, the doll, and Clifton, it seems as though the doll's automatic movements infect the other two characters. First, the narrator describes the Sambo,

a grinning doll of orange-and-black tissue paper ... [that moved] up and down in a loose-jointed, shoulder-shaking, infuriatingly sensuous motion, a dance that was completely detached from the black, mask-like face. [...] I saw the tip of the spieler's toes press upon the circular cardboard that formed the feet and a broad black hand come down, its fingers deftly lifting the doll's head and stretching it upward ... then releasing it to dance again. And suddenly the voice [of the salesman's spiel] didn't go with the hand. [...] It was Clifton, riding easily back and forth in his knees, flexing his legs without shifting his feet, his right shoulder raised at an angle and his arm pointing stiffly at the bouncing doll as he spieled from the corner of his mouth. (IM, 431-2)

Sianne Ngai has discussed how, in the language of this passage, Clifton and the doll are co-implicated in the doll's movement, such that "the human agent anthropomorphizes the puppet ... but the puppet also mechanizes the human."<sup>39</sup> This contrast, the detachment, between the easy and "sensuous" rocking of both figures simultaneously, and the stiffness of their expressions, signals that either Clifton is imitating the doll or that in playing the part of the spieling salesman he enacts a form of entertainment much like that of the doll itself. The narrator, in the moment of recognizing Clifton, describes himself as "paralyzed" before he moves to spit on the bouncing doll (IM, 432). This is clearly an uncanny moment, the similarity between Clifton and his

Sambo doll's movements producing an uncomfortable confusion. To call once again upon Bergson's interpretation of the automaton, it seems particularly strange that the Sambo doll should produce such a great deal of laughter in this scene: "He'll keep you entertained. He'll make you weep sweet—/ Tears from laughing," claims Clifton, and the crowd around Clifton continues laughing throughout the entire scene (IM, 432, original emphasis). The laughter is perhaps the scene's most non-sensical element—it seems difficult to imagine that a cardboard doll, even if it does move "as though it receive[s] a perverse pleasure from its motions," could captivate a crowd so completely (IM, 431). Rather, it is the proximity between Clifton's movements and that of the Sambo doll that gives the viewers the impression that the seller and the product are two halves of an entertaining vaudeville act. When the narrator spits on the doll, his attempt to refuse the spectacle actually implicates him in it, as he sees "a short pot-bellied man look down [at the doll], then up at me with amazement and explode with laughter, pointing from me to the doll" (IM, 433). The man apparently laughs because he supposes the narrator would be dim-witted enough to mistake the Sambo doll for another black man, as in the stock situation of comedy routines that can be traced back to Joel Chandler Harris's "Wonderful Tar-Baby" story. The difference, however, between the Tar-Baby and the Sambo doll scene, is that the latter is both a comic and tragic encounter with a sham interlocutor: for the white man who explodes with laughter, the scene is a comic one, but the scene's uncanny force "paralyze[s]" the narrator, and ultimately ends in Clifton's death.

The episodes with Clifton highlight the ethical dimension to Ellison's critique of Myrdal and the factory hospital scientists, particularly when Clifton's death sets in motion the novel's final events, including the narrator's break from the scientific Brotherhood. In what is perhaps the central ethical gesture of the novel, the narrator publicly mourns Clifton and defends his

actions against the Brotherhood, who call Clifton a “traitor” (IM, 467). The Brotherhood has used Clifton as a means to an end, discarding him when he is no longer valuable; by contrast, the narrator defends Clifton as “a man and a Negro; a man and brother [even though he was] jam-full of contradictions” (IM, 467). In the moment when the narrator finds Clifton on the corner, he spits on one of the dolls to signify his disapproval of Clifton’s actions, but he nevertheless insists on trying to reach Clifton, even though he had apparently lost his conscious autonomy and refused to return his gaze. Despite his uncertainty regarding the humanity of his former friend, the narrator makes a leap of faith in pursuing him and in defending his proper burial. As with the novel’s other interpretive dilemmas involving automatism, an act of acknowledgement across a gulf of uncertainty becomes the pivotal ethical gesture.

Unlike the factory hospital scientists, who were content to treat the narrator as a machine unworthy of ethical obligation, the narrator here offers acknowledgment despite his uncertainty about Clifton. That this acknowledgment brings about the final break from the scientific Brotherhood can remind us again of the general tenor of the narrator’s party involvement. The main source of tension in this involvement is that, in a series of tests and orations, the narrator is not sufficiently “scientific,” or “theoretical” in his approach—in his final argument with the Brothers, they call him, sarcastically, a “great tactician” and “quite a theoretician” (IM, 464, 469). His job, the Brotherhood tells him in this final argument, is to “keep repeating the last thing we told you to say,” suggesting that, as an organization man, he is acknowledged as an object, and as a tool, but not as a rational individual capable of thought and action (IM, 470).

### III.

In order to delineate the alternatives that Ellison’s novel suggests to this mid-century

scientism, let us return to the typescript's dialogue between the narrator and Brother Jack.

Where Brother Jack states that “the Negro people react rather than act,” we find that this excised conversation provides the proper context for a frequently cited moment in the novel's riot scene, in which the narrators sees Harlem's poor burning their tenement buildings. The narrator declares that, despite what the Brotherhood has claimed, these Harlem residents are “capable of their own action” (IM, 548). It is ultimately in the capability for action and in creative political gestures that Ellison's novel finds hope, in a small set of affirmative answers to the novel's well-known question, “can politics ever be an expression of love?” (IM, 452). The liberation from the tenement buildings in the riot, as well as the narrator's musings on the zoot suiters—“who knew but that they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious?”—are two well-rehearsed examples of this creative expression (IM, 441). Less often noted, however, is the anti-eviction parade that the narrator puts on early in the novel, in which he employs a kind of dancing or step team, the “Hot Foot Squad,” which delights the crowd and “dumbfounds” the police, a mood of protest that anticipates the creative political culture of the 1960s (IM, 380).<sup>40</sup> On the level of the novel's language, there is for instance the exchange between the black vet and the white donor Norton in the Golden Day bar, in which the vet had been “trying to change some blood into money,” and the vet “discovered it and John D. Rockefeller stole the formula from [him],” a brilliant mix of Marxian thought about the nature of labor, a celebratory nod to Charles Drew (the African American inventor of blood plasma), and a veiled criticism of white philanthropy's agendas, as Rockefeller had been one of Booker T. Washington's benefactors (IM, 81). In addition to the novel's language and reported actions like the parade, the novel ultimately showcases the narrator's talent as an orator as a source of creative political action. This oratorical skill, which leads to his underground hibernation and the scene from which he

writes, is not far removed from the form of the novel itself as a form of creative politics: the dialectical structure of the fiction is itself a testament to the paradox, contradiction and depth of experience which remain invisible to the scientific gaze.

In closing, I want to revisit the question of an ethics of acknowledgment, whose dilemmas Ellison so consistently figures through the specter of automatism in the novel, through Ellison's 1953 National Book Award acceptance speech, where he claims the novel attempts to return to "the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy."<sup>41</sup> This seems like a somewhat conservative statement on the face of it; it might be read, in the light of his disavowals of Wright's "narrow naturalism" later in the same speech, with an emphasis on personal responsibility, a rejection of rhetorics of damage or blame. Yet the question of a responsibility for democracy—particularly if we shift from the local and customary register of the "moral" toward the more generalizable "ethical" register—might persuade us to read the text as an exploration of what that responsibility might mean, and of how an individual or a collective might embrace it. An ethical responsibility for democracy would be precisely what the present essay has attempted to explicate relative to Ellison's novel: that an acknowledgment of others as rational and capable political agents must be the sine qua non of democracy. This is the acknowledgment withheld in the scientific management and legal disenfranchisement of an African American population, and in a scientific communist party's instrumental treatment of a community, even as perpetrated by staunchly anti-racist individuals. This acknowledgment, moreover, is not a mystical or elusive element: it consists in acting as if a particular subject is capable of playing an active role relative to his or her surroundings. Ellison's novel brings out the dynamics of this acknowledgment through the parodically reductive image of the African American automaton, urging the reader to recognize anew the complexity and irreducibility of

human experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Vintage, 1952), 570. Further references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text as IM.

<sup>2</sup> Nikil Pal Singh, Black is a Country (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 2004), Carol Horton, Race and the Making of American Liberalism (New York: Oxford U P, 2005), and related projects including David Southern, Gunnar Myrdal and Black-White Relations: The Use and Abuse of *An American Dilemma, 1944–1969* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU P, 1987), Daryl Scott, Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880–1996 (Chapel Hill: UNC P, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> The role of sociology is central to Ellison’s own explanations of the novel, as well, as his 1981 introduction to the novel calls “invisibility” a play on the “pseudo-scientific concept [of] ‘high visibility’” (IM, xv). The “‘high visibility’ [that] actually rendered one un-visible” (IM, xv, original emphasis), has also been discussed with regard to black masculinity in Daniel Y. Kim, Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow: Ralph Ellison, Frank Chin, and the Literary Politics of Identity (Stanford, CA: Stanford U P: 2005), 66–82. Related discussions of the intertwining of black masculinity and the enterprise of sociology can be found in Marlon Ross, Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era (New York: NYU P, 2004), 244–5, 145–191, and “Chapter One of Booker T. Washington’s Up From Slavery and the Feminization of the African American Male” in Representing Black Men, Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 95–110, and Wahneema Lubiano, “But Compared to What? Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in School Daze, Do the Right Thing, and the Spike Lee Discourse,” in Representing Black Men, 173–204, esp. 185.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Cavell, The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy (New York: Oxford U P, 1979), 403–418. For Cavell, the ethical gesture of “acknowledgment” is prior to all forms of scientific and philosophical knowledge. A similar assumption grounds Ellison’s attempt to undermines forms of white scientific knowledge about African Americans that explicitly withhold such acknowledgment.

<sup>5</sup> Such critical accounts include, of course, Houston Baker’s Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature and Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s The Signifying Monkey, as well as contextualizations within the post-War culture of anti-communism (Barbara Foley), the organization man (Andrew Hoberek, discussed below), and post-War intellectuals (Jerry Gafio Watts and Kenneth Warren). My work also builds on, though ultimately disagrees with, other recent work that has paid attention to the novels automata. Sianne Ngai suggests in a brief reading of the Sambo doll scene (discussed below) that the representation of automata is related to a crisis of agency associated with African American “animatedness ... a representation of the African American ... as excessively ‘lively’ and a pliant body” (12). Bill Brown, whose work I also discuss below, has read some of the novel’s scenes with automata as part of a longer discussion of racist objects and memorabilia.

<sup>6</sup> I understand Ellison’s thinking about how African Americans do or do not “count” as part of a democratic community through Jacques Rancière’s writings. He posits that reorganizing the count of citizens is the fundamental gesture of democratization: “political dispute is distinct from all conflicts of interest between constituted parties of the population, for it is a conflict over the very count of those parties. It is not a discussion between partners but an interlocution that undermines the very situation of the discussion” (100). Jacques Rancière, Disagreement: Politics

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and *Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: U of MN P, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Papers of Ralph Waldo Ellison, Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., box 146, folder 13. This folder was retyped in 1949, suggesting that this phrase was cut relatively late in the writing process. Aside from being a somewhat feeble pun, this utterance may have been excised because it is spoken in this draft by an earlier incarnation of the character “Mary,” who will be cast in a different role in the final version of the novel. In this version, she is a kindly janitor who aids the narrator in escaping the factory hospital.

<sup>8</sup> By the time he would write *Invisible Man*, Ellison had already incorporated what is now a commonplace mode of satirical asylum imagery into his fiction, using the figure of the straitjacket-toting guards as lackeys of the racist power structure in his 1944 short story, “Flying Home”: these guards have the power to declare a well-to-do African American fighter pilot “insane” for reaching above his “natural” position. A similar satirical mode is taken up again in *Invisible Man*, when the dean of the Negro college, Bledsoe, has a war veteran shipped away to another mental institution after speaking too freely to the white philanthropist Norton (*IM*, 151–2). In this moment, Ellison combines the notion of the mental institution as a space of containment for radical or outrageous ideas with a critique of the black bourgeoisie, embodied in Bledsoe, as the social group guilty of such silencing. Nevertheless, the novel’s factory hospital scene seems not to fit within even this transposed version of the familiar Foucauldian critique of mental institutions. Rather, despite the presence of electroconvulsive therapy as an instance of institutional violence, the “case” that has been developing for “three hundred years” demands a critical frame capable of understanding the reach of sociology’s implications, comprising deeper questions about the act of scientific interpretation.

<sup>9</sup> See Kim, 47 and Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004), 71–6. Ferguson uncovers from Ellison’s papers a discarded chapter of *Invisible Man* that utilizes Robert Park’s infamous statement, “The Negro is the lady of the races,” and analyzes the gender politics of the Trueblood scene in the light of John Dollard’s *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, a sociological study in the Chicago tradition. Stephen Schryer, “Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction,” (Diss. Univ. of California at Irvine, 2007) discusses Ellison’s engagement with Myrdal more centrally, but claims that, as a member of a new professional-managerial class, Ellison is closer to Myrdal than he realizes.

<sup>10</sup> Nikhil Pal Singh calls *An American Dilemma* “the landmark reference work for the long civil rights era” (142). He argues that *An American Dilemma* is particularly important for its articulation of the international significance of Jim Crow: “In the final analysis, what made *An American Dilemma* such an influential document was its presentation of ‘the Negro problem’ as the symbolic pivot on which future claims to [the] U.S. global mission rested” (148).

<sup>11</sup> Singh, 134. Although Myrdal himself had great hopes that his study would help to bring about racial justice in the U.S., the fact that riot control forms part of the project’s original impetus adds another layer of significance to the riot scene in Ellison’s novel.

<sup>12</sup> The question of Ellison’s own position relative to African American sociology is a complex one, in part because he mostly avoids direct engagements with them, perhaps out of politeness or a fear of alienating himself from the community of prominent African American intellectuals. Rampersad notes that Ellison sent courtesy copies of *Invisible Man* as a way to fuel “special rivalries,” and this list included both Richard Wright and the prominent black sociologist Horace Cayton (259). On a conceptual level, Ellison might have agreed with Marlon Ross’ assessments

in Manning the Race that African American sociologists “used urban ethnography to construct their own masculinity as normal, their sexuality as self-disciplined, and their social status as professional—that of men deserving managerial responsibility for the black urban mass” (147). I see Ellison’s humanism as drawing on a tradition of African American definitions of cultural analysis as distinct from scientific analysis, including Du Bois’s own statement, preceding his musicological analyses in “The Sorrow Songs,” that “so woefully unorganized is sociological knowledge that the meaning of progress . . . and the limits of human perfectability, are veiled, unanswered sphinxes on the shores of science” in The Souls of Black Folk (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 192. Likewise, Alain Locke opens his essay “The New Negro” with the claim that the titular character of his essay has remained invisible to the “watch and guard of statistics” kept by the “Sociologist, the Philanthropist, [and] the Race Leader” in The New Negro: An Interpretation (New York: Boni, 1925), 3. We might also look to Take Du Bois’ oft-quoted line from The Souls of Black Folk: “while sociologists gleefully count his bastards and his prostitutes, the very soul of the toiling, sweating black man is darkened by the shadow of a vast despair” (42).” which It introduces a useful distinction between the object of the count (the bastard) and the “very soul” which it neglects, a distinction that Ellison uses in his depiction of the Brotherhood. (42). In this line of thinking, one might argue that Ellison’s disavowal of sociological knowledge (which he would likely have associated with Wright), can be seen as an enabling condition for his faith in the promise of cultural analysis and action.

<sup>13</sup> See Ellen Herman, The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts, (Berkeley: U of CA P, 1995), 182. Herman claims that Adorno’s text is the first to focus on the question of prejudice as “determined by deep psychic structures,” a model that Myrdal embraces. As for the efficacy of this method I would argue that Ellison, like Horton, rejects outright Myrdal’s belief that exposing the contradiction of the Jim Crow practice with the ideal of the “American creed” will be, in itself, all that is needed to solve the “Negro problem.”

<sup>14</sup> Ellison, “An American Dilemma: A Review” in The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison ed. John Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995): 339. Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy (New York: Pantheon, 1944). It appears that Ellison misquoted this passage from his notes, though he does not misrepresent the gist of Myrdal’s argument. Ellison’s quotation appears to be a paraphrase of one or more of the following passages: (1) “History is never irredeemable, and there is still time to come to good terms with colored peoples. Their race pride and race prejudice is still mostly a defensive mental device, a secondary reaction built up to meet the humiliations of white supremacy” (1018), (2) “The voluntary withdrawal and the self-imposed segregation were shown to be a secondary reaction to a primary white pressure” (669 n.1), or (3) “Negro thinking is almost completely determined by white opinions—negatively and positively. It develops as an answer to the popular theories prevalent among whites by which they rationalize their upholding of caste. In this sense it is a derivative, or secondary, thinking. The Negroes do not formulate the issues to be debated; these are set for them by the dominant group” (784). It would seem that the variety of similar statements throughout Myrdal’s work serve to underscore the centrality of this idea of a “secondary reaction” to Myrdal’s methodology.

<sup>15</sup> Myrdal, An American Dilemma, 781-6. Singh’s account of Myrdal’s representations of African American politics agrees with Ellison’s impression of the work: “In the end, Myrdal denied the autonomous capacity of black people as individuals and as a collectivity (even as humans) to formulate a coherent, public standpoint on the social and political realities of

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American life” (147).

<sup>16</sup> Ellison, “An American Dilemma: A Review,” 339.

<sup>17</sup> Horton, Race and the Making of American Liberalism, 123.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* 123.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* 337–8, original emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Ellison, “Editorial Comment.” Negro Quarterly 1(4), 301.

<sup>21</sup> Arnold Rampersad, Ralph Ellison: A Biography (New York: Knopf, 2007), 181. See also Jerry Gafio Watts, Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1994). Reading Ellison’s essays independently of his fiction, Watts claims that Ellison’s response to sociology amounts only to “one-dimensional proclamations of black human agency against one-dimensional social-scientific denials of such agency” (57). I claim that, by reading his work on sociology in conjunction with his fiction, it is clear that Ellison takes puts a great deal of thought into how that denial of agency functions, and into ways of recuperating that agency that I discuss in my conclusion.

<sup>22</sup> See Martin Heidegger, Being and Time. trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), esp ¶14, and also Hubert Dreyfus, Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991): 29-33.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World-Picture,” in The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 21.

<sup>24</sup> See also Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness” Criticism, 50.2 (2008): 177–218. Moten makes the suggestive point that the work of Frantz Fanon, in Black Skin, White Masks, “places the Heideggerian distinction between being (thing) and Dasein—the being to whom understandings of being are given; the not, but nothing other than, human being—in a kind of jeopardy that was already implicit...” (186). I would suggest that Ellison’s automata place a similar kind of pressure on this distinction, but that, for both Ellison and Fanon, the fact of being seen only as object calls for a kind of redress, in the form of an attempt to convey one’s psychological complexity to the scientist or, as in Fanon’s essay, to the terrified young white girl on the street.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Seltzer, Bodies and Machines (New York: Routledge, 1992), 100.

<sup>26</sup> In a recent essay, Bill Brown has pointed critical attention toward automaton figurines of African Americans, in Invisible Man and Spike Lee’s Bamboozled, where he concludes that African American “golliwog” memorabilia, often evoke the U.S.’s slave-holding past as a point of unsettling confusion between people and objects. Brown cites in particular “the apprehension that within things we will discover the human precisely because our history is one in which humans were reduced to things (however incomplete that reduction)” (207). In considering Ellison’s novel as an “elaborate organization of both plot and character as a series of object-relations” (202), Brown enables a particularly productive approach to the novel. I would contend, however, that it is not only America’s slaveholding past, but also a new set of phenomena that weigh on American consciousness, namely the construction by scientific, bureaucratic, and state institutions, of the African American as a product of the Negro problem. Bill Brown, “Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny,” Critical Inquiry 32.2 (2006): 175.

<sup>27</sup> This moment in the novel also resonates with an earlier instance in the “battle royal” scene, in which the narrator is made to grab for coins on an electric carpet: in addition to the repeated image of African American bodies receiving electric shocks, the narrator sees “attendants in

white jackets” put the electrified rug in place. The white jackets, suggestive of the lab coats worn by medical doctors and many research scientists, echo with the doctors who go on to discuss the narrator’s “case” in the factory hospital, and the earlier scene with the carpet is also explicitly framed as a piece of entertainment for white audience (IM, 26). Through this parallel, the novel not only links these scientists to the broad, degrading physical humor that defined racist depictions of African Americans of the pre-Civil Rights United States, but also calls on the reader to see the scientist’s white jacket as a symbol of a desire to repress racial threats in a tidy fashion.

<sup>28</sup> Here I would argue against critics like Barbara Foley, who accuses Ellison of inhabiting in a “rhetoric of anti-communism” in order to curry favor with white audiences (530). Ellison’s is an anti-communism that criticizes the particular party approach to the social problem at hand, and with sufficient substance and continuity to suggest that the depiction of the Brotherhood was not a callous or superficial marketing calculation on Ellison’s part. Barbara Foley, “The Rhetoric of Anticommunism in *Invisible Man*,” *College English* 59 (1997): 530–47.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 22. For an example of Marxian thinking after 1943, see Ellison’s 1944 “*An American Dilemma: A Review*,” where he claims that “the Negro Problem” is “where Marx cries out for Freud and Freud for Marx” in addition to criticizing Myrdal for ignoring “the class struggle” (335, 339).

<sup>30</sup> Most notably Hannah Arendt, in the 1958 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which states the equivalence between Nazism and communism as their scientifically motivation in forcing a “law of Nature” (Darwinism) or a “law of History” (Marxism) into being, which “claim[s] to transform the human species into an active carrier of a law to which human beings otherwise would only passively and reluctantly be subjected” (462). Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958).

<sup>31</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1979), x.

<sup>32</sup> This gives one plausible explanation for Barbara Foley’s finding that the narrator’s salary was not accurate for the Communist Party of the time: making more money makes the narrator’s joining the Brotherhood primarily a means of economic success, rather than a matter of being persuaded to join out of belief. In an early outline of *Invisible Man*, Ellison writes that he joins the Brotherhood “not because he believes, but because they ask him during his moment of deepest despair,” though eventually he becomes “convinced that [in the Brotherhood] he has found a real democracy” (*Collected Essays* 347). Another explanation for this way of including the Brotherhood material can be found in Ellison’s files, where he had filed away a clipping of a communist exposé from *Life* magazine, entitled “Portrait of a Communist.” It cites this man’s salary as 85\$ a week for fourteen hours of work per week, more than the narrator’s salary of 60\$. It also includes a somewhat titillating account of interracial relationships in the party. Such an article might have shown Ellison that the communist exposé was a viable and sale-able genre of storytelling. Ralph Waldo Ellison Papers, Box 200, Folder 6. John McPartland, “Portrait of an American Communist,” *Life* 24:1: 5 Jan 1948, 23–6.

<sup>33</sup> Ralph Ellison, “Working Notes for *Invisible Man*,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, 346.

<sup>34</sup> Ralph Waldo Ellison Papers, box 143, folder 2, 667.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper, 1944), 37. In the Christian tradition, the injunction to “be in the world but not of it,” is a common paraphrase of John 15:19 and John 17:13-16 from which Wright likely borrowed.

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<sup>36</sup> Including Marx's "all history is the history of class struggle" in the Manifesto and histories like Howard Zinn's A People's History of the United States.

<sup>37</sup> See Bill Brown, "Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny," 207, and Sianne Ngai, Ugly Feelings 12.

<sup>38</sup> Watts' excellent study of Ellison's essays, Heroism and the Black Intellectual, proposes a perspective on the communist party that is useful for interpreting this moment in biographical terms, as well: Watts claims that, for both Ellison and Wright as authors, the communist party had been a "social marginality facilitator," (16), that is to say, that early on both Ellison and Wright saw the party as one of the only white audiences willing to read their work (and, in Wright's case, they served as a source of education).

<sup>39</sup> Ngai, 113.

<sup>40</sup> The Hot Foot Squad, in its creative and corporeal aspects, is squarely in line with Andrew Ross's useful distinction between the roles of creativity and the body in the Old Left as opposed to the New Left, which is marked by a new "attention to personal, liberatory values [as] a major element in redefining responsibility in terms either addressed to the body directly, or else enlisted the mind and psyche as media of self-transformation, rather than as tools to be harnessed to objective political causes" (220).

<sup>41</sup> Ralph Ellison, "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion," in The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison, 151.