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BLACK POWER

Minstrelsy and Electricity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

by Johnnie Wilcox

Introduction: Prototype for a Black Cyborg Subject

Several stubborn blind spots manifest themselves in the critical field regarding the nature and origins of cyborg identity, especially with regard to race.¹ The problem has many dimensions with none more significant than those which relate to origin and lineage. That is, what are the earliest literary uses of what we today call cybernetics, how do these uses intersect with race, and how does this affect our understanding of subsequent literary and cultural representations of race and cybernetics? Some of these very complicated questions can be addressed by considering Ralph Ellison's 1952 *Invisible Man*, a novel considered by some to be the most important work of American fiction in its era.²

My argument is that *Invisible Man* is the first American document (fictional or otherwise) to forge a relationship between cybernetics and race, and that *Invisible Man* traces the narrator's gradual transformation into a black cyborg as a result of his several exposures to electricity. Each time the narrator encounters the forces of electricity—during the Battle Royal, in the Liberty Paints Factory hospital, and in his hole full of light—he discovers increasingly effective strategies for opposing the dominant system of white, racist power. Through his exposures to electricity, the narrator learns: he must conduct his subversion of the system covertly, as the system's "hidden organ"; how to use the black vernacular strategy of signifyin(g) to undermine authority; that the abject subject position of the Sambo enacts a powerful blackface critique of existing power structures; that recursive architectures multiply power and autonomy; and that electricity is a media interface that can produce race as a network effect and that it can be used to assemble a network of subalterns within the context of a more powerful social apparatus.

In the course of my argument, I use several disparate areas of critical discourse: recent criticism examining the role of electricity in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, scholarship concerning the concept of the cyborg, and an adaptation of the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari pertaining to their notion of the "body without organs."³ I assert that Ellison's *Invisible Man* explores how electricity, as an interface between organism and machine, mediates blacks (black men) into the American system of capital, a body without organs, and that the novel documents the effects this mediation has upon the subjects so transformed. By the novel's close, Ellison finds a cyborg identity in *Invisible Man*'s narrator who apprehends race as a transdermal effect of network connections. That is, blackness and invisibility are neither ontological conditions (essence) nor behavioral characteristics (performance) but intensities of the body without organs which manifest once the proper conditions prevail and the required connections have been made.

While the boundary between animal and machine is often construed as an ontological barrier, Ellison's *Invisible Man* reconfigures this boundary as an interface whose primary substance is electricity. Electricity is a medium that binds humans to other humans and to nonhumans by virtue of its abilities to carry information and to flow through the very (conductive) materials of which organisms and machines are made. As the narrator discovers, electricity is well-suited for improvising networks of heterogeneous elements because it has the ability to couple entities which inhabit disparate ontological orders. Electricity, in other words, operates as a transducer.⁴

Put another way, electricity is a technical substance through which the 1930s America represented in *Invisible Man* transduces entities across disparate racial and ontological orders. The process of cybernation empowers the narrator by literally enabling him to manipulate the flow of electricity through his body. In a crucial moment, the narrator discovers he "could contain the electricity—a contradiction, but it works" (27). The narrator is able to alter the flow of electricity in a way that undermines the dominant power structure and gives form to at least one black subaltern. As Douglas Ford notes, despite ongoing critical neglect of the role it plays in the novel, electricity "functions as a trope that provides new aesthetic possibilities, as well as a means of accessing discourses of power and productive strategies of resistance" (888). In his hole of 1,369 lights powered by energy he appropriates, undetected, from Monopoled Light & Power, *Invisible Man's* unnamed narrator is perhaps American literature's (and the entire world's) first bona fide network hacker, occupying the first node of a network yet to come. *Invisible Man* chronicles the acquisition of technical mastery by a black male, offering a counternarrative to historical representations which restrict technological proficiency to white males.

In some ways, reading race as intensities on the body without organs can be compared to Michael Omi and Howard Winant's understanding of the production of race through "racial formation," which they define as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (55). Generalizing for convenience, the relationship articulated among racial project, racial formation, and race is (respectively) congruent to the relationship among intention, process, and product/effect. In Omi and Winant's thinking, "racial projects" motivate the process of "racial formation" and thereby produce "race."

One of the problems of Omi and Winant's model is that it does not explicitly account for the mechanisms by which a racial project achieves its aims, specifying only that a racial project represents "an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (56). Furthermore, the concept of a "racial project" suggests ideology works on a conscious level, but, as Charles R. Lawrence notes, "There will be no evidence of self-conscious racism where the actors have internalized the relatively new American cultural morality which holds racism wrong or have learned racist attitudes and beliefs through tacit rather than explicit lessons" (241). Finally, the term *race* to some degree hypostatizes the very thing it names.

To avoid these problems, I will employ the term *racial-desiring* to designate both conscious and unconscious instances of the motivated production of what Omi and Winant call "race." To emphasize the produced-ness of "race," I will use Omi and Winant's term "racial formation" to designate products of the process of "racialization." In summary form, conscious and unconscious racial-desiring drives (the process of) racialization whose

end product is a racial formation. As a final point of clarification, racial-desiring can be compared to desiring in the Deleuze and Guattari model. Racial-desiring can produce (among others) racist, oppressive, and ameliorative racial formations; context and inter-connection determine the nature of any racial formation, illustrated in the Liberty Paints Factory hospital scene which I analyze below.

Regarding the mechanisms of racialization, racial-desiring produces racial formations through various assemblages or “ensembles,” which are comprised of technical machines, municipal architecture, economic policy, social custom, legal precedent, genetic inheritance, individual perception, scholarly interpretation, religious doctrine, etc. The material and immaterial elements which constitute any given ensemble exist across disparate ontological orders. Taken together as ensembles, they are the technical means by which racial formations are generated. By nature of their composition, these racial formations are both flexible and durable, able to change over time but also able to maintain clusters of “defining” characteristics which themselves change. As I explain below, many things besides racial formations (e.g., cyborgs) are produced by such technical ensembles.

For example, *Invisible Man*’s narrator explains that his invisibility “occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact” (3), that (on the most superficial level) it is the product of an interaction between himself and the visual organs of people he encounters. The narrator recalls “a tall blonde man” into whom he “accidentally bumped” and who paradoxically “saw [the narrator] and called [him] an insulting name,” even though “the man had not *seen*” the narrator (4). In this instance, the blonde man’s racial-desiring produces invisibility as a racial formation. It is important to note that invisibility here is not a failure of visual perception or of psychological registration on the part of the tall blonde man. Invisibility here is a positive substance that transforms the narrator’s race into something other than black, even at the same time it is “produced” by the blonde man’s perception of the narrator’s blackness. Racialization also operates in the other direction. Imbued with his own racial-desiring, the narrator identifies the source of his invisibility as an already racialized figure. In the period just following the second World War (and even today), the description of “a tall blonde man” would convey an image of Aryan (white) supremacy. In one sense, then, the narrator influences his own racialization when he identifies (racializes) the man as “a tall blonde.” The scenario can be compared to distorting mirrors facing each other. The narrator produces (in his narrative account of his own racialization) a racial formation that affects the man he accidentally bumps into. Analyzing this encounter for ways in which racial formation is produced by racial-desiring reveals a complex interaction between the body of the unnamed narrator, the body of the unnamed man, their conscious and unconscious racial-desiring, and a number of other material and intangible elements. The racial formations—a tall blonde man and the narrator’s invisibility—generated in this encounter (a spontaneously occurring ensemble) affect their perceptions of each other and generate, recursively, further racial formations. The feedback pattern is so intense that both men find themselves in a confrontation which nearly becomes deadly. The narrator learns that recursive architectures can multiply small inputs (in this instance dangerously), discovering an engineering strategy fundamental to modern computing and cybernetics. Understanding racial formation as the product of racial-desiring reveals the intricate reciprocal and recursive interaction of the entities involved in any instance of racialization.

The Narrator's "Exquisitely Rude Aperture": Narrative Form as Conductive Structure

Before undertaking an analysis of the narrator of *Invisible Man* as hacker and cyborg, it will be helpful to understand the way in which the narrator's plight traces a circuit which provides the narrator with the very possibility of opposing the social and institutional forms of racial oppression he encounters. Some of this work has been done by Robert B. Stepto in "Literacy and Hibernation: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," wherein Stepto identifies the electrical potential of the novel's narrative arc by comparing Brother Tarp's leg iron to Bledsoe's.

In his larger argument that with *Invisible Man* Ellison forges a narrative form that goes beyond traditional narratives of ascent and narratives of immersion, Stepto argues that Bledsoe's closed leg iron symbolizes the novel's dominant structures of power.⁵ In particular, the college trustees "are the smooth, closed shackle—and the shackle, the men—not only because the men are a 'closed circle,' but also because the rhetoric of progress which they [. . .] oversee, and in that sense enclose far more than author, is as fixed or static as is their conception (and perception) of the present" (380–81). The unbroken leg iron suggests the static enclosure of power and the continued integrity of historically oppressive power structures. Opposed to this closed form is Tarp's ruptured shackle, which links Tarp to Frederick Douglass because, "like Tarp, [Douglass] set himself free, and partly because Douglass, like the filed-open shackle, is an expression of human possibility. The key, as it were, to this construction is the exquisitely rude aperture that 'defiles' the otherwise completed (or closed) form of the leg iron" (Stepto 381). The ruptured leg iron is not just visible evidence that the power structures which enslave African Americans have been compromised. As Stepto asserts, as a figure for Douglass's "artful movement out and back in and out of" it, the ruptured shackle is "the trope [. . .] for a viable pattern of mobility and a viable system of authorial control" (381) which the narrator learns to read in his warm hole.

Whereas Stepto emphasizes the ruptured shackle as a master trope for the novel's narrative structure, I would like to emphasize how it serves as a metonym for the operation of the body without organs. The rent, or defilement, in the shackle introduces to the static and "otherwise completed (or closed) form" a margin of indetermination which provides the narrator (and Douglass) with the pure possibility for redirecting energy from a region of greater potential to a region of lesser potential. The void transforms the inert shackle into an open circuit whose structure is comparable to the open circuit of the novel's narrative structure. Just as Tarp at one time sundered his leg iron to escape slavery, the narrator tears an opening in the enclosed structure of the warm hole where he is located and, within that tear, across the two terminals of the novel's "frame," flows the substance of the narrator's story. Tarp literally frees his labor value, or capital, enabling it to circulate more widely. Similarly, by disrupting the closed space of the hole in which he hibernates, the narrator reanimates his own capital and directs it to the narrative's various coupled machines, which I describe below.

Stepto's insight about the novel's narrative form and what it suggests about race, capital, and electricity has far-ranging implications. For example, Stepto's model of narrative production can be combined with Caribbean novelist Wilson Harris's analysis of the theme of death and rebirth in *Invisible Man* to explain how the novel generates its primary substance. Harris notes that readers are often

attracted to [the novel] as to a document of terror. It takes some time, in fact to arouse a class of readers into the significance of the stages of dying/awakening that move in the novel from the boxing-ring cycle (where Invisible Man metaphorically dies and reawakens) into the Bledsoe cycle (where the narrator's expulsion from college is so shocking and demoralizing that he endures a torment akin to dying followed by reawakening as he resumes his odyssey). That odyssey ushers us into further cycles. Invisible Man "dies" in an explosion in a paint factory and reawakens under the Cyclopean eye of a doctor in a Harlem hospital. Invisible Man experiences or endures other "extinctions" of self followed by the bleakest of intimations of survival. (161)

The cycles of death/rebirth Harris identifies correspond to three of the narrator's most important moments of transformation, or four if one includes the cycle of the novel itself.⁶ The cycles of vitality and morbidity which punctuate the course of the narrator's development are characteristic of the interaction between connected elements (machines) of an ensemble. Deleuze and Guattari provide some insight into this phenomenon when they define a machine "as a system of interruptions or breaks" and assert that "every machine, in the first place, is related to a continual material flow (*hylè*) that it cuts into" (*Anti-Oedipus* 36). For Deleuze and Guattari, this action of "cut[ting] into" allows "each associative flow [to] be seen as an ideal thing, an endless flux" (*Anti-Oedipus* 36). In other words, connected elements of an ensemble necessarily oscillate between action and inaction, and this oscillation conditions as ideal the incoming flows which the ensemble transduces. Deleuze and Guattari explain that

Far from being the opposite of continuity, the break or interruption conditions this continuity: it presupposes or defines what it cuts into as an ideal continuity. This is because, as we have seen, *every machine is a machine of a machine*. The machine produces an interruption of the flow only insofar as it is connected to another machine that supposedly produces this flow. (*Anti-Oedipus* 36, emphasis added)

Deleuze and Guattari's characterization of machinic periodicity describes the narrator's own periodic movement, his oscillations between inertia and activity, death and rebirth. Precisely what kind of machine the narrator is remains an open question. In what follows, I will analyze two of the periods Harris identifies as instances of the narrator's "'extinctions' of self followed by the bleakest intimations of the survival" (161), to ascertain the elements to which the narrator (as organism and machine) is connected, to identify the material/energies/substances he transduces during those periods, and to characterize the nature of the racial formations produced by those ensembles which include the narrator's cyborg body. The periods I will analyze are the narrator's experience in the "Battle Royal," his rehabilitation in the Liberty Paints Factory Hospital, and the hibernation which both begins and ends the novel.

Regarding the novel's overall structure, I concur with Stepto that the narrator produces a new narrative form by breaking the closed form of traditional African-American

narratives.⁷ By rupturing the narrative closure expected in narratives of both ascent and immersion, the narrator introduces a *margin of indetermination* into his narrative, thereby transforming traditional African American narrative into a functioning machine. Stepto's insight that Tarp's broken leg-iron becomes useful the moment Tarp inserts into its structure a defilement corresponds with Deleuze and Guattari's observation that machines operate by producing breaks in the flows to which they are connected. Viewed another way, Tarp produces a break in the flow of the closed leg-iron. The defiled leg-iron is a metonym for the novel's structure, and the novel makes use of this procedure elsewhere, installing "rude apertures" in closed structures (ensembles) which limit the narrator's agency, in the inherited legacy of white male inventors descended from Ford, Edison, and Franklin, for example. In this way, the novel is a recursively generated parable (instruction manual, literary primer) about introducing defilements into existing forms, so that the resulting margins of indetermination turn those forms into machines available for production outside established orders of capital. The narrator's first encounter with the closed forms of capital happens during "The Battle Royal," to which I now turn.

Prelude to a Battle Royal: Desiring Defiled

Electricity is a substance, or medium, which conditions the narrator and other blacks for connection to larger systems of power and control, something the novel makes plain on several occasions, including (in order of occurrence) the Battle Royal, the Liberty Paints Factory Hospital, and the warm hole episodes. Like Tarp's leg-iron, the Battle Royal and the moments which lead to it can be read as metonyms of the generation of black labor and its conversion into forms useful to white-controlled systems of capital. Published first as a short story, the Battle Royal episode is "a manufactured race riot and Dionysian orgy and coon show and circus entertainment and scapegoat sacrifice. It [is] an object lesson in humiliation, a sexual torture and castration rite [. . .]" (Wright 261). Ellison has himself assented to one interviewer's similarly cast observation that "the Battle Royal as a false initiation rite (circumcision) is then really a castration rite" (Carson 197). This ritualized castration happens at a smoker attended by "all of the town's big shots [who] were there in their tuxedos, wolfing down the buffet foods, drinking beer and whiskey and smoking black cigars" (17). These big shots simultaneously enact their power and prepare the narrator (and nine other young black men) for connection to a less visible but more pervasive system of production and control.

This preparation begins with a prelude wherein a "stark naked [. . .] magnificent blond" woman dances with "a slow sensuous movement; the smoke of a hundred cigars clinging to her like the thinnest of veils" (19). First and foremost, the naked woman provides a means for the white men to sexualize their relationship to the black men. She is also an object that facilitates the exchange of power from the black men to the white men, a role similar to the one women play in the homosocial relations between men (Sedgwick 25–26). As Cheryl Clarke notes in *This Bridge Called My Back*, "the white man learned, within the structure of heterosexual monogamy and under the system of patriarchy, to relate to black people—slave or free—as man *relates* to woman, viz. as property, as a sexual commodity,

as a servant, as a source of free or cheap labor, and as an innately inferior being" (135–36). The dancing white woman with her naked body presents the young men with an icon of sexual desirability in a context where black male sexual desire is taboo. By staging the provocation of interracial sexual desire under their own watchful eyes, the white men position themselves both as censors and voyeurs. The narrator recalls, "She seemed like a fair bird-girl girdled in veils calling to me from the angry surface of some gray and threatening sea. I was transported. Then I became aware of the clarinet playing and the big shots yelling at us. Some threatened us if we looked and others if we did not" (19–20). In addition to echoes of the girl-by-the sea Stephen Dedalus sees (Joyce 164–65), the language the narrator uses to describe the naked dancer calls to mind the work of another turn-of-the-century author, W. E. B. Du Bois, and his concept of the veil. The suggestion is that the woman, like the black men, possesses double consciousness, that her subjective experience is antiparallel to the subjective experience of the young black men.

First, the blonde woman's "sensuous" movement anticipates the "infuriatingly sensuous motion" (431) of the Sambo dolls Tod Clifton hawks, both of which are forms of blackface minstrelsy. Furthermore, the blonde woman's distinguishing features span a racial and ethnic continuum: "the 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" (19). In what follows, the narrator specularly identifies with the naked white woman through primitivist characteristics that signal the woman's affinity with descendants of black Africans. The narrator notices that her face is made up "as though to form an abstract mask." The mask abstracts and transforms the woman's racial and sexual identity in the same way that Du Bois's veil abstracts black identity and, more to the point, in the same way that Picasso's "African masks" (e.g., *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*) racialize as black the female figures he paints. The naked woman is typed as an African primitive by means of maskface while the veil theme is made explicit when she begins dancing with "the smoke of a hundred cigars clinging to her like the thinnest of veils." A further hint that she is a minstrel figure comes in the smear of "cool blue" which suggests to the narrator a "baboon's butt," an animal native to continental Africa and whose association with primitivism and allusion to trickster identity are patent. However, in conflict with these intimations of the exotic, the woman is branded as a domestic product by the "American flag tattooed upon her belly," below which the narrator wishes to "stroke." "Tattoo" is a homophone for her minstrelized dancing as well as a reference to the subcutaneous ink branding her as a product "Made in the U.S.A."

The critical point of connection and alienation comes in the narrator's imagined sense that he is the only object in her visual field. The narrator specularly identifies with the naked white woman, but this identification is undercut by the fact that what he imagines to be an intimate and singular connection—"of all in the room she saw only me"—comes to him through a set of "impersonal eyes." Despite her being in his presence, her gaze is no more penetrating than the gaze of a two-dimensional image, and the narrator's sense of significance is equivalent to the feeling he might have while gazing into the eyes of a pin-up girl or an inanimate "kewpie doll."

Where the narrator does directly identify with the woman is in the domain of scopic agency. The woman's ocular reaction contradicts her facial reaction, and the narrator reads this separate visual signal as a sign of subjectival affinity. The narrator recounts

that the drunken white men “caught her just as she reached the door, raised her from the floor, and tossed her as college boys are tossed at a hazing, and above her 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). Here, the woman carries in her eyes a look of terror “almost like” the terror the narrator feels. There is an equivalence between the sexual fetishization of the woman as a blonde kewpie doll—an icon of sexual desirability and white supremacy—and the half-naked young black men about to box each other while blindfolded—symbols of sexual potency and neutralized threats to white male supremacy. The repression of black male sexual desire and the provocation of white female sexual disgust are part of the maintenance of an oppressive white male sexual power, a power predicated by the transformation of the white woman and the black men into objects of desire and objects of abjection. While the woman’s dehumanization is complete once she has been transformed into a hypersexual automaton (a “circus kewpie doll”), the black men’s sexualities are further channeled (transduced) into disorganized violence. The scene, then, traces an ideological pathway between black male desire for a white female sexual fetish and incoherent, black-on-black violence. The desiring apparatus of the black males is disconnected from the production of sexual desire and reconnected to human boxing machines.

The presence of this lone, hypersexualized female both disrupts and facilitates the exchange of power among all the men (white and black) at the smoker. In this prelude, the fetishization of sex under the sign of race forces a large, powerful, black man to “plead to go home” because his “dark red fighting trunks [are] much too small to conceal the erection which project[s] from him” (20). At the same time, the racial and sexual imperatives structuring the relations between the parties present allows a drunken white man to sink his “beefy fingers” into the sexualized automaton’s “soft flesh” (20). Once she has been transformed into a sexual fetish, her presence reifies the relationship between the white men as autonomous agents and the black men as powerless thralls. As the narrator recalls, this differentiation is catalyzed by the blonde woman as she “continued dancing, smiling faintly at the big shots who watched her with fascination, and faintly smiling at our fear” (20). The differential power relations which obtain in the prelude confer prerogative and authority to the white male attendees, whatever their behavior. For example, one man “ran his hand through the thin hair of his bald head and, with his arms upheld, his posture clumsy like that of an intoxicated panda, wound his belly in a slow obscene grind” (20). The white man’s lewd dance is a degraded version of the naked blonde’s tattoo and, like the blonde, his racial identity is hybridized/ambiguous, represented by a panda whose fur is black and white.⁸ More to the point, this drunken white man can gesture obscenely with impunity because the presence of the white woman as sexual fetish legitimizes everything he does, no matter what he does. By the same racial logic, the young black men must conceal even the involuntary erections they experience when forced to watch the woman’s “slow sensuous movement” (19).

The woman’s presence as a racial and sexual fetish anneals the inconsistencies of the prelude’s racial-desiring, her whiteness sanctioning the desire and actions of the white men and outlawing the desire and reactions of the black men. Racial-desiring here produces three racial formations: the empowered white men, the disempowered black men, and an icon of white female sexuality that is catalyst and object of the ensemble’s racial-desiring.

Ellison has said that the Battle Royal “was a rite which could be used to project certain racial divisions into the society and reinforce the idea of white racial superiority” (“On Initiation Rites” 49).

As catalyst, the woman facilitates the production of racial formations and the transmission of white supremacist ideology in a more or less orderly fashion, but her presence also inspires some of the white men to transgress the unspoken prohibition against touching. When this happens, the ensemble stops functioning smoothly. It stutters, further differentiating the white men into those who behave like “intoxicated panda[s]” and those who assist the woman in her escape. The differing spontaneous reactions of these men suggests that sexuality, like race, generates contradictory responses even from subjects located inside the system. In other words, the woman as sexual fetish is an ideological object that stitches the inconsistencies of the several racial-sexual subject positions which come into being by the fact of her very presence. She is a rent in the racial-desiring of this prelude to black-on-black violence, a gap that introduces a margin of indetermination into the prelude’s closed circuit of sexual desire and racial oppression. She is both the defiler and the defilement, and she makes the racial-sexual relationship between the white men and the black men work.

Taken as an allegory of the preparation of black males for the system of American capital, the prelude to the Battle Royal trains these young black men-about-to-become-machines to disavow their organismic impulses when in the presence of a white sexual fetish. The young black men are taught how to read a symbol of white female sexuality. Ellison believed that “anyone writing from the Negro American point of view would certainly have had to write about the potential meaning and the effects of the relationship between [. . .] black men and white women, because [. . .] a great part of [American] society was controlled by the taboos built around the fear of the white woman and the black man getting together” (“On Initiation Rites” 61). The prelude to the Battle Royal illustrates the way in which (1930s-era) American racial-desiring produces white supremacy as a mechanism that prohibits the consummation of black male sexual desire for a fetishized white woman, a process that ironically links the white woman with the black men even as it dehumanizes them.

Their desires disconnected from desiring-production, their abilities to determine the directions of their actions nullified, their lines of sight obscured by blindfolds, and their perspectives limited to the spectacle of the Battle Royal itself, these young black men have been taken off the grid, so to speak, their labor and desiring-production decoupled from any network not connected to the local system of capital controlled by the white bankers, lawyers, and priests who both desire and fear the young blacks they have recruited. The Battle Royal following the prelude has two parts—a blindfolded boxing match and an electrified money grab—and both are instances of the behavior of black organisms in a system of white racist capital. The violence which ensues in the boxing match is a symbolic parallel of, as well as preparation for, the disorganized violence of the money grab. An analysis of the relationships that obtain between the black boxing machines will reveal the underlying dynamics of the subsequent scramble after the signifiers of capital during which the narrator “discovers” a method of turning the power of the system against the system itself.

Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots: Plugging Blacks into the Body of Capital

Building upon the work of Elias Canetti, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between masses and packs, where mass multiplicities (distinct from individual multiplicities) have the qualities of “large quantity, divisibility and equality of the members, [. . .] one-way hierarchy, [and] organization of territoriality or territorialization,” whereas packs have “small or restricted numbers, dispersion, [. . . the] impossibility of a fixed totalization or hierarchization, a Brownian variability in directions, [and] lines of deterritorialization” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 33). Organizations like the Brotherhood, the Liberty Paints Factory, and the college the narrator attends are populated by masses, whereas the young black men who fight each other in the Battle Royal, the gathering of people at an eviction in Harlem (267–84), and the subjects who occupy a space similar to that occupied by the narrator at the novel’s beginning and end can be viewed as schizoid members of packs. The affiliated members of these packs are nodes of networks where hierarchy is indeterminate (multiple, shifting) and individuality is subordinated to location within the system. Between these two forms of social organization—masses and packs—the narrator discovers a form of agency that enables him to game the system in ways that destabilize it.

During the Battle Royal, black boxing machines fight one against the other as schizoid subjects, members of a pack together in their aloneness. The narrator recounts that “everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. [. . .] No group fought together for long. Two, three, four, fought one, then turned to fight each other, were themselves attacked” (23). Disconnected from each other, these blinded black men form a schizoid pack of automatons who aggregate into random, unintentional cooperatives which quickly dissociate back into radicalized nomadic components. Their functioning is a literalization of the ability of the body without organs to form ensembles quickly from disparate components. With their lines of sight blocked, these boxers cannot gather contextualizing information about their situations (their individuality is subordinated to location within the system), so they are able only to assume reactionary defensive postures and execute unstrategized offensive melees. Desiring racializes these young men into black schizoid automatons whose present functioning prepares them for a lifetime of pursuing symbolic capital while reassuring the powerful white men who watch that these machines will not recognize anything beyond the ring’s borders as legitimate targets of their violence. Disconnected from themselves and each other, these black men are ready to be plugged into the electrified body of capital.

After Tatlock KO’s the narrator and ends the Battle Royal, “attendants in white jackets [roll] the portable ring away and [place] a small square [. . .] rug” in the boxing ring’s place (26). The M.C. then calls, “Come on up here boys and get your money.” The narrator sees “the rug covered with coins of all dimensions and a few crumpled bills,” but finds himself especially excited about “the gold pieces” (26). The rug and its arrayed objects can be read as a metaphor for the body of capital, with the rug’s electrification making it a literary illustration of what Deleuze and Guattari identify as the body without organs. The connection of things to the rug is made palpable by the invisible force of electricity. The narrator recalls that he “lunged for a yellow coin on the blue design of the carpet, touching it and sending a surprised shriek to join those rising around me. I tried frantically to remove my hand but could not let go. A hot, violent force tore through my body, shaking me like a wet rat. The rug was electrified” (27).

The young men cannot easily “let go” of the objects they have chosen to grab. Their muscles involuntarily contract once they have come into contact with conductive objects lying upon the rug. Condensing the terms of electrical and capital networks, attachment to commodified objects “plugs” one in to the system. Connection to the system of capital represented by the electrified rug and the tokens that can transmit capital produces a muscular attachment to the (represented) body of capital. This attachment is an investment in the system of capital that exceeds the intentions and awareness of those who come into contact with that system. The young black men are unaware of how they are being manipulated in their attempts to grab the most highly conductive signifiers of capital. This scene provides a model of the ability of capital to attach objects, in this case organisms, to itself to produce a network. Once capital comes into contact with an organism, the organism attaches to the system by means of its own motive force, (as if) electrified into place.

Increasingly aware of the system which grabs at him with the very force he uses to grab at it, the narrator begins “trying to avoid the coppers and to get greenbacks and the gold,” an improvised strategy that leads him to discover he “could contain the electricity—a contradiction, but it works” (27). In one of the only sustained studies of electricity in *Invisible Man*, Ford remarks that the “element of contradiction [in the narrator’s approach to electricity] permeates the novel as a whole, as it finds new channels and purposes for the electricity used to shock and assimilate black citizens—in effect, dismantling even as it inscribes the machinelike apparatuses of discrimination we see at work” (892).⁹ The electrified free-for-all in some ways resembles the blindfolded boxing match, especially in that the black men behave alone together as members of a pack. A fundamental difference between the boxing match and the free-for-all is the presence of an electrified rug in the latter, which represents the structural extension of technology, by the powerful, into the milieu of black production. This technological innovation presents the narrator with the possibility of subverting the system.

In particular, the narrator’s newly-discovered ability to contain the shocks the system sends to his body threatens to limit or disrupt the spectacle of (at least) his involuntary twitching. Just as the narrator makes this discovery and uses it to limit the paralyzing attachment his muscles experience when touching the electricity-conducting objects, he notes, “the men began to push us onto the rug. Laughing embarrassedly, we struggled out of their hands and kept after the coins. We were all wet and slippery and hard to hold (27).” This recalls the blonde woman’s efforts to avoid the “beefy fingers” (20) of the men chasing after her. Just as the woman first eludes the drunken men by “mov[ing] around [. . .] in graceful circles” (20), so do the black men initially elude the white men who try to push them back onto the rug in order to laugh at the spectacle of their “connecting” to the system. The bodies of the young black men are “slippery and hard to hold,” a description that sexualizes their bodies just as “slipping and sliding over the polished floor” characterizes the white men’s pursuit of the blonde as sexual slapstick. Once the men catch the woman, they “[raise] her from the floor, and [toss] her as college boys are tossed at a hazing.” A similar scene takes place when the whites finally grab one of the young black men, with the exception that after he is “lifted into the air, glistening with sweat like a circus seal,” he is “dropped, his wet back landing flush upon the charged rug” (27). The narrator “hear[s] him yell and [sees] him literally dance upon his back, his elbows beating a frenzied tattoo upon the floor, his muscles twitching like the flesh of a horse stung by

many flies" (27). As in the earlier scene with the naked blonde woman, the word "tattoo" signals that a minstrel act is transpiring.

The Electric Sambo: Blackface as Survival Technology

The parallels between the plights of the woman and the black men suggest both are fetish objects of powerful white men. Both are transformed into things whose agency is overwhelmed by the system to which they are connected. In this sense, they are automatized, a point underscored when the M.C. tells the men that "You get all you grab," one blonde man affirming with a wink, "'That's right, Sambo'" (26). I want to consider, now, how the blonde man's words are a slyly delivered clue to a strategy the narrator can use to subvert the dominant system, words similar to the narrator's grandfather's advice "to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (16). The blonde man's words impart to the narrator that the dominant power structure cannot be opposed through direct confrontation, that the narrator will have to work from inside the system. In particular, the narrator is encouraged to embrace the abject and grotesque comic figure of the Sambo.

In his landmark study *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between the Wars*, Joel Dinerstein argues that urban laborers "experienced the same kind of anomie and isolation that black slaves felt in the cotton fields" and so developed a "survival technology called the blues—as song form, personal narrative, field holler, work song, validation of 'somebodiness,' and as a cultural form that integrates the expression of individual experience with group consciousness" (46). According to Dinerstein, blues and jazz dance were also responses to the pressures of working life. Dances such as "the lindy hop (or jitterbug) synthesized energy *and* control, pattern and improvisation [. . .]. Black dance was in such demand between 1910 and 1940 (and met with such resounding response) because here were artistic, aesthetic, and kinesthetic survival skills for human participation" (16). Dinerstein treats mostly elevated forms when discussing jazz dance as a survival technology, and I would like to add to the kinesthetic strategies Dinerstein identifies the abject figure of the Sambo.

The Sambo doll's grotesque gestures and gyrations are symbolic of the bodily and social behavior of African Americans connected to a racist system of capital, and whose struggle in that system is entertainment for some who are wealthy and powerful. In *Deliberate Speed*, W. T. Lhamon, Jr. considers the scene in which Tod Clifton peddles paper Sambos (54–58), reading the figure of the Sambo as a form of clowning, "a way to make money, fawning to surveillance, a double masking and signaling of one's vulnerable fragility, a way to make others happy, and, through it all, a mockery of the controlling group's power" (58). As one of the items inside the narrator's briefcase, the paper Sambo is a key to the narrator's identity, one that in the hands of Tod Clifton "showed people as puppets to unseen hands, shuckin' and jivin' on invisible strings" (Lhamon 54).

When the "blonde man affirms with a wink" what the M.C. says and calls the narrator "Sambo," he is both luring and warning the narrator. The wink announces that what the man says has a multiplicity of meanings: that "you get all you grab" is true and untrue

and that “Sambo” is not just a demeaning epithet but also a contextually accurate naming of the narrator. The blonde man hints to the narrator that the black men will become Sambos to the degree that they snatch convulsively after false signifiers of capital. The spectacle of convulsing black bodies entertains and comforts the white men even as it enacts a critique of their power and privilege, teaching the narrator that indirection can be an effective subaltern strategy to oppose racist capital.

Historically, the Sambo is a racially hybrid figure, which makes the figure of the Sambo especially fitting because in this free-for-all the young black men are ontological hybrids, a combination of human and machine, organism and mechanism.¹⁰ These electrified Sambos are black entertainers in blackface whose “labor” is a show comprised of hideous facial expressions and grotesque physical contortions. The electricity which runs through the rug transforms young black men into dancing machines, parodies of self-possessed humans whose existence legitimates and critiques the system engendering them.

The spectacle of the young men convulsing on the electrified rug provides the white men with some assurance that their own place in the system of capital is not a bad one. After all, they are above the humiliating positions in which the black men find themselves, and it is for their pleasure that the black men “labor.” So, the subsequent behavioral transformation undergone by some of the white men is inexplicable except as the product of sadism, of a perverse desire to ground completely the shaking, shuddering black men by eliminating the space between their shivering bodies and the electrified rug, sadistically to close the gap, the defilement, the hole. By doing so, the white men also remove the margins of indetermination in which the black men may be able momentarily to “contain” the electricity. The narrator responds to one such life-threatening shove by “grabb[ing] the leg of a chair” (28), and because he “feared the rug more than [he] did the drunk [in the chair, he] held on, surprising [him]self for a moment by trying to topple [Mr. Colcord] upon the rug” (28).

The narrator’s spontaneous and intuitive impulse to extend the reach of the electric network to the very men who have staged the spectacle is, of course, doomed to fail since the rules governing how the network may be populated are determined by those men. The audacity of the narrator’s move is matched only by his naivete. By the end of the novel, which is also the novel’s beginning, the narrator has learned to do his network hacking surreptitiously, covertly stealing energy from the power grid. But even as early as the Battle Royal, the narrator understands that the electricity which makes a real-time framework out of the bodies and tokens through which it runs can be extended to include any body (and anybody), black or white. When the white Mr. Colcord is nearly toppled onto the electrified rug, the narrator almost reverses Mr. Colcord’s racial polarity by means of electricity. Had the narrator been successful, Mr. Colcord, too, would have beat “a frenzied tattoo upon the floor” as readily and with as much dexterity as any young black man. Like capital, electricity has an inherent ability to create ensembles from disparate objects and, in this scene, electricity makes humans Sambos, turns them into convulsive, blackface entertainers.

What the castration prelude, the Battle Royal, and the free-for-all aftermath illustrate is that blackness is not essence, performance, or even just a combination of the two. Among the lessons the narrator learns is that blackness is also partly the effect of the circulation of electricity (capital). A racial formation is produced by the flow of energy which induces

connected organisms to behave in a particular kinesthetic manner, and the interpretation of such behavior as blackness depends upon the framework constituted by the very enactment (transduction) of such behaviors. Racial-desiring, constituted ensembles, and embedded context are all integral components in the production of racial formations. Blackness is neither intrinsic nor extrinsic to any individual or even group of individuals. It is an articulation of a network populated on an ad hoc basis. Definitions of racial type are unstable because race is not static but the dynamic effect of the flow of invisible forces, such as electricity and capital, as well as the product of social milieu, political context, and organismic traits.

The narrator and the nine other black men who participate in the Battle Royal and who are disconnected from each other in preparation for their reconnection to the system of American capital become cyborgs whose ontologies are subject to the flux of electricity, capital, and sex. Ellison himself identifies the biographical source of this scene as a job interview, wherein the interviewer, a white man, asks Ellison to sit on “a crate with a cushion on it” (“On Initiation Rites” 57). Ellison recalls that just “at the moment when I was most certain the job was mine, I felt a charge of electricity in my tail” (“On Initiation Rites” 57). So, too, are the black men in the Battle Royal shocked by the system in their attempts to acquire signifiers of capital. However, the narrator is distinguishable for his attempts to subvert the system: partially undoing his blindfold, attempting to topple Mr. Colcord, targeting non-conducting objects, containing the electricity. The narrator’s characteristic rebelliousness is, in fact, part of what drives the cycles of death/rebirth Harris identifies.

In the Battle Royal, electricity establishes connections between the constituent elements of the ad hoc networks which generate capital, affecting the kinesthetic behavior of connected organisms in such a way that those organisms are identified as racially inferior, as black. The narrator learns that directly opposing the white men in power is not possible under their watchful eyes and that inhabiting the abject position of the Sambo embodies and enacts a critique of the system which entralls him. However, not every organism associated with the flow of electricity is typed racially inferior, as the episode in the Liberty Paints Factory hospital makes plain and to which I now turn.

Recursive Ontology: Yo’ Mama Is a Machine

The opening scene of Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) depicts Leon Kowalski, a Nexus-6 replicant, answering questions posed by Holden, an investigator for a bounty hunter’s outfit. The questions Holden poses are part of the Voight-Kampff test used to distinguish humans from replicants.¹¹ Holden asks Kowalski to “describe in single words only the good things that come into your mind about your mother.”¹² Kowalski replies, “Let me tell you about my mother,” and shoots Holden point-blank. The intensity of the blast and the force with which Holden’s body hits the wall opposite suggest that a cyborg’s maternal origins are taboo, questioned, in this case, under threat of death. Maternity and mothering are the *sine qua non* of embodied organism, and to expose an entity’s lack of a mother is precisely to reveal that entity as a nonorganism, to reveal that entity as an alien, as other.

Holden's question about Kowalski's mother has the potential to out Kowalski as a nonhuman, a revelation that would lead directly to Kowalski's "retirement."¹³ Motherhood also figures prominently in African American vernacular tradition, especially in strategies of signifyin(g) in which a performer accrues mojo by denigrating an opponent's "mama." It is this very aspect of signifyin(g) that the narrator uses once he has learned to oppose the dominant power structure covertly.¹⁴

In the Liberty Paints Factory hospital scene, the narrator employs three distinct strategies to resist the "rehabilitation" to which he is subjected. First, the narrator (involuntarily) internalizes his anger about being forced into the abject position of a Sambo, after which he comprehends that he has become a "hidden organ" within the system, a music maker. Second, his anger transformed and the significance of his invisibility grasped, the narrator undermines a white doctor by signifyin(g) on that doctor's mother. Finally, the narrator achieves radical autonomy by relinquishing his human ancestry and embracing a recursive cyborg ontology that turns him into his *own mother*. By becoming his own mama through means of the machine, the narrator also circumvents Oedipus, reducing an inhibition to desiring production.

The narrator's experience inside the factory hospital illustrates how assemblages of technical machines, racialized organisms, and transducted energies are arrayed by racial-desiring into an interface which produces blackness in inferior relation to whiteness. In contrast to the Battle Royal's free-for-all, the possibility of reconfiguring the electrical connections between elements (e.g., toppling Mr. Colcord from his chair onto the rug) is precluded by the apparatus which encloses the narrator. The components of the technical ensemble in which he finds himself comprise an interface that generates and conceals (assimilates) kinesthetic blackness, making the black(ened) narrator a part of the machinery which the white hospital staff control. Within the Liberty Paints Factory hospital, a tension is manifested between artificial but powerful white machinery and natural but vulnerable black organism.

To start, the narrator is confined by surroundings which are entirely white. He begins "in a cold, white rigid chair" wearing "new overalls, strange white ones" (231) and later wakes to find "two indefinite women in white" attending him. The feminine image of two nurses withholds its suggestion of care and yields to a third more sinister image of a white woman sitting "a desert of heat waves away, [. . .] at a panel arrayed with coils and dials" (232). The narrator is confined in a room whose chromatic whiteness reflects and multiplies the ambulatory women's racial whiteness. Superficially, the arrangement of humans and machinery implies that the narrator's immobility and impotence are properties of his blackness. However, the contrast between his paralysis and the nurses' mobility also draws attention to the causative role played by the white hospital staff. The scene represents the narrator's loss/lack of self-possession as an effect of the connections between the hospital's machinery, the hospital's white staff, and the narrator's body. This representation of the hospital-as-network critiques the company "hospital" whose pretenses to medical therapeutics recede behind the "piece of cold metal" encircling the narrator's head. The carceral image of "the iron cap worn by the occupant of an electric chair" (233) invites readers to compare the narrator's rehabilitation to an execution and to read the medicalization of blacks as a proxy for capital punishment.

About his own encounter with medicalized electricity, the narrator recalls being “pounded between crushing electrical pressures; pumped between live electrodes like an accordion between a player’s hands. My lungs were compressed like a bellows and each time my breath returned I yelled [. . .]” (232). The narrator is assimilated by the machine and, in the process, turned into a machine, his own yells “punctuating the rhythmical action of the nodes” (232). Soon he hears “strains of music” and “voices dron[ing] harmoniously. Was it a radio I heard—a phonograph? The *vox humana* of a hidden organ? If so, what organ and where?” (233–34). *Vox humana* usually refers to the stops in a pipe organ used to mimic the timbre of the human voice. Here, however, the narrator has become the “hidden organ” of a technical ensemble that produces human sounds, namely his own screaming. The Liberty Paints Factory hospital is a cybernetic orchestra featuring a music maker who shrieks, the narrator no longer a mere human being, but also a cyborg—a manipulated, screaming, singing machine.

Assimilated, the narrator has so lost his sense of identity he cannot recall his own name. One doctor scribbles, “WHAT IS YOUR MOTHER’S NAME?” causing the narrator to think:

Mother, who was my mother? Mother, the one who screams when you suffer—but who? This was stupid, you always knew your mother’s name. Who was it that screamed? Mother? But the scream came from the machine. A machine my mother? . . . Clearly, I was out of my head. (240)

The narrator is not so much out of his head as his head has been made part of a cybernetic network whose boundaries overlap the threshold of his own biological body. The narrator focuses on the screams as clues to the identity of his mother, but those screams erupt from his own lungs and have as their motivation surges of electrical current. If mother is the “one who screams when you suffer,” the narrator’s mother is his own cybernetically extended self. This is an important moment in the narrator’s gradual transformation and education because, for one, he is removed from what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as “Oedipus,” the overarching sociopolitical framework that originates with Freudian thinking and limits the possibilities of desiring-production and delirium.¹⁵ With a recursively generated cyborg body that makes him his own mother, the narrator gains a psychic self that favors desiring-production over psychic inhibition.

As I mentioned above, African American dances such as the lindy hop and the jitterbug can be interpreted, as Dinerstein does, as survival technologies. In the factory hospital, dance is not so much conducted as a survival technology as it is transduced across the narrator’s body into involuntary convulsions:

“Look, he’s dancing,” someone called.

“No, really?”

An oily face looked in. “They really do have rhythm, don’t they? Get hot, boy! Get hot!” it said with a laugh. (237)

Dancing is here figured as a form of (reflexively produced) kinesthetic blackness similar to the electricity-induced spasms of the money-grab. The hospital scene also draws attention to the agency of the white doctors who cynically ignore their active role in causing his convulsions. They jeer, interpreting the jerks and spasms of his electrocuted body as signs

he “really do[es] have rhythm.” They seem unaware of the fact that were they subjected to the same electrical pressures as the narrator, they too would “Get hot!” The arrangement of people and machinery insulates the doctors from electricity and its racializing power while at the same time enabling them to control its flow. White racial privilege is maintained by the hospital’s network architecture, and the narrator is electrically forced to dance as if he is black *because* he is black.¹⁶

Maureen Curtin reads this passage similarly, arguing that the narrator’s electroconvulsive performance is “a kind of blackface that prompts his ostensibly disinterested doctors to adapt x-ray film and electric shock therapy together, to induce an ‘unmistakable’ performance of blackness and then capture it as an interior essential truth” (41). Here, race is the effect of connections between the narrator, the doctors, the nurses, and the hospital machinery with electricity acting as an interface between these elements. Blackness is neither performed nor embodied: it is transduced. The racial-desiring which pervades the network produces blackness as a racial formation out of machines, humans, and electricity.

Considered another way, blackness is a network effect, more the product of connections between inorganic and organic systems than the result of the innate essence or autonomous behavior of those bodies. Certain bodies become “black” and others bodies “white” because of network topology. Admittedly, the novel to a large degree focuses on optical networking. The narrator notes that the “invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact” (3). However, the invisibility of the medium of electricity suggests that it is as important a medium as light. Indeed, light is the visible portion of the electromagnetic spectrum which at different frequencies is invisible, just as laboring bodies and their connected machines are the visible aspects of pervasive but invisible capital.

This invisibility is metonymized once the narrator has become a hidden organ within the machinery of the Liberty Paints Factory hospital. The narrator recalls, “I wanted to be angry, murderously angry. But somehow the pulse of current smashing through my body prevented me” (237). The narrator cannot feel anger and is left in “bewilderment.” His confusion helps him adjust to having been transformed into a black hidden organ whose boundaries paradoxically (and recursively) extend beyond the threshold of his biological body into the network of the factory hospital itself. This confusion also enables him to respond to the system without anger and unconsciously to draw on a vernacular strategy by which he can undermine those in power without their being aware he is doing so.

When a “scholarly looking man” writes on “a child’s slate,” “WHO WAS YOUR MOTHER?” the narrator first rejects then employs signifyin(g), thinking “[. . .] I don’t play the dozens. And how’s *your* old lady today?” (241). The narrator’s confusion leads him to a form of black vernacular expression that transfers mojo from his unwitting white interlocutor to him. The doctor adopts the tone of the master, asking “BOY, WHO WAS BRER RABBIT?”; and the narrator responds by thinking, “He was your mother’s back-door man” (242). Like marriage as homosocial exchange, this form of signifyin(g) uses (representations of) women to facilitate the exchange of power between men. One price of the narrator’s private subversion of the system using a stratagem drawn from black American vernacular is misogynistic thinking, something a longer study might address.¹⁷

By the time he leaves the factory hospital, the narrator has gained a greater awareness of how far his self extends into the network of white capital. This awareness enables the

narrator to reconceive his very ontology so that, among other things: his desiring production is freed from what Deleuze and Guattari designate as Oedipus; he is able to diminish the authority of the white men by using techniques drawn from black culture; and he can fortify his own cybernetic ontology by deliriously conceiving (of) himself as his own mother. The most important lesson he learns, however, is that he must embrace an abject subject position to gain power and fight the system.

This lesson is summed by Lucius Brockway's description of their roles as "*the machines inside the machine*" (*Invisible Man* 217). The narrator absorbs this lesson only after he has gone to work for the Brotherhood, which notifies him that the interests of the section of Harlem he manages "must be sacrificed to [the interests] of the whole" (502). Furious, the narrator "now recognize[s his] invisibility," realizes he is an "hidden organ" existing unseen inside the system. He finally understands, "That was all anyone wanted of [black men], that [they] should be heard and not seen, and then heard only in one big optimistic chorus of yassuh, yassuh, yassuh!" (509). The narrator vows to "walk around in their guts with hobnailed boots," thinking, "They wanted a machine? Very well, I'd become a supersensitive confirmer of their misconceptions, and just to hold their confidence I'd try to be right part of the time" (509). The narrator understands he must fight as a Sambo, as Brer Rabbit, as a hacker of Monopolated Light & Power. Still, he occasionally questions the strategy of "overcom[ing] 'em with yeses" (16) which he learned from his grandfather, uncertain about whether saying "yes" is "to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men," "to affirm the principle [. . .] to the point of absurdity," or "to take the responsibility for all of it, for the men as well as the principles" (574). Or something else. For example, saying "yes" is a radical form of hybridization. Like electricity, the unconscious, and conjunctive synthesis, "yessing" generates interconnection, produces ensembles out of disparate and contradictory parts. "Yes" multiplies. "Yes" is the power of miscegenation and cybernation.

Conclusion: The Power of "Yes"

Harryette Mullen observes that texts like *Invisible Man* replace the nineteenth-century racial romance wherein a "black woman whose position as the white man's concubine result[s] in her reproducing the genetic traits of Anglo-Saxons" with "technological fantasies featur[ing] mechanical production as an asexual reproduction of whiteness" (77). Mullen argues that instead of dramatizing "the coupling of a black man with a white woman (thus risking the castration of the black male)," *Invisible Man* fabricates a fantasy where "miscegenation is effected without sexual reproduction" (77). Without question, Mullen's analysis accounts for the way in which white women are objects that facilitate the transference of power from black men to white men. But where Mullen emphasizes the fantasy-like nature of the mechanical reproduction of whiteness, I would like to emphasize that the narrator's achieving technical mastery (such as wiring a room with 1,369 lights) can be read as an act of delirious resistance.

I have argued that a primary source of this resistance is the novel's representation of electricity. Electricity gives "form" to the narrator. It is a medium capable of constituting

assemblages of elements located across diverse racial strata and within disparate ontological orders. Electricity yields cybernetic miscegenations, making it the perfect tool for a black hacker such as the narrator. The narrator uses this black vernacular strategy of “yessing,” of radical hybridization, to claim he is “in the great American tradition of tinkers,” “kin to Ford, Edison and Franklin” (7). By establishing genealogical connection to a line of white American inventors known, respectively, for advances in mass production, artificial light, and electrical energy, the narrator aggressively challenges the notion that technological mastery is the exclusive forte of white men. The racially exclusive composition of the history of American invention consolidates power and prestige, restricting their circulation to social and racial elites. The narrator’s story, his yessing, liberates power by introducing a defilement into the closed circuit of American technological history.¹⁸ A margin of indetermination is introduced that provides racial subalterns greater access to the domain of the cybernetic.

When the narrator asks “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” readers should understand that they, too, are as “invisible” as the narrator and the millions of others whose efforts are materialized in the work of people such as Edison. These invisibles give racial and material form to the historical white male personages credited with the pioneering of American technologies. “Edison” is not a man but a network of individuals, systems, organisms, machines, information, and myths—as is the narrator—and this network is black, white, and invisible, a delirious formation. The novel tells invisibles about the possibility of cybernetic miscegenation, that technical mastery was never solely the domain of white men, and that what history constructs as the achievement of white men is, in fact, the achievement of many persons beyond those white men.

Invisible Man offers no solution to forms of racial-desiring that produce racist formations (a pernicious subset of racial formations). The novel closes imperfectly, giving rise to an “exquisitely rude aperture” that provides the (narrative) system nothing more nor less than a margin of indetermination, which may be just enough. This margin of indetermination is partially the product of Ellison’s breaking open the closed narrative forms found in traditional black narratives of ascent and immersion. By means of a rent or defilement, the narrator and author of *Invisible Man* execute an “artful movement out and back in and out of the shackle[s]” (Stepto 381) of narrative production and literary expectation. The novel’s cycles of death/rebirth, hibernation/awakening, and extinction/proliferation are driven by systems of interruptions that condition the transduction of energy from one form to another. The narrator starts as a disconnected black boxing machine and is later connected to an electrified system of capital, is injected in and extracted from a paint factory’s manufacturing process, is plugged into and disconnected from a rehabilitative carceral apparatus, and is appropriated by and suppressed as the voice of the Brotherhood.

Over the course of these cycles of connection/disconnection and after several encounters with electricity, the narrator grasps the wisdom of his grandfather’s dying words, words echoed by other trickster figures who in some cases are white. These words tell the narrator that one of the most effective ways to resist hegemonic power is by indirection, through strategies of resistance such as signifyin(g) which can transfer power from central authority to subalterns. The position is sometimes counterintuitive. For example, one such strategy depends upon the narrator embracing his own abjection in the form of a convulsing, electrocuted Sambo doll. The paroxysms of the Sambo not only critique

the system that produces them, but they also suggest the ways in which race is a network effect, a racial formation produced by relationships which obtain between electricity, machines, organizations, and individuals. Electricity-induced seizures generate and signify blackness, pointing the narrator toward other transductional possibilities, especially after he discovers he “could contain the electricity—a contradiction” (27) to be sure, but a contradiction that works.

Finally, the transduction of electricity into incandescent light parallels the transduction of voice into print, a possibility suggested by the narrator’s closing reference to “the lower frequencies” (581). In this way, the narrator is a transducer coupled to the novel’s racializing machinery, itself made productive by the insertion of a defilement into a formerly closed narrative form. The result is the hybridization and miscegenation of heterogeneous elements across several ontological and racial orders with electricity / print / voice acting as connective tissue. At the novel’s end, the narrator has withdrawn from the world above ground to begin hacking the system from within. He is his own mama, safe inside his warm hole with 1,369 lights. He is recursive and delirious. He is both compliant and subversive, operating as America’s, and the world’s, first cyborg hacker, “yessing” the system even as he siphons its energy. He is the first node of a network yet to come.

NOTES

This essay is one component of an extended cyborg body. First among the entities to which this essay connects is my mama, Yung Sun Wilcox. Other biological constituents bear specific designators such as: Amritjit Singh, Michael Levenson, Johanna Drucker, Jennifer Wicke, Catherine Taylor, Paul Jones, Carey Snyder, Kathleen Godfrey, and Thomas Higgins. Unavoidably, for each component identified, dozens are made invisible. This essay belongs to them.

1. Noteworthy studies which cut against the critical grain to consider the relationship between race and cybernetics include: Michael A. Chaney’s “Slave Cyborgs and the Black Infovirus: Ishmael Reed’s *Cybernetic Aesthetics*”; Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman’s *Race in Cyberspace* (especially Tara McPherson’s “I’ll Take My Stand in Dixie-Net”); Thomas Foster’s *The Souls of Cyberfolk: Posthumanism as Vernacular Theory*; Lisa Nakamura’s *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, Stacy Gillis’s *The Matrix Trilogy: Cyberpunk Reloaded* (especially Nakamura’s “The Multiplication of Difference in Post-Millennial Cyberpunk Film: The Visual Culture of Race in the *Matrix* Trilogy”); and Alondra Nelson, Thuy Linh N. Tu, and Alicia Headlam Hines’s *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*.
2. Writing for *The New York Times Book Review*, A. O. Scott notes that in 1965 the *New York Herald Tribune* published a survey that identified Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as “‘the most memorable’ work of American fiction published since the end of World War II.” In another survey conducted by John K. Crane and Daniel Walden of Pennsylvania State University, major American critics named *Invisible Man* as the novel “most likely to endure” from among two dozen novels published between 1945 and 1972 (*Graham and Singh* xx).
3. Brian Massumi provides a very useful introduction to the concept of the body without organs in *A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (70–71). Generally, the body without organs is a composite of the potentials and virtual states of any given system of objects as well as that system’s manifest state. This means that the body without organs always has what Adrian Mackenzie would call a “margin of indetermination” which is necessary for a machine or system to be useful. As Mackenzie explains, “A fully determined mechanism would no longer be technological; it would be an inert object, or junk. A machine must articulate some degree of openness to a milieu in order to remain technological” (52–53).
4. In his introduction to *Transductions: Bodies and Machines at Speed*, Mackenzie explains that “transduction designates both a process that lies at the heart of technicity and a mode of thought adapted to thinking how collectives are involved, as Deleuze puts it, in the ‘establishing of communication

- between disparates” (24–25 n. 1).
5. Stepto recounts that “the classic ascent narrative launches an ‘enslaved’ and semiliterate figure on a questing journey to a symbolic North. [. . .] The ascent narrative conventionally ends with the questing figure situated in the least oppressive social structure afforded by the world of the narrative [. . .]” (363). A narrative of descent, on the other hand, “is fundamentally an expression of a ritualized journey into a symbolic South, in which the protagonist seeks those aspects of tribal literacy that ameliorate, if not obliterate the conditions imposed by solitude” (363).
 6. Curiously, Harris does not list the narrator’s hibernation in his hole as one of these “metaphorical deaths.” This may be because Harris believes these deaths to be failures of *coniunctio*, “the ancient alchemical term for ‘true marriage’” (159), in which the narrator’s metaphorical death is attended or facilitated by “shadowy” muse figures (161). With the exception of Ma (whose appearance does not precede one of the narrator’s extinctions), the shadowy figures Harris identifies are *white* women. Given Harris’s repetition of Ellison’s remark that a “man without myth is Othello with Desdemona gone” (qtd. in Harris 161, from “Twentieth-Century Fiction” 41), it is clear *coniunctio* corresponds to miscegenation. The black narrator and the proliferation of white female shadowy muse figures—the naked blonde in the Battle Royal, the nurses in the Liberty Paints Factory hospital, Sybil—are signals that one form of the alchemical “true marriage” is the hybridization of racial type through miscegenation.
 7. Which is not to say Ellison’s narrative is the first by an African American to break with traditional African American narrative form. Writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Jean Toomer, and Richard Wright are among the black writers who innovate narrative form before 1950.
 8. My thanks to Matthew G. Stratton for bringing the panda’s bichromaticity to my attention.
 9. One of the major points of difference between Ford’s work and mine is that Ford traces connections between the blues and electric networks while I focus on reading electricity as a metaphor for capital. It is worth noting that Ford offers a compelling and insightful reading of the Trueblood episode as an instance of a “blues network” (an extension of Houston Baker’s work in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*) which parallels the electric network to which the Trueblood family does not have access (898–99).
 10. Lhamon notes that because Sambo derives from the Spanish for mulatto, it “is etymologically neither black nor white, by definition neither this nor that. Rather, he or she is a figure occupying a middle ground between races. Helped by such etymological solicitations, the Sambo figure developed into the masked figure who shuffled onto the minstrel stage enacting formulaic, protective behavior: *yasSUH*” (56). The Spanish word for mulatto is *zambo*.
 11. *Blade Runner* is an adaptation of Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and replaces that novel’s “androids” with “replicants.” In the film, replicants are beings whose psychological profiles derive from once-living humans, but whether replicants are machines, clones, or cyborgs is never made clear. Both the film and the novel obscure the precise morphological nature of replicants and androids, respectively.
 12. Not yo’ mama, but Kowalski’s.
 13. “Retirement” is a euphemism used to describe the killing/destruction of replicants by blade runners.
 14. Henry Louis Gates references Clarence Major’s *Dictionary of Afro-American Slang*, which compares signifyin(g) to the “Dirty Dozens,” “an elaborate game traditionally played by black boys, in which the participants insult each other’s relatives, especially their mothers. The object of the game is to test emotional strength. The first person to give in is the loser” (qtd. in Gates 68).
 15. Two components of Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of Oedipus concern me here. First is the extent to which Freudian psychoanalysis “[takes] part in the work of bourgeois repression at its most far-reaching level” by inscribing madness and “patterns of self-punishment resulting from Oedipus as a confession of guilt” (*Anti-Oedipus* 50). Second, Deleuze and Guattari also argue that Freud’s interpretation of (Schreber’s) paranoid delirium which multiplies possibilities for historical, racial, and geographic identification is “ground, squashed, triangulated into Oedipus; everything is reduced to the father, in such a way as to reveal in the crudest fashion the inadequacies of an Oedipal psychoanalysis” (*Anti-Oedipus* 89). By becoming his own mother, the narrator avoids the guilt generated by Oedipal triangulation. Second, the narrator’s hallucinations cannot be read as psychopathological symptoms deriving from Oedipalism, leaving room for them to be interpreted as the delirious interconnections of desiring-production.
 16. Eric Lott discusses the performative nature of blackness in *Love and Theft* with regard to Frederick Douglass’s dissatisfaction with the performance of a blackface troupe. Douglass judges that the troupe’s presentation was “not even a tolerable representation of the character of colored people”

and declares that the troupe's "attempts at [performing blackness] showed them to possess a plentiful lack of it" (qtd. in Lott 36). Lott argues that Douglass's remarks reveal how blackness "is not innate but produced, a cultural construction" which can be performed (36).

17. Discussions of the role of women in *Invisible Man* include: Lisa Maria Hogeland's "Invisible Man and Invisible Women: The Sex/Race Analogy of the 1970s"; Yolanda Pierce's "The Invisible Women in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952)"; and Anne Folwell Stanford's "He Speaks for Whom? Inscription and Reinscription of Women in *Invisible Man* and *The Salt Eaters*."
18. Similarly, by writing *Invisible Man* Ellison defiles the closed circle of the 1950s literary establishment whose canon is comprised largely of white males.

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