

Bluesprints for Negro Manhood: Ellison and the Vernacular

I don't deny that . . . sociological formulations are drawn from life, but I do deny that they define the complexity of Harlem. . . . Which is by no means to deny the ruggedness of life there, nor the hardship, the poverty, the sordidness, the filth. But there is something else in Harlem, something subjective, willfully, and complexly and compellingly human. It is that "something else" which makes for our strength, which makes for our endurance and our promise. This is the proper subject for the Negro American writer. Hell, he doesn't have to spend all the tedious time required to write novels simply to repeat what the sociologists and certain white intellectuals are broadcasting like a zoo full of parrots—and getting much more money for it than most Negro writers will ever see. If he does this, he'll not only go begging, but worse, he'll lie to his people, discourage their interest in literature, and emasculate his own talent.

—*Ralph Ellison*¹

At the very least, what can be gleaned from my analyses in the previous chapter and from statements like the one above is the pivotal function Ralph Ellison assigned to sociology in shaping his literary project. Ellison's writings on black cultural production function as a kind of reverse discourse: by claiming "folklore, blues, jazz and black literature to be brainy yet *virile* subjects," as Darryl Pinckney puts it, Ellison sought to invert the view of black expression promoted by Robert E. Park and other sociologists.² I will be looking in some detail in the concluding section of this chapter at the culmination of his aesthetic theories: the celebratory account he offers of the African American vernacular tradition in his collection of essays *Shadow and Act*, in which he engages in a near point-by-point rebuttal of Park's various assertions concerning the Negro's creative proclivities. If Park insisted that expression came naturally to the Negro, that it was simply a product of his genetically transmitted racial temperament, Ellison maintained that "authentic" black

writers—like jazz players and bluesmen—only achieved mastery over the craft through an arduously achieved sense of discipline and an exacting study of prior aesthetic styles. If Park heard the “naturally sunny, cheerful, [and] optimistic” personality of the Negro expressed in folk songs and spirituals, Ellison attuned his ear instead to the blues, which give expressive form to a “tragicomic” sensibility that exemplified the particular contributions made by the Negro to American culture. If Park presented the Negro as the “lady among the races” in contrast to the Anglo-Saxon pioneer, Ellison countered with a view of jazz musicians and other black artists as “frontiersmen.”

In drawing out the oppositional stance that Ellison adopts toward sociology in general and Park’s views in particular my intent is not to reduce his literary project to a disciplinary quarrel with the views of one social scientist, however influential. It is, rather, to underscore the central function that this agonistic relationship to other purportedly “inauthentic” representations of black life performs in Ellison’s conception of the aesthetic. This agonistic stance comprises, I want to suggest, the modernist core of Ellison’s beliefs—beliefs that have been shared by a range of male writers of color—about how and why the literary domain functions as the site of resistance *par excellence* to a racism whose injurious effects are imagined through a gendered and sexualized symbolic vocabulary.

The term “sociological” is a highly resonant one in Ellison’s writings: of the handful of adjectives that he affixes to those representations of the Negro he finds objectionable, “sociological” seems to be a particular favorite. Nearly every example he provides in his nonfictional writings of a representation of black life that needs to be corrected seems to bear the traces, in some way, of the sociological. This much is evident in his characterizations of the figure who is most regularly thought of as challenging his preeminence in the canon of African American male writers, Richard Wright. While Ellison will just as often refer to him as socialist rather than sociological, as ideologically constrained more by his membership in the Communist Party than by the fundamental influence on his work of the “Chicago School,” it is not difficult to establish that many of the critical volleys he directs at “sociology-minded” writers also have Wright as their implicit target. After all, Wright plainly acknowledged his intellectual debt to sociology in his foreword to Horace Cayton’s and St. Clair Drake’s study of Chicago’s South Side, *Black Metropolis*; he also drew heavily on this research in constructing his own documentary account of the Great Migration, *12 Million Black Voices*.³

Ellison's well-known criticisms of Wright indicate that the binary distinction he makes between "authentic" and "inauthentic" representations of blackness does not neatly coincide with a division between black- and white-authored texts. When he identifies particular members of "that feverish industry dedicated to telling Negroes who and what they are, and which can usually be counted upon to deprive both humanity and culture of their complexity,"⁴ these figures are not always white. Indeed, as the epigraph to this chapter suggests, it often seems that what Ellison finds most distasteful are the *black* writers who "repeat what the sociologists and certain white intellectuals are broadcasting like a zoo full of parrots." Particularly salient for the purposes of my study is the linkage this passage makes between the passive repetition of demeaning white representations and an emasculated aesthetic sensibility. Black literary representations that merely parrot white "sociological formulations" are depicted as indicative of a racial "inauthenticity" figured as racial betrayal ("he'll lie to his people") and of an aesthetic "inauthenticity" that is figured as an abdication of manhood ("he'll . . . emasculate his own talent"). Discernible here is a version of the gendered rhetoric of inauthentication that is more forcefully articulated by writers like Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver. Indeed, I hope to suggest in this chapter that the gendered and sexualized symbolism that black nationalist writers deployed in the late sixties and early seventies in order to distinguish between the "authentic" and "inauthentic" may have been partially derived from a similar symbolic structure that was deployed by Ellison, first to distinguish his literary project from that of the Harlem Renaissance writers and then to separate himself from Richard Wright. In each of these moments, the black male writer's rhetorical need to claim the authenticity of his own literary project seems to require the invalidation (often in gendered or sexualized terms) of a prior model of black literary production.

A version of the masculinist binary that Phillip Brian Harper has located in the black nationalist rhetoric of authenticity, in other words, can be found in Ellison's assertions concerning the nature of black cultural expression. This dimension of his literary project is apparent in the premium he places on an aggressively mimetic form of homosocial desire as the primary psychic impulse animating all "authentic" literary production. Literary identity for Ellison is, at bottom, an intensely virile affair—it is fundamentally experienced as a kind of Bloomian agon, predicated as it is on the incorporation, imitation, and supercession of rivals. I will attempt in this chapter to map

the ideological determinants that shaped Ellison's conception of the aesthetic, but in so doing I want also to insist on the psychic needs that this particular conception of the literary fulfills. I want to consider the *fantasmatic* quality of Ellison's insistence on viewing literature as "A Very Stern Discipline."⁵

This agonistic dimension of Ellison's aesthetic theory will likely be most familiar to readers from the vernacular theory he elaborates in *Shadow and Act*: from his commentary on the relationship of the novelist's craft to jazz and the blues, and, more specifically, from his celebrations of the "jam sessions" that are so central to the mythos surrounding these musical forms. In several of the essays he included in this volume, Ellison, by depicting his literary identity as being modeled on jazz and the blues, claims to occupy an organic relationship to the black working class. The strenuousness with which Ellison trumpeted this affiliation between his writing and the essential spirit of jazz and the blues was matched by the vigor with which he attempted to distinguish himself from Richard Wright. For, as most readers of Ellison also know, he rather consistently distinguished his view of writing from that of Wright's, never missing an opportunity (from about 1960 onward) to insinuate that the work of his former mentor and close friend was compromised by its ideological allegiances to sociology and Marxism. What is clearly being staged and also mystified in these aspersions, which are *calculatedly* casual, is the intense sense of rivalry that came to define his relationship to Wright. That a passionate homosocial rivalry of this kind is absolutely fundamental to the development of an authentic and individualized sense of literary voice is, in fact, theorized by Ellison in his writings on the vernacular; it also speaks to the centrality of a certain aestheticized version of male homosocial desire in the more recent vernacular theories of Houston Baker, Jr., and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

I will begin this chapter, however, by bringing into focus the agonistic structure at the heart of Ellison's *first* formalized account of what black writing should be—one that preceded his rivalry with Wright. As the work of Michel Fabre has made clear, in the years before he began writing *Invisible Man* Ellison saw himself not as an adversary of Wright's, but rather as a devoted protégé.⁶ Indeed, the primary "Other" against which Ellison projected his initial vision of black literary authenticity was that cultural movement for which Robert E. Park served (according to George Fredrickson and George Hutchinson) as a kind of ideological nursemaid—the Harlem Renaissance.⁷

Hating the Renaissance: "The Fruits of That Foul Soil"

In the final chapter of his study *The Black Image in the White Mind*, George Fredrickson suggests that the image of the New Negro promoted by advocates of the Harlem Renaissance bore a significant resemblance to the stereotype of the Old Negro that it was intended to replace. "The New Negro," according to Fredrickson, "as perceived by many whites, was simply the old romantic conception of the Negro covered with a patina of the cultural primitivism and exoticism fashionable in the '20s."⁸ It is Park's description of the Negro as "the lady among the races" that instantiates for Fredrickson this resurgent romantic racialist view; and since the eminent sociologist "would come to be recognized as the foremost white student of race relations in the period between the World Wars," his patronizing view of the Negro's racial temperament "set the tone for subsequent appreciation of black cultural achievements."⁹

Given Ellison's antagonism to both Park and the Harlem Renaissance, it is somewhat surprising that he makes no direct mention in his nonfictional writings of this connection. The disdain with which Ellison regarded the movement, however, is clear not only from his depiction of its milieu in the ninth chapter of *Invisible Man* (which I examined in Chapter 1), but also in the first pieces of literary criticism he ever published: reviews and essays that appeared in the late thirties and early forties in socialist periodicals like *The New Masses*. The account of the Renaissance that Ellison offers in these pieces is virtually identical to the one that had been presented by Richard Wright in his 1937 literary manifesto, "Blueprint for Negro Writing." Indeed, there is much in these essays to confirm Michel Fabre's assertion that Ellison felt "a good deal of loyalty to Wright's controversial principles" during the crucial decade before he began writing *Invisible Man*, much more than he would later tend to admit.¹⁰ One thing he shared with Wright was the extremely dim view he took of the black literary works that were produced during the twenties.

At the heart of Wright's and Ellison's critical perspective on the Harlem Renaissance is a governing assumption about the nature of the interracial relationships that sustained the movement, relationships that were often ones of patronage. The dominant view has tended to be that the inequities of power between the black and white figures at the heart of the Renaissance had a corrosive effect on the art that was produced. More recently, cultural

critics Ann Douglas, George Hutchinson, and Ross Posnock have tried to offer more positive readings of the forms of interracialism characteristic of this cultural movement.¹¹ They have suggested that this highly critical view of interracialism reflects a residual black nationalist bias that has tended to frame most studies. Rather than trying to settle the issue of whether the interracialism of the Renaissance was generally equitable or exploitative—which is the issue that largely divides the recent treatments from the earlier ones—I would like to explore how it is that Ellison and Wright distinguish between disabling and enabling forms of interracialism. For Ellison and Wright, the question was not whether interracialism *in toto* was good or bad—both recognized that, in order to attain the forms of cultural and literary power they sought, a significant amount of interracial interaction was both necessary and desirable. But Ellison and Wright saw in the patronage that was an indelible part of the Harlem Renaissance a clear example of disabling interracialism.

In other words, the “inauthenticity” of the typical New Negro artist, as Ellison and Wright depict him, has everything to do with a basic orientation toward whiteness, an orientation that tended toward abjection and hapless mimicry and that was also clearly demarcated in class terms. This much is clear from the following passage, from Ellison’s review of Hughes’s *The Big Sea*, in which he heralded the arrival of a new nationalistic and potentially revolutionary spirit among working-class Negroes of the twenties:

It happened that those who gave artistic expression to this new spirit were of the Negro middle class, or, at least, were under the sway of its ideology . . . these writers sought to wed the passive philosophy of the Negro middle class to the militant racial protest of the Negro masses. Thus, since the black masses had evolved no writers of their own, the energy of a whole people became perverted to the ends of a class which had grown conscious of itself through the economic alliances it had made when it supported the war. This expression was further perverted through the bohemian influences of white faddists whom the war had destroyed spiritually, and who sought in the Negro something primitive and exotic; many writers were supported by their patronage.¹²

The reason why Negro writing in this period was so susceptible to being “perverted through the bohemian influences of white faddists,” Ellison suggests, has everything to do with the fact that it was largely an expression of

“the shallow, imitative culture of the educated middle class Negro” (22). Not only did this writing, expressive of black bourgeois values, espouse a “passive philosophy,” it produced a writing that was “apologetic in tone,” “timid of theme, and for the most part technically backward.”

Ellison is basically echoing here assertions that Wright had made four years earlier in his “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” In this essay, Wright paints the culture of middle-class blacks in a most unflattering light, describing it as “parasitic and mannered”;¹³ he characterizes its literary products as

prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. For the most part these artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks. (394)

Referring more pointedly to the products of the New Negro Renaissance, Wright describes them as “the fruits of that foul soil which was the result of a liaison between inferiority-complexed Negro ‘geniuses’ and burnt-out white Bohemians with money” (395). Given the ideological debt that both Wright and Ellison openly acknowledge to modernist aestheticians like Eliot and Hemingway, it is not surprising to find that the Other against which they define the authenticity of art is a tradition of writing they depict as inane bourgeois. While the Negro middle-class culture that flourished during the Renaissance is not explicitly identified in these essays with *femininity* per se, it is linked with a form of interracialism that is presented as enfeebling—as, indeed, emasculating.

In speaking of “the fruits of that foul soil which was the result of a liaison between inferiority-complexed Negro ‘geniuses’ and burnt-out white Bohemians with money” Wright is alluding to the sexual legacy of the Negro Renaissance—a dimension of it that became for many black writers, including Wright and Ellison, the apt symbol of its shortcomings. It is not difficult to see how the desire of a white patroness like Charlotte Mason for the writers she sponsored to produce an image of blackness catering to *her* expectations might have been perceived as analogous to the sexual desires of white Bohemians seeking an erotic taste of the exotic in Harlem nightclubs and rent parties. Wright’s choice of phrase, “the fruits of that foul soil,” also makes reference to what might justifiably be called the great “open secret” of

the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁴ Ann Douglas's monumental *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* is arguably the first study to address directly and explicitly an aspect of this cultural movement that has generally been acknowledged only through innuendo: namely, that "most of the best-known black male writers on the New York scene were homosexual."¹⁵ By Douglas's count, this group includes most of the major male writers of the Renaissance: Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Alain Locke, and Claude McKay; it also includes "minor talents" like Richard Bruce Nugent and Harold Jackman.¹⁶ According to Eric Garber, Harlem in the twenties was not only home to a thriving "homosexual subculture" that was "uniquely Afro-American in substance," it was also a place where white homosexual men found "social acceptance," a sense of "identification," and a "feeling of kinship."¹⁷ The white male figure who was the most influential proponent of Harlem's artists, Carl Van Vechten, was part of this group.

Phillip Brian Harper has suggested that it was this "widely acknowledged though generally only coyly acknowledged" aspect of the Harlem Renaissance that writers of the Black Arts Movement were responding to in their criticisms of it.¹⁸ If the homosexuality of figures like Cullen and Locke—which symbolized their "inadequately developed black consciousness" and a concomitant "failed masculinity"¹⁹—proved an embarrassment to black male writers of the sixties and seventies, as Harper suggests, then the same seems to have been true for Wright and Ellison writing decades earlier.

In none of his critical remarks concerning the Renaissance, however, does Ellison explicitly allude to this dimension of the Renaissance. The only reference of this kind to be found in his published writings is in the ninth chapter of *Invisible Man* (which I examined in the previous chapter). What is implied in Ellison's depiction of Young Emerson—the neurotic decadent and devotee of Oscar Wilde whose homosexuality seems to allegorize the "bohemian fancies for things Negroid" that wealthy whites sought to indulge during the Renaissance through their sponsorship of black artists—is that the offer of employment he extends to the invisible man has been extended before, and that other black men have been quite willing to accept that offer. What this scene conjures, in other words, beyond the edges of what it actually depicts is a spectral figure of another kind. Although the reader is spared the experience of meeting such a character, the narrative does seem to imply the existence of young black men who would, unlike the invisible man, be happy to play "Nigger Jim" to would-be "Hucks" like

Young Emerson. What this scene suggests but never fleshes out, in other words, is another kind of invisible man—the black “faggot” stigmatized by his sexualized desire for white men. Hovering in the space between the ninth chapter of *Invisible Man*, “Recent Negro Fiction,” and “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” in other words, is an incipient version of the homophobic symbolism that Cleaver and other black male writers of the sixties and seventies would use to invalidate their rivals. All of these writers vilify a sexualized mimetic desire that is oriented both toward white men and the values of an enervating bourgeois order.

*The Writer as Proletarian Hero: A Marxian Blueprint
for Negro Writing*

If the ideological embrace of white middle-class norms (and the sexual embrace of white men) produced a writing that was “shallow” and “imitative,” as Wright and Ellison suggest, then a more authentic black literary tradition can only emerge, they argue, through developing an organic connection to the black working masses. In examining the “blueprint” for a more authentic Negro writing that both writers elaborate, I want to show that the shift in *class* allegiance they advocate does not involve a repudiation either of mimetic desire or of interracialism, but rather a refiguring of them.

Both Wright and Ellison describe the ideal relationship that the Negro writer ought to adopt to the culture of the working masses as involving a complex mimetic interplay: on the one hand, he needs to develop within himself a folk consciousness that is already possessed by working-class Negroes and that is already developing into a revolutionary proletarian consciousness; on the other, he must prefigure in his own individual psyche a revolutionary transformation of consciousness that must be reproduced in the psyches of each member of the black working class. From the first point of view, the writer is seen as a figure who must emulate an already existing model of consciousness immanent to the “folk”; from another, the writer is a kind of Mosaic or vanguardist figure, helping to lead the “folk” toward the higher form of consciousness necessary for revolutionary change.

In “Recent Negro Fiction,” Wright describes this interplay in relation to a burgeoning race or “nationalist” consciousness. The Negro writer, insists Wright, must engage with “Negro folklore,” which expresses a “collective

sense of Negro life in America" imbued with nationalist implications (397). Negro writers must reckon with the nationalist spirit of black folk culture, in order not to encourage but to change and transcend it, "*possess and understand it*" (398). The only way the black writer will be able to achieve this is through "a Marxist conception of reality" (399) that can reveal the limitations and dangers of nationalism. A Marxist perspective not only clarifies that nationalist aims are ultimately "unrealizable within the framework of capitalist America" (398), but also offers "the maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling [that] can be gained for the Negro writer" (399). As necessary as Marxism is to the Negro writer, however, it is "but the starting point. No theory of life can take the place of life" (399). What supplements Marxism is a particularity of vision that can only be attained through a disciplined training in the craft of writing, one that derives from a careful reading of a broad range of writers:

Eliot, Stein, Joyce, Proust, Hemingway, and Anderson; Gorky, Barbusse, Nexo and Jack London no less than the folklore of the Negro himself should form the heritage of the Negro Writer. Every iota of gain in human thought and sensibility should be ready grist for his mill, no matter how far-fetched they may seem in their immediate implications. (399)

The writer is to serve, then, as a kind of crucible into which the nationalist sensibility expressed in Negro folk culture is poured. And through an ideological alchemy that fuses together modernism and Marxism, he will be able to forge a Negro writing capable of molding the nationalist consciousness of working-class blacks into a properly revolutionary consciousness.

The Negro writer, Wright insists,

is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die.

By his ability to fuse and make articulate the experiences of men, because his writing possesses the potential cunning to steal into the inmost recesses of the human heart, because he can create the myths and symbols that inspire a faith in life, he may expect either to be consigned to oblivion, or to be recognized for the valued agent he is. (399)

While this passage places the Negro writer at the very vanguard of the black working classes, exemplifying and prefiguring in his own work a revolutionary form of consciousness that he will help to disseminate through his writ-

ings across the Negro population, the passages I have examined earlier suggest a different relationship of mimesis, and an alternate temporality. In them Wright insists that the writer must follow and emulate the masses: in order to “possess” and “understand” the nationalist terms in which they make sense of their experiences, he must leave himself open to that “body of folklore, living and powerful,” through which “the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complete expression.”

Further complicating this doubly mimetic relationship to black working folk is the suggestion that it is only achievable through substantive forms of *interracial* contact. Negro writers must not simply study the work of white writers like Eliot, Stein, Joyce, Proust, Hemingway, and Anderson, they must also interact with progressive white writers. Though Wright’s essay begins by underscoring the debilitating effects on Negro art of one version of interracialism (i.e., the patronage of the Harlem Renaissance), it concludes with a section entitled “The Necessity for Collective Work,” which emphasizes the need for contact between the races: “The Negro writers’ lack of thorough integration with the American scene, their lack of a clear realization among themselves of their possible role, have bred generation after generation of embittered and defeated literati” (402). Wright stresses the inadequate access to resources that black writers face as a result of segregation and asserts that this situation only intensifies the most regressive nationalist tendencies. This predicament can only be rectified, Wright insists, by an *intensification* of interracial solidarity:

The ideological unity of Negro writers and the alliance of that unity with all the progressive ideas of our day is the primary prerequisite for collective work. On the shoulders of white writers and Negro writers alike rest [*sic*] the responsibility of ending this mistrust and isolation. (402)

If the Negro writer requires unimpeded access to American civilization in order to meet the demands of the revolutionary role he is being called upon to play, as Wright insists, this can only be achieved by encouraging interracial and collective work. Interracialism *per se* is not the problem, then, but rather the forms of interracialism that flourished under the Renaissance.

Nearly all of Wright’s claims about the ideals to which black writing ought to aspire are echoed and amplified by Ellison. Indeed, the only significant ways in which his “Recent Negro Fiction” goes beyond Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” is the specific mention it makes of writers

who exemplify both the regressive and progressive directions that black writing could take. Ellison thus identifies Zora Neale Hurston and Arna Bontemps as clinging to the obsolete concerns of the Renaissance, while he commends Langston Hughes and Richard Wright in precisely the terms laid out in "Blueprint for Negro Writing": for their connection to working-class Negroes, which is apparent from their use of folklore and their commitment to Marxism; and for their awareness of the aesthetic techniques of modernist writers such as Joyce, Stein, Anderson, and Hemingway.²⁰ An important reason for the unusual aesthetic success of Hughes and Wright is that they "*experienced freedom of association with advanced white writers*" (25). In contrast to the more debilitating forms of interracialism characteristic of the Renaissance, the interracial association experienced by Wright and Hughes was fruitful because it afforded them access to that cultural resource so important to all writers, but "controlled" in the United States "on the basis of color"—"the possession of Western culture" (25).

In order to substantiate more fully the progressive effects of such interracial contact, Ellison draws from Wright's biography, placing particular emphasis on his experience in the Chicago John Reed Club. The effects of this experience were, Ellison insists, wholly transformative, enabling Wright to develop "disciplines which were impossible within the relaxed, semi-peasant environs of American Negro life" and indeed amounting to "attainment of a new sensibility, of a rebirth" (25). Throughout "Recent Negro Fiction," Ellison makes use of Wright's life in this way, as entirely exemplary. Indeed, this essay is a virtual hagiography: it canonizes Wright for living out in his own life and works the narrative of poetic development outlined in "Blueprint." The hyperbole in Wright's descriptions of the Negro writer's responsibilities ("to fuse and make articulate the experiences of men," to "create the myths and symbols that inspire a faith in life") is matched by Ellison's. As the following passage makes clear, Ellison's prose is hard at work in this essay, seeking to develop the appropriate imagery for conveying the Negro writer's revolutionary role—a role for which writers of the twenties were entirely inadequate:

The grinding impact of the depression upon the aroused Negro people was transforming its folk consciousness into a working class awareness. Negro communities sprouted picket lines, and shouted slogans showing an awareness of the connection between world events and Negro lives. And the

writer who had stood aloof from the people, confining himself to transmitting the small, thin, compromising voice of the black middle class, found himself drowned out in the mighty protesting roar of the black masses. And when the writer attempted to transmit this new sound it was as though he had encountered a strange language; it cracked the crude mechanism of his prose. Yet the speech patterns of this new language had long been present in Negro life, recorded in the crystallized protest of American Negro folklore. It was only that now this protest was receiving intensification and amplification as a result of the folk Negro's reaction to mechanized capitalist suffering: the pressure was bursting the shell of the Negro people's folk consciousness. (23)

While the extended conceit that Ellison elaborates here strains a bit, it is one that renders writing akin to a technology of aural reproduction and transmission. The writer is a figure who should seek to "transmit" "the mighty protesting roar of the black masses"—to act like a kind of radio tranceiver, capturing, amplifying, and broadcasting the "protest" of the black masses. In order to fulfill that function, the writer will require the "mechanism" of a prose less "crude" than that which was used by writers of the Harlem Renaissance. He will need to develop "prose mediums capable of dealing with the complexities of the society in which its new consciousness struggled to be born": these "prose mediums" will have to draw from the experimentalism of modernist writing as well as from black vernacular traditions (23).

Richard Wright emerges from "Recent Negro Fiction" as the only Negro writer who has thus far shown himself capable of shouldering this revolutionary burden of representation. In *Native Son*, Ellison continues,

we have *the first* philosophical novel by an American Negro. This work possesses an artistry, penetration of thought, and sheer emotional power that places it into the front rank of American fiction. Indeed, except for its characters and subject matter, *it seems hardly identifiable with previous Negro fiction*. (22; my emphasis)

While Wright's accomplishments are initially described as "the continuation of the fictional trend started by Hughes," the passage above presents him as having superseded his predecessor. By emphasizing the "first-ness" of Wright's novelistic accomplishment, Ellison suggests that it is possible for a talented writer to resume an earlier literary trend and yet to produce work that appears to have no precedent—that "seems hardly identifiable with pre-

vious Negro fiction.” Later in the essay, Ellison similarly suggests that Wright’s novel,

examined against past Negro fiction, represents the take-off in a leap which promises to carry over a whole tradition, and marks the merging of the imaginative depiction of American Negro life into the broad stream of American literature. For the Negro writer it has suggested a path which he might follow to reach maturity, clarifying and increasing his social responsibility. (25)

A fully developed literary maturity entails not only exceeding the accomplishments of the figure whose path one followed, but also producing a work that appears to have no precedent at all. Implicit here even in 1941 is an agonistic and competitive model of black cultural production and writing that Ellison would continue to codify and elaborate through his nonfictional writings over the next quarter-century: a model of literary identity that is predicated on the erasure of prior models of emulation and that presents itself precisely as a model that later writers “might follow to reach maturity.”

That Ellison, in the years before he began composing *Invisible Man*, perceived Wright as precisely such a model is evident from sources other than “Recent Negro Fiction.” Ellison’s letters to Wright from the late thirties to mid-forties, a correspondence that has been brought to light by Michel Fabre, intimate that his regard for the more advanced writer was imbued with an intensely mimetic homosocial desire. In drawing attention to this aspect of Ellison’s relationship to Wright, my intent is not to “queer” it, to disclose a hitherto closeted erotic dimension of it. It is to suggest, however, that Ellison’s adamant refusal later in his career to acknowledge any dimension of their relationship that might resemble an Oedipal rivalry has everything to do with suppressing the intensely mimetic aspects of it that are so palpable in “Recent Negro Fiction” and in the correspondence that Fabre examines.

In his analysis of this correspondence, Fabre’s main purpose is to suggest that Ellison was, in those crucial years shortly before he began writing his novel, much closer to Wright than he tended later to admit: politically, aesthetically, and emotionally. The two were both deeply critical of the Communist Party USA for its support of the war effort, the discipline it attempted to exert on its intellectuals and writers, and its inability to contend with the specific issues confronting American Negroes. In the letters

Fabre cites in order to detail the deep sense of political and aesthetic affinity that the two men shared, what also comes across quite powerfully is the deeply identificatory nature of the bond as it was apparently experienced by Ellison.

The letter in which the intensity of this bond is most palpable is one Ellison wrote some three months after "Recent Negro Fiction" appeared (November 3, 1941). Given that Ellison would later stress the differences between his own Southwestern upbringing and Wright's Southern one, it is striking that he here describes them both as coming North "from the same region." In the following passage, Ellison describes the revelatory effect that reading Wright's documentary account of the Great Migration, *12 Million Black Voices*, has had on him:

I have known for a long time that you have suffered many things which I know, and that the truths which you have learned are Negro truths. (That's one reason I have always been amazed by those who distrust you.) . . . Of this, however, I am now sure more than ever; that you and I are brothers. Back when I first knew you, remember, I often speculated as to what it was that made the difference between us and the others who shot up from the same region. . . . I think it is because this past which filters through your book has always been tender and alive and aching within us. We are the ones with no comforting amnesia of childhood, and for whom the trauma of passing from the country to the city of destruction brought no anesthesia of consciousness, but left our nerves peeled and quivering. We are not the numbed but the seething. God! It makes you want to write and write and write, or murder. Like most of us, I am shy of my naked personal emotions, they are too deep. Yet one gets strength when he shares his deepest thoughts and emotions with his brother. And certainly you could have found no better way to share your experience with the rest of us.²¹

What links Wright and Ellison is not only the shared experience of racism and poverty (apparently of a specifically Southern variety), but also the fact that they are endowed with a capacity—because they are writers—to remember the painful details of this experience.

Other passages echo this point, that Wright's prose has the effect of making its black readers acknowledge and re-experience in its most jagged forms a shared sense of pain. The emotional identification with injury engendered by Wright's prose apparently arouses in its reader a desire for a kind of retributive violence: it makes Ellison "want to write and write and write, or

murder.”²² The most revolutionary function of Wright’s writing is its capacity to incite a transformative anger, to function as a kind of “weapon more subtle than a machine-gun, more effective than a fighter-plane. It is like Joe Louis knocking their best men silly in his precise, impassive, alert Negro way.”²³ Indeed, the fraternal metaphors that abound in this letter are often martial, apparent evidence of their mutual reading of André Malraux; it is clear that Ellison saw himself and Wright as brothers-in-arms, as members of a “virile fraternity” engaged in a war against racism:

12 Million Black Voices calls for exaltation—and direct action. My emotional drives are intensified and reorganized in such a manner that the only relieving action would be one through which all our shames and wrongs would be wiped out in blood. But this is not all. After reading your history . . . , I was convinced that we people of emotion shall land the most telling strokes, the destructive-creative blows in the struggle. And we shall do it with books like this!²⁴

While passages like this one suggest that Ellison saw himself and Wright as brothers-in-arms—imply, in other words, a certain egalitarian quality to their bond—others acknowledge the hierarchy between them. If Wright had laid out for the Negro writer “the path which he might follow to reach maturity,” Ellison was quite willing to acknowledge his debt directly: “It gives me something to build upon, my work is made easier, my audience brought a bit closer. I’m a better man for having read it.”²⁵

“Richard Wright’s Blues”: A Modernist Bluesprint for Negro Writing

Fabre’s analyses of this correspondence indicate how unalloyed Ellison’s loyalty to Wright still was in the mid-forties, just before he began composing *Invisible Man*.²⁶ He plainly saw Wright as championing a kind of writing that he wanted to emulate. Fabre also finds in Ellison’s specific praise of Wright’s capacity to engender a shared sense of pain in his black readers a provisional formulation of the blues aesthetic with which he would identify the author of *Black Boy* in 1945. Four years after “Recent Negro Fiction” appeared, Ellison would publish “Richard Wright’s Blues” in *The Antioch Review*. While at least one critic—Joseph Skerrett, Jr.—has seen this essay as marking a kind of “break” from Wright, as interweaving into its praise ele-

ments of criticism, Fabre's analyses invite a different reading.²⁷ If "Richard Wright's Blues" does indeed record a break, the one it seems to commemorate is Ellison's and Wright's mutual departure from the Communist Party. It is among the first of Ellison's reviews to appear in a nonsocialist periodical, and it was published in 1945, a year after Wright had publicly announced his resignation from the Party in the pages of *The Atlantic Monthly*, in the essay "I Tried to Be a Communist." Read in this context, what is remarkable about Ellison's lyrical tribute to *Black Boy* is that he constructed a largely new aesthetic framework—one absent of Marxian references—in which to valorize Wright.

At the heart of the blues, as Ellison famously defined them in this essay, is the immediacy of its depiction of emotional pain, something that he had identified in his earlier letters to Wright as essential to the Negro aesthetic he himself hoped to follow:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal tragedy expressed lyrically.²⁸

. . . like a blues sung by such an artist as Bessie Smith, [Wright's] lyrical prose evokes the paradoxical, almost surreal image of a black boy singing lustily as he probes his own grievous wound. (79)

It was toward this justifiably famous definition that Ellison was inexorably moving, according to Fabre, when he described the Southern past that "filters through" *12 Million Black Voices* as one that "has always been tender and alive and aching within us," as a "trauma" that "left our nerves peeled and quivering."

But while Ellison once again links Wright's aesthetic authenticity to his use of folk culture, the black folk of "Richard Wright's Blues" are no longer the heroic proletarian subjects who will foment historical changes on a revolutionary scale. Instead they are Southern peasants, scarred by the Jim Crow system under which they live. Physically and emotionally brutalized by the violence of white racism, they respond with what Ellison terms "homeopathic dose[s] of violence," which they turn inward, at both fugitive individualists like Wright and at wayward individualistic impulses in their own psyches (86). The oscillating mimetic interplay between the "authentic"

Negro writer and the masses, each amplifying the revolutionary impulses in the other, is replaced here by a far more antagonistic and violent relationship. In the analysis Ellison offers of Wright's depiction of the affective ties that hold together the Southern Negro community—ties in which love is infused with the most casual and omnipresent brutality—he replaces the Marxian vocabulary of his earlier essay with a Freudian one. If Southern Negroes are depicted in "Recent Negro Fiction" as ushering in the revolution through their spatial movement from the countryside to the cities, their temporal movement from feudalism to modernity, their ideological movement from a "folk" consciousness to a proletarian one—if they are depicted in the previous essay as *the* privileged subjects of historical change—they are depicted here as psychically and historically frozen in a state of arrested development.

The most salient aspect of Negro folk practices is for Ellison their putatively "physical" or "erotic" character: "Negro music and dances are frenziedly erotic; Negro religious ceremonies violently ecstatic; Negro speech strongly rhythmical and weighted with image and gesture" (88). What these "physical" or "erotic" forms of expression represent are the "channelization" of an individuating intellectual energy that would, in a freer society, find expression through language, through properly intellectual work. In order to substantiate this point, Ellison refers to "the rapidity of Negro intellectual growth in the North" (88):

In the North energies are released and given *intellectual* channelization—energies which in most Negroes in the South have been forced to take either a *physical* form, or, as with potentially intellectual types like Wright, to be expressed as nervous tension, anxiety, and hysteria. Which is nothing mysterious. The human organism responds to environmental stimuli by converting them into either physical and/or intellectual energy. And what is called hysteria is called suppressed intellectual energy expressed physically. (88)

The Southern Negro is, then, a kind of hysteric: he speaks through his body not because he naturally inclines toward physicality, but because he is laying claim to the only medium available for giving expression to those intellectual impulses that in a more emancipated social order might be expressed through, say, literature.

Ellison runs some serious ideological risks in his use of this Freudian conception of hysteria to anatomize the forms of subjectivity possible under a

repressive social order. At times he comes close to pathologizing African Americans. But his stated intent in elaborating through psychoanalysis the view of the Negro contained in *Black Boy* is to dismantle perspectives on the Negro that view the physicality and eroticism of his folk culture as expressions of racial temperament—romantic racist views not unlike those championed by Parkian sociology. Ellison in fact identifies two white ways of seeing the Negro that *Black Boy* challenges. The first he labels “pastoral,” and in elaborating the second, Ellison echoes his earlier critiques of the white patronage that sustained the Renaissance. Wright’s book frustrates the

attitude . . . which leads whites to misjudge Negro passion, looking upon it as they do, out of the turgidity of their own frustrated yearning for emotional warmth, their capacity for sensation having been constricted by the impersonal mechanized relationships typical of bourgeois society. The Negro is idealized into a symbol of sensation, of unhampered social and sexual relationships. And when *Black Boy* questions their illusion they are thwarted much in the manner of the occidental who, after observing the erotic character of a primitive dance, “shacks up” with a native woman—only to discover that from possessing the hair-trigger sexual responses of a Stork Club “babe,” she is relatively phlegmatic. (86–87)

The “physical” or “erotic” aspects of Negro expression that white enthusiasts (whom Ellison interestingly refers to here as “occidentals”) misread as essentially racial are, in fact, the expressions of a complex psychic response—a product of the human need for intellectual expression bumping up against the oppressive constraints of a social order that denies access to the appropriate mechanisms (literacy, education, and so on) for satisfying that need.

The significance of the blues singer as Ellison renders him in this essay, then, is that he reproduces something of the violent corporeality of this hysteric posture in his aesthetic posture. If ordinarily the Southern Negro’s body becomes freighted with meanings it cannot adequately bear, then what is extraordinary about the body of the blues singer is precisely the *sound* that it makes. For while his singing is *of* his body, it is not equivalent to it; and in that subtle relay between body and breath, between singer and song, he is able to mirror, distill, but also transpose to another register altogether the form of cultural expression characteristic of his community. What the singing of the blues seems to open up in the singer is a kind of alterity, a temporal gap between the one who was victimized by “a brutal experience” and

the one who is able *through the act of narration* to confront and transcend it. Implicit in this celebratory account of the blues singer is a disjuncture between the body that bears a “grievous wound” and the bluesman who “sing[s] lustily as he probes” it.

Despite the intense lyricism that Ellison brings to bear in his tribute to Wright as bluesman, critics like Joseph Skerrett, Jr., have been tempted to read a certain ambivalence into it. This apparent ambivalence can be seen to manifest itself in at least two ways. Firstly, there is the somewhat confusing and confused gender imagery through which the figure of the bluesman is described. For instance, by associating Wright’s narrative voice with the body of a black *boy* singing lustily or with the figure of Bessie Smith, Ellison seems to suggest a certain incompleteness to this figure, encoded as immaturity and femininity. (Ellison does not, in other words, evoke here a Robert Johnson or a Jimmy Rushing.) Moreover, the figure of the “grievous wound” carries with it intimations of castration. If Ellison was seeking to project a vision of black expressivity that would counter the less-than-wholly-masculine terms conferred by the romantic racialism of Parkian sociology and the Harlem Renaissance, this image seems an odd choice, given its ambiguously gendered character. Secondly, there is the way in which Ellison’s review makes Wright’s intellectualism proximate to hysteria. If Wright’s writing is related to the hysterical mode of expression typically produced in response to the violence of the South, then his writings might also be compared to “the violent gesturing of a man who attempts to express a complicated concept with a limited vocabulary,” whose “thwarted ideational energy is converted into unsatisfactory pantomime,” and whose “words are burdened with meanings they cannot convey.”

Such a reading of “Richard Wright’s Blues”—as containing a veiled critique of the figure it seems to lionize—is abetted by the context in which most readers come across it: as part of *Shadow and Act*, a volume of essays containing several criticisms of Wright’s work. In “The World and the Jug,” for instance, Ellison famously suggests that it was Ernest Hemingway rather than Wright whom he regarded in his formative years as a literary “ancestor.” Wright, as a rough contemporary, was more like a “relative.” Hemingway’s influence was greater not only because he came first, temporally speaking, but also because he was “a greater artist than Wright.”²⁹ Claiming that he derived his aesthetic by studying modernists like Hemingway, Ellison insin-

uates that he diverged from Wright, who derived his models elsewhere—from Marxism and sociology. These comments obscure the fact that his 1945 tribute to Wright mobilizes a modernist conception of literary identity that had been codified by Hemingway himself. Ellison casts Wright, in other words, in the very image of that figure who was “the true father-as-artist of so many of us who came to writing during the thirties” (141).

The elements of Ellison’s depiction of Wright that seem to imbue him with a sense of incompleteness take on an entirely different meaning when they are seen as embodiments of certain by-now clichéd figures derived from Hemingway’s writings. For instance, the intimations of castration in the figure of the bluesman “singing lustily as he probes his own grievous wound” suggest an analogy to the figure of Jake Barnes, whom Ellison describes elsewhere as follows: “Jake Barnes survives, precisely because Jake Barnes is the writer of *The Sun Also Rises*. Ball-less, humiliated, malicious, even masochistic, he still has a steady eye upon it all and has the most eloquent ability to convey the texture of the experience.”³⁰ Ellison’s discussion of the bluesman’s technique also mirrors the relationship to language advocated by Hemingway. The blues are able to “transcend” “the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience” by keeping it “alive” through representation, but also by “squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.” The emphasis on lyricism underscores the implacable discipline imposed on the bluesman by the constraints of his form. Twelve bars, no more, no less, with fairly strict rules of repetition—it is by “squeezing” his “autobiographical chronicle of personal tragedy” into this lyric form that the bluesman is able to transcend it. This radical distilling of language required by the blues bears some relation to the aesthetic of understatement and omission so valued by Hemingway.³¹

It is not, however, just the compression of language that Ellison prizes about the blues, it is also the particular attitude toward tragic experience that they express. It is a capacity to glean the “near-tragic, near-comic” significance of brutalizing events, to sing lustily about one’s suffering that Ellison prizes here; and it is not unlike the sentiment he often finds Hemingway’s writings infused by. In 1964 he explains that one reason he claimed Hemingway as a literary “ancestor” was because his writing “was imbued with a spirit beyond the tragic with which I could feel at home, for it was very close to the feeling of the blues, which are, perhaps, as close as Americans can come to expressing the spirit of tragedy.”³² Grace under pres-

sure is not an inapt formulation for the qualities that Ellison finds in the bluesman, and thus in the figure of Wright himself.

The final two pages of “Richard Wright’s Blues” contain two other direct references to Hemingway. First of all, Ellison uses the figure of the matador to describe Wright’s agonistic relationship to Western culture (and here again Ellison is recasting an earlier argument that had been rendered in Marxian terms in “Recent Negro Fiction”):

Wright is pointing out what should be obvious (especially to his Marxist critics) that Negro sensibility is socially and historically conditioned; that Western culture must be won, confronted like the animal in a Spanish bullfight, dominated by the red shawl of codified experience and brought heaving to its knees. (93)

Secondly, in a more convoluted conceit, Ellison compares Wright’s attempt to delineate the distorted and wounded forms of humanity in the Southern Negro with a quail hunter’s attempt to distinguish his quarry “from the brown and yellow leaves of a Mississippi thicket” (93). Rendering the Negro’s humanity is as difficult a task of discernment, Ellison writes, but Wright had a certain advantage in this regard:

Having himself been in the position of the quail—to expand the metaphor—Wright’s wounds have told him both the question and the answer which every successful hunter must discover for himself: “Where would I hide if I were a wounded quail?” But perhaps that requires more sympathy with one’s quarry than most hunters possess. Certainly it requires such a sensitivity to the shifting guises of *humanity under pressure* as to allow them to identify themselves with the human content, whatever its outer form . . . (94)

Here Ellison not only identifies Wright’s aesthetic as having been shaped by Hemingway’s aesthetic, but he also presents it as exceeding its model in one particular way. If Hemingway is like “most hunters” in that he can identify his difficult-to-see prey, Wright possesses something that sets him apart: a capacity for sympathetic identification, “a sensitivity to the shifting guises of *humanity under pressure*.” This phrase evokes Hemingway’s aesthetic of “grace under pressure” while simultaneously suggesting an element lacking in it, an element that is, by contrast, apparent in Wright’s writings: a capacity to identify with the wounded forms of humanity produced by the pressures of Southern racism.

Inauthenticating Wright

Ellison's well-known criticisms of Wright began to appear around 1960, the year of Wright's death. From that point forward, Ellison's interviews and essays tend to include statements underscoring the distinctions between his relationship to literature and that of Wright's and denying the older writer's influence. In the following I want to examine Ellison's account of their relationship as it began to solidify in this period, when the two writers were increasingly seen to embody opposing conceptions of black writing. The interviews and essays I will be analyzing make clear how wholeheartedly Ellison encouraged the perception of an aesthetic divide between himself and Wright. In these pieces, most of which were included in *Shadow and Act*, Ellison presents his writing as being driven by allegiances to the "ordinary" American Negro, to the vernacular traditions of jazz and the blues, and, above all, to the discipline of writing; in contrast, he depicts Wright's literary output as having been compromised by various *ideological* allegiances—to Marxism, to sociology, to existentialism. In examining the rhetoric of inauthentication that Ellison marshals against Wright, I will show how it redeploys and reconfigures certain arguments that both writers had directed against the writing of the Harlem Renaissance.

It was in the course of defending himself against the criticisms leveled at him by Irving Howe in his 1963 essay "Black Boys and Native Sons" that Ellison issued his most disparaging comments regarding Wright: "How awful that Wright found the facile answers of Marxism before he learned to use literature as a means for discovering the forms of American Negro humanity" (120). According to Ellison, Wright's immersion in Marxism not only resulted in the diminishment of his aesthetic capacities, it also effected a kind of racial self-alienation within the writer himself. If his parroting of "the facile answers of Marxism" led him to "dissociate himself from the complexity of his background," this suggests that his internalization of Marxism cut him off from certain aspects of his own black self—the links to Negroness within his very psyche. To demonstrate Wright's disconnection from the mainstream of black life, Ellison makes the following observation, which is quite remarkable given the praise he had given in his 1945 review of *Black Boy*: "if you think Wright knew anything about the blues, listen to a 'blues' he composed with Paul Robeson singing, a *most* unfortunate collaboration!" (140).

In a 1960 interview, Ellison tells Harold Isaacs that Wright “has a passion for ideology and is fascinated by power”; this concern with world politics has led him to “cut his ties to American Negroes.”³³ Ellison’s criticisms are not usually so narrowly focused on Wright as they are in this interview: more typically, he will cite Wright’s ideological biases as exemplary of a “sociological” approach to writing taken by a number of black and white writers. One effect of this rhetorical strategy is that Ellison’s criticisms come off as, if not reluctant, offhanded, even nonchalant. By cultivating this studiously unruffled critical attitude toward Wright, Ellison plays down any suggestion of an Oedipal dimension to their relationship—he denies any need to, as it were, kill the father. This rhetorical strategy enables Ellison to target and neutralize the one male writer who might be seen as challenging his pre-eminence in black letters; it also allows him to evoke a whole strain of Negro writing that is likewise marred by sociological allegiances. In much the same way that Ellison and Wright in the thirties and forties required the negative example of the Harlem Renaissance to limn the features of the black writing they hoped to produce, Ellison in the sixties needed to conjure forth a tradition of “sociological” writing to contrast with his own, more “authentic” sense of literary craft. “People who want to write sociology,” Ellison remarked of Wright in his interview with Isaacs, “should not write a novel.”³⁴

The rhetorical strategy I have outlined above—in which a critique of the “sociological” encompasses both a contemporaneous generation of “militant” black writers and Richard Wright—is very much on display in the 1967 interview entitled “A Very Stern Discipline.” In this conversation, the primary object of Ellison’s criticism is a certain tendency toward the sociological that seems to afflict the work of most recent Negro writers. Though it is easy for Negro writers, Ellison suggests, to rely on the sociological, the more difficult yet richer challenge is to maintain (as he himself has done) one’s allegiance to the “very stern discipline” of literature. The *mise-en-scène* of this interview, which is described in a prefatory paragraph, reinforces this sense of a divide in black letters; it also makes clear that the piece as a whole will privilege the Ellisonian model. The headnote establishes Ellison’s credentials as an elder statesman of African American letters: he is identified as the author of a “memorable first novel,” “the recipient of the 1952 National Book Award,” and one of “the front rank of American writers” (109). He is being interviewed by “three young Negro writers,” all of whom are male: Steve Cannon, Lennox Raphael, and James Thompson (109). This scenario casts the interviewers as

representatives of a contemporary generation of black male writers who are being exhorted by their literary "father" to emulate his example. Ellison's pronouncements have the feel of Mosaic exhortations, as if he were calling upon the younger members of his tribe to renounce the false god of sociology for the true god of literature. "What is missing today," Ellison announces,

is a corps of artists and intellectuals who would evaluate Negro American experience *from the inside*, and out of a broad knowledge of how people of other cultures live, deal with experience, and give experience to their experience. We do too little of this. Rather we depend on outsiders—mainly sociologists—to interpret our lives for us. (129)

Black writers who parrot the findings of sociology will tend to evaluate black experience from an outsider's perspective. Such writers will invariably focus on the question, "How do we fit into the sociological terminology? Gunnar Myrdal said this experience means thus and so. And Dr. Kenneth Clark, or Dr. E. Franklin Frazier, says the same thing . . .' And we try to fit our experience into their concepts" (129–30).

Through his recurrent use of the first person plural in these statements, Ellison seems to suggest that he himself has also been tempted to write from this sociological point of view. But he also insists that he has resisted that temptation out of a recognition that it would result in an elitist dis-identification from blackness:

Well, whenever I hear a Negro intellectual describing Negro life and personality with a catalogue of negative definitions, my first question is, how did you escape, is it that you were born exceptional and superior? If I cannot look at the most brutalized Negro on the street, even when he irritates me and makes me want to bash his head in because he's goofing off, I must still say within myself, "Well, that's you too, Ellison." And I'm not talking about guilt, but of an identification that goes beyond race. (130)

Ellison's use of "we" suggests that he is criticizing a general trend—a temptation, really—that authentic writers must resist. But it is also clear that the prototype he has in mind for the kind of black writer who writes from the perspective of sociology is Richard Wright, whom he describes in "The World and the Jug" as subscribing to "the ideological proposition that what whites think of the Negro's reality is more important than what Negroes themselves know it to be" (114).

Ellison's criticisms of this sociological tendency have, moreover, a gendered and sexual dimension. In "A Very Stern Discipline," the specific sociological findings that he mentions are those of the Moynihan Report, which had been released two years earlier, in 1965:

If a Negro writer is going to listen to sociologists—as too many of us do—who tell us that Negro life is thus-and-so in keeping with certain sociological theories, he is in trouble because he will have abandoned his task before he begins. If he accepts the clichés to the effect that the Negro family is usually a broken family, that it is matriarchal in form and that the mother dominates and castrates the males, if he believes that Negro males are having all of these alleged troubles with their sexuality, or that Harlem is a "Negro ghetto"—which means to paraphrase one of our writers, "piss in the halls and blood on the stairs"—well, he'll never see the people of whom he wishes to write. (109–10)

The black writer who affirms such a sociological view—one that seemingly calls into question the masculinity of black men—risks, then, the diminishment of his own aesthetic acuity: "He'll never learn to use his own eyes and his own heart, and he'll never master the art of fiction." In order to convey the lapse of aesthetic vision that will result from this allegiance to sociology, Ellison conjures the following image:

Hell, he [the Negro writer] doesn't have to spend all the tedious time required to write novels simply to repeat what the sociologists and certain white intellectuals are broadcasting like a zoo full of parrots—and getting much more money for it than most Negro writers will ever see. If he does this he'll not only go begging, but worse, he'll lie to his people, discourage their interest in literature, and emasculate his own talent. (110)

Discernible in this figure is a linkage between literary inauthenticity, racial inauthenticity, a compromised masculinity, and a passive mimicry of white intellectual models. The distinction that Ellison establishes here between his own work and that of more recent "'angry' Negro writers" rests on the assumption that inauthentic forms of black writing will passively mimic the findings of sociologists while authentic forms will challenge them.

I want to specify what it is about the view of the Negro promoted by sociology that Ellison identifies as particularly problematic. In "A Very Stern Discipline" it is a pathologizing of the Negro as wholly brutalized that Ellison objects to, that he links with the kind of sociological perspective put forward

in the Moynihan Report. Given the explicitly *gendered* nature of the findings of the Moynihan Report—which emphasized the emasculation of black males by their own culture—it is not entirely surprising that Ellison would depict the Negro writer who affirms its perspective as “emasculat[ing] his own talent.”

Enclosed within the gendered terms that frame Ellison’s account of the “sociological,” however, are also questions of desire—and, specifically, of white racist desire. In “The World and the Jug,” Ellison generalizes from the specific sins of misinterpretation that he finds Howe guilty of and elaborates a kind of template for white racist desire—a template that can be discerned in the findings of all “sociology-oriented critics” (108). What turns out to be most problematic about the view of the Negro presented by sociology and affirmed by certain sociologically inclined writers (e.g., Wright) is that it caters to certain “private Freudian fantasies”—that the Negro as depicted in sociology simply serves as “a territory for infantile self-expression.” The literary self-emasculation that Ellison ascribes to the Negro writer who parrots the findings of sociology is thus linked to a particular orientation to white racial desire—it involves what Ellison had several decades earlier described as “indulg[ing] white bohemian fancies for things Negroid.” It is also involved with a passively mimetic orientation to white culture, a tendency that Ellison had early identified in the writings of the Harlem Renaissance.

Southwestern Jazz and the Vernacular Subject

What should be clear by now is the way in which the rhetoric of inauthenticity that Ellison marshaled against Wright in the sixties echoes the rhetoric that both he and Wright had deployed in their Marxian critiques of the Harlem Renaissance. Vilified in either case is a passively imitative relationship to white culture, a literature that is “shallow” and “imitative” and that caters to the racist fantasies of a white readership. What has changed about this rhetoric of inauthenticity, however, is that it is no longer rooted in a Marxian vocabulary of class: while Wright’s loyalty to sociology is depicted as alienating him from most black Americans, this posture is not presented as indicative of a bourgeois sensibility. Nonetheless, Ellison still retains in his writings of the sixties a belief that it is the working-class—the “folk”—who are the bearers of the most authentic and muscular form of black culture. He simply offers a different account of the Negro folk culture that should pro-

vide the foundation for an “authentic” Negro writing. Ellison identifies the folk sensibility informing his work in regionalist terms—as deriving not from the South but from the Southwest.

The texts that most critics have treated as comprising Ellison’s aesthetic theory are the essays and interviews collected in *Shadow and Act*. In them, Ellison details the features of what he identifies as a specifically Southwestern black vernacular tradition. This tradition—which is exemplified by the music of figures like Jimmy Rushing and Charlie Christian—is presented as having had a wholly formative effect not only on Ellison’s approach to literature, but also on his sense of national, racial, and masculine identity. While the vernacular sensibility that Ellison codifies and celebrates in these writings is situated in a specific geography, it is also presented as thoroughly in the American grain, as expressive of a national sensibility. It is a sensibility that rejects both black and white notions of racial purity and celebrates instead the mongrelized character of all American identities. In their open embrace of racial hybridity and cultural eclecticism, Ellison’s aesthetic ideologies as outlined in this period have been perceived by several critics as transcending the identitarian rhetoric in which his ideological rivals of the sixties are more self-evidently enmeshed. But Ellison’s explicit and unambiguous rejection of a crassly biological essentialism does not necessarily amount to a rejection of essentialism *tout court*. As Diana Fuss has observed of the work of two more recent vernacular theorists—Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston Baker, Jr.—essentialism can inhere in things other than bodies:

What we see in the work of both Gates and Baker is a romanticization of the vernacular. As their detractors have been all too quick to point out, each of these critics speaks *about* the black vernacular but rarely can they be said to speak in it (in the same way that some feminist critics can be said to speak about but not in *écriture féminine*). A powerful *dream* of the vernacular motivates the work of these two Afro-Americanists, perhaps because, for the professionalized literary critic, the vernacular has already become irrevocably lost. What makes the vernacular (the language of “the folk”) so powerful a theme in the work of both Gates and Baker is precisely the fact that it operates as a phantasm, a hallucination of lost origins. It is in the quest to recover, reinscribe, and revalorize the black vernacular that essentialism inheres in the work of two otherwise anti-essentialist theorists. The key to blackness is not visual but *auditory*; essentialism is displaced from sight to sound.³⁵

To a significant extent, the vernacular criticism that Gates and Baker both promoted in the eighties had been anticipated two decades before by Ellison, and Fuss's observations concerning the "powerful *dream* of the vernacular" that animates their criticism can be extended backward.

Fuss suggests a certain psychic motivation to these critics' claims to a vernacular critical practice. What is "powerful" about the "*dream* of the vernacular" is the compensatory fantasy about class it helps to sustain. By becoming professional intellectuals, Gates, Baker, and Ellison have all essentially entered the middle class; but by seeking to imbue their own work with the aura of the vernacular, they suggest a connection between their intellectual labors and labors of a more literal kind.

Moreover, as Martin J. Favor has recently observed, the privileging of the vernacular in Gates's and Baker's writings—as well as in the work of W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke—attests to the persistence and power of

theories of African American culture and literary representation that had at their foundation the valorization of some notion of the African American folk. The rift between "true" and "false," folk and bourgeoisie existed, too. Uniqueness lies in difference, and difference is best represented by a particular class stratum. Class becomes a primary marker of racial difference; to be truly different, one must be authentically folk.³⁶

By insisting that their writing is fundamentally shaped by an allegiance to a folk aesthetic, vernacular theorists attempt to legitimate themselves as spokesmen for ordinary black folk—for working-class African Americans who have always been presumed to embody "authentic" blackness. Finally, we should also recall Phillip Brian Harper's observation that the performance of working-class identity in Black Arts writings through the "incorporation" of "the semantics of 'street' discourse" involves the performance of a masculine identity—that verbal facility often serves as "proof of one's conventional masculinity . . . when it is demonstrated specifically through the use of the vernacular."³⁷ As I will suggest, embedded in Ellison's vernacular theory is likewise a deep concern with the issue of manhood.

One issue that complicates the claims put forward by Ellison is that he, much like Baker and Gates, "speaks *about* the black vernacular but rarely can [he] be said to speak in it."³⁸ All three of these writers display an ostentatious fluency in the prevailing idioms of high Western literary criticism even as they insist that their criticism is continuous with and an extension

of the vernacular tradition it treats—that the vernacular is not simply being described but also embodied by their work. Given the relative absence in their prose of linguistic markers that would more directly and obviously give expression to a vernacular sensibility, how, exactly, is this sensibility to be discerned? How are readers to know that a given piece of criticism is rendered in the vernacular if its syntax, idiom, and grammar are all in Received Standard English?

As Fuss has noted, “the key to blackness” in the work of Gates and Baker “is not visual but *auditory*.” The vernacular sensibility that they claim to be describing and expressing in their writings is one that is indexed to what they claim is a certain *sound* that can be heard in their criticism: “A blues text may thus announce itself by the onomatopoeia of the train’s whistle sounded on the indrawn breath of a harmonica or a train’s bell tinkled on the high keys of an upright piano.”³⁹ However eloquent and evocative this description of the blues sound may be, it is difficult to discern how readers are supposed to “hear” the same sound in Baker’s prose itself—unless, of course, we simply accede to the author’s claims about his *intent* to produce a blues-toned criticism. Indeed, as I will be arguing, *intent*, or perhaps *attitude*, is the thing that readers are ultimately supposed to “hear” in this mode of vernacular criticism. In other words, the claims that all of these vernacular theorists—Gates, Baker, and Ellison—make about the *sound* of the blues or jazz discernible in certain writings are, at bottom, assertions of a certain *intentionality*—an artistic agency—that they impute to the figures they privilege. What they are able to “perform” in their criticism is not, then, the *sound* of the blues or jazz, but rather the *intent to evoke that sound*. The key to discerning the blackness they specify as authentic is not literally auditory, but metaphorically so. What the auditory stands in for ultimately is a quite specific rendering of aesthetic agency—an agency that is predicated on a violent and aggressively appropriative mode of cultural production.

For instance, in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Baker purports to offer “a sui generis definition of *modern Afro-American sound* as a function of a specifically Afro-American discursive practice.”⁴⁰ But the discernment of this sound depends on a certain parsing of aesthetic intent:

I suggest that the analysis of discursive strategies that I designate “the mastery of form” and “the deformation of mastery” produces more accurate and culturally enriching interpretations of the *sound* and *soundings* of Afro-

American modernism than do traditional methods. Out of personal reflection, then, comes a set of formulations on expressive modernism and the meaning of speaking (or *sounding*) “modern” in Afro-America.⁴¹

What “mastery of form” designates in Baker’s analyses is the strategy adopted by trickster figures like Booker T. Washington: “The mastery of form conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee.” In contrast, “the deformation of mastery” involves extravagant displays, such as those put on by gorillas seeking to indicate their territory:

Rather than concealing or disguising in the manner of the *cryptic* mask (a colorful mastery of codes), the phaneric mask is meant to advertise. It distinguishes rather than conceals. It secures territorial advantage and heightens a group’s survival possibilities.

The gorilla’s deformation is made possible by his superior knowledge of the landscape and the loud assertion of possession that he makes. It is, of course, the latter—the “hoots” of assurance that remain incomprehensible to intruders—that produce a notion (in the intruder’s mind and vocabulary) of “deformity.” An “alien” *sound* gives birth to notions of the indigenous—say Africans, or Afro-Americans—as *deformed*.⁴²

Gates’s corollary to the gorilla/guerilla warfare that Baker’s vernacular subjects engage in is, of course, the practice of “signifying”:

The ironic reversal of a received racist image of the black as simianlike, the Signifying Monkey—he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language—is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed, is our trope of chiasmus itself, repeating and simultaneously reversing in one deft, discursive act.⁴³

Baker and Gates both valorize an implicitly masculine figure, who speaks back from the racial margins, whose linguistic prowess lies in his deft capacity to repeat parodically and subversively—to ape—the languages that constitute the center, none of which he should be able to claim as properly his own. Despite Gates’s insistence that “signifying is not a gender-specific rhetorical game,” the agency he ascribes to the vernacular practices he celebrates is nonetheless masculine.⁴⁴ What is being prized, ultimately, is a violent and aggressive capacity to incorporate, appropriate, and mangle whatever linguistic materials enter into one’s verbal domain—a combative psychological disposition. What is being put on extravagant display in the

practices that Baker describes as “mastery of form” and “deformation of mastery” and later as the blues is, at bottom, a kind of virility.

The sense that Gates’s signifying involves a form of masculine aesthetic combat is quite apparent in his discussion of black literary history, a discussion in which Ellison figures prominently as “our Great Signifier.”⁴⁵ While Gates sees Ellison as deploying several different aspects of “signifying” in his writings, he gives special attention to his rivalry with Wright. He sketches the outlines of a reading of *Invisible Man* that suggests how “Ellison in his fictions signifies upon Wright by parodying Wright’s literary structures through repetition and difference.”⁴⁶ This “signifying” on the work of an eminent literary predecessor Gates defines as “critical signification” or “formal signifying,” and it constitutes his “metaphor for [black] literary history.”⁴⁷ In his delineation of a twentieth-century black literary tradition (which includes only one female writer, Zora Neale Hurston), each writer gains a place by critically or formally signifying on the works of those who have come earlier. The vernacular *sound*, then, that Baker and Gates celebrate in their writings has less to do with the ways in which a given text onomatopoeically evokes “the train’s whistle sounded on the indrawn breath of a harmonica or a train’s bell tinkled on the high keys of an upright piano” than it does with agonistic aesthetic agency that the critics claim to “hear.” Ellison can be regarded as “our great Signifier” (Gates’s formulation) or as the author of a “Blues Book Most Excellent” (Baker’s) not because of how his prose “sounds” but because of the *intent* that is presumed to give his writing its vernacular shape. The vernacular is, at its core, the sound of an aggressive and virile mimesis whose essential blackness is simply assumed. As such the authentic vernacular subject can sound like anyone at all while remaining true to his racial self.

The contestatory paradigm that Gates elaborates through his account of “critical signification” or “formal signifying”—the Bloomian agon through which black writers contest and supersede their predecessors—is apparent in many of Ellison’s writings on jazz and the blues. While Gates will cite the African diaspora as the geographical “origin” for the promiscuous and polymorphous capacity for mimesis he celebrates, Ellison will identify the American Southwest—the frontier itself—as the geography giving shape to the jazz sensibility he champions and claims to exemplify. Ellison’s account of this jazz subjectivity is detailed in a group of essays that comprise the middle section of *Shadow and Act*. Gathered together under the subtitle “Sound

and the Mainstream,” all of these pieces were written after the publication of *Invisible Man*. It is clear that his treatment of this musical tradition is also partly an attempt to identify the features of his own literary project, and to emphasize its vernacular underpinnings. In recalling the jazzmen he knew growing up in Oklahoma, he presents them as embodying a redemptive and affirming attitude toward life that is expressed by an intense and disciplined devotion to one’s craft.

Anticipating Baker’s arguments concerning “mastery of form” and “deformation of mastery” that characterize the best black artists, Ellison celebrates the musicians he knew growing up in Oklahoma for their absolute “technical mastery of their instruments” (189). Whether he is discussing Charlie Christian’s relationship to his guitar, Jimmy Rushing’s relationship to his voice, Louis Armstrong’s to his trumpet, or Charlie Parker’s to his saxophone, he emphasizes how each of these musicians possesses a full understanding of “the fundamentals of his instrument . . . the intonations, the mute work, manipulation of timbre” (208). Rebutting any notion that this musical fluency might have come “naturally” (e.g., Park’s assertion about the Negro’s expressive “temperament”), Ellison insists that it is a product of disciplined study. The jazzmen Ellison champions have, for the most part, received at least some classical training in the use of their instrument (as Ellison did as a trumpeter); they have also schooled themselves in “the traditional techniques of jazz” (208). This technical mastery cannot be gained in artistic isolation, however, for it can only be fully achieved within the context of playing in a jazz ensemble—through “the give and take, the subtle rhythmical shaping and blending of idea, tone and imagination demanded of group improvisation” (189). The “jam session” in particular serves as “the jazzman’s true academy” (208). It is only by playing with other musicians who are the acknowledged masters of their instruments that the jazz player develops his own technique to the fullest.

But the jazzman, in order to reach maturity, must undergo a period of “apprenticeship,” which is followed by a series of “ordeals” through which he attempts to develop his own individual improvisatory style; these culminate in an “initiation ceremon[y]” in which he must “achieve, in short, his self-determined identity” (208–9). The identity that the jazzman creates for himself is not, however, entirely “self-determined,” for it only comes through an agonistic struggle with other players whose style one attempts to supersede. There is, Ellison insists, a “ceaseless warfare for mastery and recognition”

waged in these jam sessions, which is most vividly dramatized in “the ‘cutting session,’ or contest of improvisational skill and physical endurance between two or more musicians” (208). This competitive element cuts to the heart of what Ellison terms “a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself. For true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment . . . springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest” (234). This battle to assert one’s individual identity is also a grab for immortality. Since each individual style is developed through an appropriative mimesis and transcendence of existing styles, the “original ideas” of even “the most brilliant of jazzman . . . enter the public domain almost as rapidly as they are conceived, to be quickly absorbed into the thought and technique of their fellows” (233–34). To claim his “self-determined identity” as a true jazz musician, a player must earn the recognition of “his fellow musicians, [and] especially [of] the acknowledged masters” (209). But obscurity and defeat are ever-present dangers that the jazz musician necessarily confronts: “even the greatest [of jazz musicians] can never rest on past accomplishments, for, as with the fast guns of the old West, there is always someone waiting in a jam session to blow him literally, not only down, but into shame and discouragement” (209).

The black aesthetic identity that Ellison champions through these figures—an identity whose gendered quality is evident in this passage—is animated by an intensely competitive will, by an impulse to assert one’s individuality through an agonistic struggle with one’s peers, to imitate, appropriate and supersede all “the acknowledged masters” of one’s craft. Its masculinist and homosocial character is apparent from the analogy he makes to Western gunfighters in the passage above, and also from his assertion that in gaining an “acceptance of his ability” from his fellow musicians, the jazzman also attains “his recognition of manhood” (209).

Of the various jazzmen Ellison celebrates in *Shadow and Act*, the ones who take pride of place are those who share his Southwestern background. Oklahoma City, Ellison’s birthplace, is basically presented as the birthplace of modern jazz. Of the various Southwestern jazz musicians Ellison recalls, however, it is probably Jimmy Rushing who stands out most boldly. Rushing, a legendarily rotund singer who achieved a measure of fame during the fifties and sixties as a performer with the Count Basie orchestra, is the only musician whom Ellison acknowledges by name in the introduction to *Shadow and Act*. Ellison describes Rushing as a childhood hero and specifically cred-

its him for “help[ing] to keep my sense of my Oklahoma background—especially the jazz—so vividly alive” (xxiii). *Shadow and Act* also contains an essay entitled “Remembering Jimmy,” a glowing tribute originally published in 1958. Placed alongside “Richard Wright’s Blues,” all of these essays elaborate a distinction between the Southern blues tradition and the Southwestern one. They emphasize a regionalist distinction between the blues aesthetic Ellison had ascribed to Wright in 1945 and the more capacious and experimental blues *and* jazz aesthetic that apparently shaped his own writings.

These two different blues traditions do seem to share, however, a tendency toward understatement and a proximity to the corporeal—what Ellison describes in “Remembering Jimmy” as “their ability to imply far more than they state outright and their capacity to make the details of sex convey meanings which touch upon the metaphysical” (245). But while the compression required by the Southern blues is likened to a kind of hysteria—to “the violent gesturing of a man who attempts to express a complicated concept with a limited vocabulary”—the emphasis in Ellison’s account of Rushing is placed on the transcendence of generic limits, on the Oklahoma singer’s ability to “always find poetry in the limits of the Negro vocabulary” (245). Rushing’s technical mastery evinces itself in a linguistic dexterity that has emerged out of a productive “tension between the traditional folk pronunciation and his training in school” (245). Ellison singles out as one of the most crucial aspects of his art

the imposition of a romantic lyricism upon the blues tradition . . . a lyricism that is *not of the Deep South, but of the Southwest*: a romanticism native to the frontier, imposed upon the violent rawness of a part of the notion which only thirteen years before Rushing’s birth was still Indian territory. Thus there is an optimism in it which echoes the spirit of those Negroes who, like Rushing’s father, had come to Oklahoma in search of a more human way of life. (245; my emphasis)

The essential mood of the blues as sung by a Southwestern artist like Rushing, whose father (like Ellison’s) apparently came West to settle the frontier, is imbued with this romantic lyricism.

Whereas the Southern blues voice of Richard Wright is one that renders audible the sound of a body in pain, Rushing’s Southwestern blues aesthetic seems to express the sound of a body in flight. Its ever-upward soar offers an

aural image for the tenaciously optimistic sensibility that characterizes, Ellison claims, the black culture of Oklahoma City: Rushing's voice "evoked the festive spirit" of his community, "his song the singing essence of its joy" (242). While blacks in Oklahoma City were well aware of the limits imposed by segregation, they always sought to transcend those limits. What "sounded in Rushing's voice" was the attitude of this community, which "coupled" a recognition of "the rock-bottom sense of reality" to a "sense of the possibility of rising above it" (242).

In his elaboration of the regional sensibility that finds expression in Rushing's voice, which he offers in the introduction to *Shadow and Act*, Ellison sounds quite a bit like a Van Wyck Brooks or Edward Sapir.⁴⁸ Like those earlier cultural nationalists, Ellison finds in the particular values of this community an attitude that is prototypically American—one that has been intimately shaped by the geography of the American frontier:

One thing is certain, ours was a chaotic community, still characterized by frontier attitudes and by that strange mixture of the naïve and sophisticated, the benign and malignant, which makes the American past so puzzling and its present so confusing; that mixture which often affords the minds of the young who grow up in the far provinces such wide and unstructured latitude, and which encourages the individual's imagination—up to the moment "reality" closes in upon him—to range widely and, sometimes, even to soar. (xiii)

The "effects" of this frontier sensibility can be heard not only in the upward soar of Rushing's voice, but more generally

in the southwestern jazz of the thirties, that joint creation of artistically free and exuberantly creative adventurers, of artists who had stumbled upon the freedom lying within the restrictions of their musical tradition as within the limitations of their social background, and who in their own unconscious way have set an example for any Americans, Negro or white, who would find themselves in their arts. (xiv)

This regional sensibility expresses itself in "a freer, more complex and driving form of jazz" than that which emerged—like Wright's writings—out of the rural South (xiv); by implication, a writing that is similarly shaped by this attitude (like Ellison's, for instance) would likewise be more consonant with the spirit of American nationalism (xiv).

The contrast between the blues aesthetic that Wright's work embodies and that exemplified by Rushing and Ellison also emerges through the emphasis that is placed on the communal nature of Southwestern jazz. The opening image of "Remembering Jimmy" celebrates the agonistic interplay between Rushing's singing and the voices of the other instruments. What sounds in his voice is "the stress of singing above a twelve-piece band." While the voice of Wright's bluesman is rendered in solo, Rushing's is captured by Ellison's prose as "now soaring high above the trumpets and trombones, now skimming the froth of reeds and rhythm." This opening also draws attention to the interplay between Rushing's voice and his audience—in this case a group of young boys including Ellison—who in becoming avid listeners are prodded into performances of their own. In a later passage in "Remembering Jimmy," Ellison elaborates a more detailed description of this particular audience. Rushing's music not only encouraged individualized visions of freedom in Ellison and his friends, it transformed them into active members of a polyvocal community of sound:

When we were still too young to attend night dances, but yet old enough to gather beneath the corner street lamp on summer evenings, anyone might halt the conversation to exclaim "Listen, they're raising hell down at Slaughter's Hall," and we'd turn our heads westward to hear Jimmy's voice soar up the hill and down, as pure and as miraculously unhindered by distance and earthbound things as is the body in youthful dreams of flying.

"Now that's the Right Reverend Jimmy Rushing preaching now, man," someone would say. And rising to the cue another would answer, "Yeah, and that's old Elder 'Hot Lips' signifying along with him; urging him on, man." And, keeping it building, "Huh, but though you can't hear him out thus far, Ole Deacon Big-un [the late Walter Page] is up there patting his foot and slapping on his big belly [the bass viol] to keep those fools in line." And we might go on to name all the members of the band as though they were the Biblical four-and-twenty elders, while laughing at the impious wit of applying church titles to a form of music which all the preachers assured us was the devil's potent tool. (243)

In listening to the music being produced by Rushing's ensemble, Ellison and his friends do not simply talk about it, they become, in a sense, part of it. They do not simply take in the music as a topic of conversation; they allow

that music to structure the very form of conversation itself, to shape the very structure of community that is formed. For this music has the effect of making its listeners talk in a way that echoes the call-and-response polyvocality of the music itself. To talk about the way in which “Hot Lips” Paige’s horn is “signifying along with” “the Right Reverend Jimmy Rushing[’s] preaching,” Ellison and his friends must engage in some signifying of their own. In describing each of the voices they hear, their voices themselves become part of the ensemble of sound, echoing the phrasing of the music through their collective critical interplay. This intimately aural interaction is presented here not as an impediment to individuality, but as its enabling context: for Ellison and his young friends exhort each other to ever more creative displays of “impious wit,” and to enjoy the laughter that comes from feeling like one has claimed possession of “the devil’s potent tool.”

What is being celebrated in Ellison’s evocation of this theater of listening is a virilizing form of male homosocial intimacy. Rushing’s performance engenders in the listening boys a kind of mimetic desire. Their aural intercourse is the acting out of an identification that is occasioned by the collective participation in an aesthetic experience. These ritualized moments of aesthetic enjoyment engender an identification with a certain style of manhood that is itself mimetic, that is based on the imitation and incorporation of other men.

The same sensibility—the far-ranging eclecticism, the acquisitive incorporation of myriad musical styles and traditions—that led these musicians to concoct “a freer, more complex and driving form of jazz,” manifested itself as well, Ellison insists, in a particular attitude toward masculine identity that he and his boyhood friends attempted to approximate. To be a black boy growing up on the Oklahoman frontier, Ellison suggests, was always to be “exploring an idea of human versatility and possibility which went against the barbs or over palings of almost every fence which those who controlled social and political power had erected to restrict our roles in the life of the country” (xiv). This “idea of human versatility and possibility,” Ellison specifies elsewhere in this introduction, was “the concept of Renaissance man” (xiii). It was a concept that drove them to “master(ing) ourselves and everything in sight as though no such thing as racial discrimination existed” (7). “Spurring us on in our controlled and benign madness,” Ellison continues, “was the voracious reading of which most of us were guilty and the vicarious identification and empathetic adventuring which it encouraged”

(xv). In the books they read, Ellison and his friends (many of whom were fatherless, he notes) “were seeking examples, patterns to live by,” and so they created “father and mother substitutes,” “fabricated [their] own heroes and ideals catch-as-catch can, and with an outrageous sense of freedom” (xv). They found exemplary figures in a variety of guises and races, figures that—as both “archetypes” and “projections”—were “neither white nor black, Christian or Jewish, but representative of certain desirable essences, of skills and powers physical, aesthetic and moral” (xvi). They extracted features and attributes from one figure and combined them with others through a process that Ellison likens to that of editing film (xvi).

The range of models that Ellison and his friends felt entitled, indeed obligated, to imitate attests to the hybridity and, indeed, the cosmopolitanism of this Negro American version of the Renaissance man ideal. The gendered aspect of this hybrid ideal is quite evident:

We felt, among ourselves at least, that we were supposed to do anything and everything which other boys did, and do it better. Not defensively, because we were ordered to do so; nor because it was held in the society at large that we were naturally, as Negroes, limited—but because we demanded it of ourselves. *Because to measure up to our own standards was the only way of affirming our notion of manhood.* (xvii; my emphasis)

The Ellisonian ideal of Renaissance man is a model of black manhood that eschews a narrowly essentialist ethno-nationalism, that is promiscuous in its identifications and appropriations of models from other races and cultures and extravagantly avows those borrowings. The polymorphously multiracial nature of this ideal seems devoid of any potentially regressive ideas about racial purity; its gendered aspect seems, moreover, relatively benign when compared, for instance, to the relentless masculinism of a writer like Amiri Baraka or Eldridge Cleaver. But while the gender ideology that underwrites Ellison’s aesthetic writings of the sixties may well be kinder and gentler, as it were, than the one underwriting those of the black nationalists, the preoccupation with masculinity and racial authenticity is present nonetheless.

That Ellison is intent on imbuing this vernacular subjectivity with a “Negro” nationalist as well as an American nationalist quality is evident in the following passage: “Not only were we to prepare but we were to perform—not with mere competence but with an almost reckless verve; with, may we say (without evoking the quaint and questionable notion of *negri-*

tude), Negro American style?" (xvi–xvii). Ellison insists that whatever forms of cultural expression African Americans “appropriate,” “possess” and “re-create” in their “own group and individual images,” that as long as they do so with “reckless verve,” they will inject those forms with an indelible sense of “Negro American style.” Ellison goes on to list some of the cultural realms in which he and his friends glimpsed manifestations of this racially distinct style and the male exemplars of it:

And we recognized and were proud of our group’s own style wherever we discerned it—in jazzmen and prize fighters, ballplayers and tap dancers; in gesture, inflection, intonation, timbre and phrasing. Indeed, in all those nuances of expression and attitude which reveal a culture. (xvii)

What Ellison insists that he and his boyhood friends could detect in these various performances of Negro American style—what he insists they could “hear,” in a sense—was something very much like the “sound” of the blues that Baker claims to hear in the black texts he prizes. What registers as black is the sound of a specific intent that is said to signify manhood—one that Ellison describes as “a yearning to make any- and everything of quality *Negro American*; to appropriate it, possess it, re-create it in our own group and individual images”; one that Baker describes as “mastery of form” and “deformation of mastery.”

Coda

Put broadly, what this book as a whole grapples with is the question of how and why the literary domain has come to be understood by male writers of color across the twentieth century as providing access to an exhilarating freedom from the constraints of racism. It has also engaged with the gendered and sexualized quality of the rhetoric that is used, on the one hand, to underscore white racism’s most debilitating effects and, on the other, to flesh out the aesthetic sphere’s utopian promise. My readings of Ellison’s works have attempted to challenge the assumption that they somehow rise above the identitarian embroilments that more explicitly shape the works of other writers of color. Ellison’s carefully orchestrated self-presentation tends not only toward a kind of elitism, as some critics have noted, but it also encourages the perception of an utter originality, as if he had somehow escaped the

petty political squabbles, the sectarian warfare in which many of his less celebrated literary brethren have been involved. I have tried in these chapters to work against this erasure, to detail the intimate ways in which his pretensions to universality have been pressured by the same torsion of ideological forces that have shaped the works of other, less-well-regarded writers. My intent has been to demonstrate the ways in which his literary project is as deeply shaped by questions of racial authenticity, homosocial desire, and manhood as that of writers—like Amiri Baraka or Frank Chin, for instance—whose engagement with such issues is more explicit.