

The Comic Book World of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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The Invisible Art

In the vibrant and ever-expanding world of Ellison criticism, scholars have become adept at plumbing the wide scope of Ralph Ellison's influences. These influences range from Ellison's affinities with modernism, surrealism, or expressionism to his chosen literary "ancestors," such as Malraux, Hemingway, or Faulkner, and his "relatives," such as Richard Wright. Critics have also highlighted Ellison's extensive cultural heritage, citing his seminal reflections on jazz and the blues or, following a more recent thread, his serious engagement with photography. Nevertheless, something seems to have slipped through the cracks. In a 1964 interview with Ishmael Reed, when Ellison was asked if there were any popular influences in his work, he replied, "Oh, sure, I use anything from movies to comic strips" (Graham and Singh 362). A decade earlier, Ellison told a group of writers and publishers that "the individual man . . . is more apt to get a sense of wonder, a sense of self-awareness and a sharper reflection of his world from a comic book than from most novels" ("What's Wrong" 472). Why does Ellison, a writer obviously committed to the novelistic form, privilege the comics genre over novels, for the sake of the "individual man," and most important, how are we to make sense of the comic book allusions scattered throughout *Invisible Man*, these small yet pivotal moments that surge up suddenly and have mostly been missed? Supplementing attempts to answer these questions is Ellison's work and association with Dr. Fredric Wertham, founder of the Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic in Harlem and instigator of a major crusade against comic books throughout the 1950s (see figure 1). Ellison's published writings and those stored at the Library of Congress make apparent that issues surrounding the comic book culture of the Cold War directly link up with many of the novel's bigger themes: the rapport between violence and heroism, youth culture and leadership, Harlem and urban life.

Ellison's engagement with comic books allows us to draw out certain of the novelist's aesthetic and ethical ambivalences that might not otherwise be visible. On the one hand, Ellison's predilection for indigenous American forms of expression like jazz, as well as his embrace of popular forms, renders him receptive to the "invisible art," as Scott McCloud calls comics. However, his allegiance to the novel and his attunement to the violent, hostile reality of what *Invisible Man* calls the "comic-book world" (458) of Harlem during his funeral oration for the fallen

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Figure 1 Cover of a 1949 brochure produced by the Lafargue Clinic (note the address on the bottom left), found in Ellison's Lafargue Clinic folder at the Library of Congress. The brochure advertised an exhibition at the Charles-Fourth Gallery titled "School for Sadism." "The collection, based on the studies of Dr. Frederic [sic] Wertham . . . is a thought-provoking exposé of the violence, sadism, and general underlying damage perpetrated by the popular 'comic' books on American children today." (Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations)

Tod Clifton, complicate Ellison's literary engagement with the medium. Further, Harlem and comics—in content as well as in their lurid and colorful vividness—seem to be intrinsically linked in Ellison's mind, a relation I will parse by reading the Harlem riot episode in *Invisible Man* alongside Ellison's sociological writings on Harlem, most notably "Harlem's America" and "Harlem Is Nowhere," Ellison's piece on Wertham's Lafargue Clinic. Looking at the points at which comics and *Invisible Man* intersect provides us with an occasion to address some of the uncomfortable currents of Ellison's thought that have been debated—or suppressed—in criticism for over fifty years. Indeed, as much of its reception history suggests, *Invisible Man* is vulnerable to many of the same critiques that have in the past marginalized comic books and positioned them as a site for moral debate: in its portrayal of violence in defense of a "higher" purpose and its seeming indifference to the possible nefarious influence of popular culture on youth. Both *Invisible Man* and comics raise the question of whether the American fantasies and myths found in mass culture contribute to an individual's cultivation or lead to unrealistic expectations and a life of crime.

In following a narrative arc that resembles many origin stories—whether those found in the bildungsroman or even those recounted in early superhero comics—*Invisible Man* traces the episodic metamorphosis of the protagonist from naive Southern schoolboy to urban outlaw living in an underground lair. This "outlaw" promises to play a socially responsible leadership role even though he is evidently a man with aggressive tendencies—he beats up that "blond man" within an inch of his life—a combination of violence and principle that verges on vigilantism. Thus *Invisible Man* possesses certain structural and thematic affinities with the "ten-cent plague" that changed America in the postwar years. Ellison's recourse to comic book allusions offers a new angle for understanding what he calls the "unreality" of the Harlem he is often at pains to depict in his novel and essays. Ultimately, this essay seeks to show how comics provide Ellison with a model for portraying the violence and heroism of Harlem life at a time when novelistic precedents failed to offer a mythology that would be adequate to his sense—as well as that of the emerging youth culture—of the conditions of contemporary urban American life.¹ While he does not unreservedly endorse the influence of comics on American youth, in subtly critiquing the reigning belief that comics mobilize only the nefarious perversities and dangers of mass culture, Ellison strategically underscores the productive, imaginative dynamism comics possess as models of urban nimbleness and adaptability necessary for the promise of future leadership.

Harlem's Little Batmen

When Ellison began writing *Invisible Man*, he reports reading Lord Raglan's *The Hero*, a work that traces the characteristics of mythic heroes and through which, as

¹ In the introduction to *Shadow and Act*, Ellison stresses the importance of his own personal perspective: "What does American society mean when regarded out of my own eyes, when informed by my own sense of the past and viewed by my own complex sense of the present?" (59).

Ellison puts it in *Shadow and Act*, he "got to thinking about the ambiguity of Negro leadership during that period" ("That Same Pain" 76). It is clear that, inspired by the modernist techniques of James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, Ellison studied myth as a way to inform and inflect his own time. Heroism and mythic properties became the ingredients of leadership that, for Ellison, always found crystallization in the individual. His 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man* evinces his wish to imaginatively create an ideal sovereign figure that would transcend any and all restrictions, be they racial, societal, or merely human, through an unrelenting "personal vision of possibility" (xxii). "At its most serious," Ellison writes, "fiction . . . is a thrust toward a human ideal" (xx). For a novelist like Ellison who is attuned to the reappearance of myth and heroism in novels and in contemporary fashion, comic books, then littering every corner of America, evidently offered a new fantastic vision of possibility, one made manifest in the form of the superhero.² Comic book writers were practicing a similar plundering of myth in elevating individuals to superhuman status. In particular the Batman, created in 1939, a hero who has no superpowers but rather actualizes the human's superhuman possibilities, becomes a seductive emblem, which intimates why Ellison would refer to him directly in "Harlem's America." Throughout *Invisible Man*, Ellison tries to enact a balance between tradition and change using the appeal to mass culture as a bridge between both, an approach to tradition echoing that of Ellison's close friend Albert Murray in *The Hero and the Blues*. Tradition, Murray suggests, is "that which continues; it is also the medium by which and through which continuation occurs" (72). Such a statement should be understood in the context of Ellison's and Murray's interest in analyzing the American penchant for supernatural legends and fables, particularly as they are discussed in Constance Rourke's *American Humor*. Murray's reading of Rourke's study suggests how this American production of tall tales might have evolved into comic books. Comics become an example of how "the traditional adapts itself to change, or renews itself through change," and thus casts comics as an offshoot of the American "resilience"—Rourke's term—that "regenerates itself in the vernacular" (Murray, *Hero* 72), a feature much discussed in the selected correspondence between Ellison and Murray published as *Trading Twelves* (Murray and Callahan), and one Ellison praised in his foreword to John Atlee Kouwenhoven's *The Beer Can by the Highway*.³ Leslie Fiedler, one of the many New York Intellectuals writing on comic books in the 1940s and 1950s, was quick to realize that the superheroes populating comics "are seen as inheritors, for all their superficial differences, of the *inner* impulses of traditional folk art" (126).

² David Hajdu claims that in the mid-1940s, "the comic book was the most popular form of entertainment in America. Comics were selling between eighty million and a hundred million copies every week, with a typical issue passed along or traded to six to ten readers, thereby reaching more people than movies, television, radio, or magazines for adults" (5).

³ Rourke uses the word *resilience* multiple times in *American Humor*, casting "resilience as a prime trait" (86) of the American national character. Murray appropriates this term in his own work (see *Omni-Americans*, 16–17). In *Trading Twelves*, the letters of Ellison and Murray also use this term, as well as *nimbleness*, in an analogous way.

As for the fantasies pervading his youth in Oklahoma, Ellison notes that he and his friends strove to recreate the archetypes and legendary figures of American myth—those “which violated all ideas of social hierarchy and order” (Introduction, *Shadow and Act* 53)—and recast them as “*Negro American*” (54). Ellison’s yearning to appropriate for African Americans the archetypes traditionally reserved for white Americans serves as an underlying motivation for taking the invariably white superhero and imagining a black counterpart. In his eulogy for his friend Romare Bearden, Ellison directly points to comics as the source of archetypal figures to be reimagined as African American in his recollection of the “hero of my childhood,” a young neighbor of his in Oklahoma City, who:

filled his notebooks with cartoon characters who acted out visual narratives that I found far more interesting than those provided by the newspaper comic sections. More interesting because they were about us, about Negro boys like ourselves. He filled his notebooks with drawings which told the stories of Negro cowboys and rodeo stars like Bill Pickett, of detectives and gangsters, athletes, clowns and heroes. Indeed, he created such a variety of characters and adventures that our entire neighborhood took on a dimension of wonder. (“Bearden” 836)

Ellison felt that the artworks of this childhood hero and those of Bearden “speak eloquently of a promise which goes far beyond the designs and figures displayed within their frames” (839). This sentiment closely echoes the one he expresses at the 1966 Senate hearing on “The Crisis in Our Cities,” published as “Harlem’s America.” Here Ellison casts the city, and Harlem specifically (the next neighborhood to take on a “dimension of wonder” for Ellison), as the site for overcoming the frustrations and restrictions faced by “Negro children” and African Americans as a whole: “Harlem is a place where our folklore is preserved, and transformed. It is the place where the body of Negro myth and legend thrives. It is a place where our styles . . . find continuity and metamorphosis” (28). The city should ideally be a “place for allowing the individual to achieve his highest promise” (29). Ellison’s sensibility for what he calls “promise” creates a kind of ethereal matrix for not only his thoughts on mythic figures as they are found and reinvented in comics and in Harlem but, as I will demonstrate, also with the great number of “juvenile delinquents” populating Harlem and America. At the hearing, speaking of the changes occurring in Harlem at the time, Ellison tells members of the Senate that with the children of those African Americans who had migrated North to Harlem, “you had a different situation, because [these children] could see what is possible within the big city. They could see the wonderful possibilities offered by the city to define one’s own individuality, to amplify one’s talent, to find a place for one’s self” (25). At the same time, Ellison notes, many of these children had poor schooling, and sometimes their parents had none. “This,” says Ellison, “makes for a great deal of frustration” (25).

The period Ellison alludes to, the 1930s to the 1950s, coincides with the rapid upsurge of comic books all over the country, purchased by millions of American children regardless of color. Having situated Negro youth culture as caught

between possibility and frustration, Ellison describes the motivation for their dreams in terms of both nationalism and comics:

Now, on the other hand, these are American children, and Americans are taught to be restless, to be mobile, to be daring. Our myths teach this, our cartoons teach us this, our athletic sports teach us this. The whole society is geared to making the individual restless, to making him test himself against the possibilities around him. . . .

So you see little Negro Batmen flying around Harlem just as you see little white Batmen flying around Sutton Place. It is in the blood. But while the white child who is taken with these fantasies has many opportunities for working them into real life situations, too often the Negro child is unable to do so. This leads the Negro child who identifies with the heroes and outlaws of fantasy to feel frustrated and to feel that society has designated him the outlaw, for he is treated as one. Thus his sense of being outside the law is not simply a matter of fantasy, it is a reality based on the incontrovertible fact of race. (25)

In other words, the restless, mobile, and daring black youths fully engaged in the pursuit of the "infinite possibilities" that the city seems to offer more naturally identify with the outlaws of American fantasy because, like the Batman, they are branded as such. But what Ellison is careful to underscore here is that "the incontrovertible fact of race" positions the African American outside the law, where the fantasy of heroic action opens the possibility for the kind of vigilantism practiced by Batman. Indeed, the defiance and determination involved in bypassing the limitations imposed on his freedom, combined with the intention to develop himself "for the performance of many and diverse roles" (Introduction, *Shadow and Act* 54), reveals Ellison's protagonist to be quite the little Batman himself.

Write or Murder

Seen through the prism of comic book ethics, *Invisible Man* exhibits an increasing sense of vigilantism as it progresses, culminating in the disturbing confessions of the prologue/epilogue, where the protagonist's fraught relationship to society and the law comes to the fore. The narrator explains that "now, after first being 'for' society and then 'against' it, I assign myself no rank or any limit" and states that "my world has become one of infinite possibilities" (576). His world is nevertheless one riddled with contradictions: "[T]he world is just as concrete, ornery, vile and sublimely wonderful as before, only now I better understand my relation to it and it to me" (576). Invisible Man, in line with his blues-sense, has learned to thrive on these contradictions: "I condemn and affirm, say no and say yes, say yes and say no" (579); "I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love" (580). He confesses, at the very end, that even though "there's still a conflict within me," he is "coming out nevertheless" because "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (581). Vigilantes such as Batman act under their own authority, tolerating "no rank or any limit," and come out of their lairs to make a difference in the world, motivated by their own individual sense of social responsibility. Invisible Man sees his outlaw status—he steals his electricity through "an act of sabotage" (7),

he lives "off the grid" in his hole, he smokes marijuana and beats people up—as operating in the service of his aim to "protect the higher interests of society" (14). As Batman himself once put it, "If you can't beat them 'inside' the law . . . you must beat them 'outside' it" (Fleisher 110). Resorting to violence seems to constitute part of Invisible Man's "socially responsible role" when, filled with rage, he attempts a kind of underlying justification for the vigilante stance he is adopting. In the prologue, he asks the reader to remember the man he head-butted and kicked:

Take the man whom I almost killed: Who was responsible for that near murder—I? I don't think so, and I refuse it. I won't buy it. You can't give it to me. He bumped me, he insulted me. Shouldn't he, for his own personal safety, have recognized my hysteria, my "danger potential"? . . . And if he had yelled for a policeman, wouldn't I have been taken for the offending one? Yes, yes, yes! Let me agree with you, I was the irresponsible one; for I should have used my knife to protect the higher interests of society. (14)

Responsibility here seems to also mean "answerability," in that the protagonist is not answerable for the violent actions he perpetrates upon those who fail to see him, even though the law, here in the form of the policeman, would incontrovertibly cast *him* as the criminal. In these circumstances, he is exempt from blame in unleashing his "danger potential" since his actions are rather a consequence of what is wrong with American society. This kind of "irresponsibility," he claims, "is part of my invisibility" (14). But the above statement is even more alarming, for Invisible implies that he acted irresponsibly in *failing* to use his knife to "protect the higher interests of society," as he "should have," which turns violent action—in this case, murder—into a moral imperative.⁴

The complicity between crime and social utility is something Ellison had already expressed, in stark terms, in a 1941 letter to Richard Wright. Having just read Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, a deeply emotional Ellison shares with Wright how he has "learned to keep the bitterness submerged . . . so that those passions which could so easily be criminal might be socially useful." In Ellison's thinking, these passions are characteristic of those who, like his novel's protagonist, "shot up from the same region," those "for whom the trauma of passing from the country to the city of destruction brought no anesthesia of unconsciousness, 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."⁵ Although there are only two alternatives here, to write or to murder, either option "might be

⁴ As the vivid and careful visual description of the prologue makes clear, Invisible Man was dangerously close to murdering the tall blond man he assaulted: "I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him in the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth. . . . And I stopped the blade, slicing the air as I pushed him away, letting him fall back to the street" (4).

⁵ Richard Wright Papers, Box 97, "Personal Correspondence," Ralph Ellison, 1937–1953, 3 November 1941.

socially useful." This is precisely the dilemma at the heart of Invisible Man's stance toward society: he "should have used [his] knife to protect the higher interests of society," yet ends up instead committing a "near murder" and writing down his story (14). Ellison's sense of writing as an alternative to murder can help explain why Invisible Man has been increasingly aligned with a kind of vigilantism, not as a "superhero" but as a writer. The two alternative reactions are not opposed. The last line of the novel—"Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (581)—still contains a kernel of vigilantism, in the sense that Invisible Man considers himself in a state of exception and takes on the task of acting on our behalf. Like a comic book, the novel stresses the uncomfortable notion that, under certain circumstances, the individual will have to forgo the law and use violence as a means of ridding society of its evil.

In the early days of comics, the violent acts of superheroes always had productive consequences for society; redemptive violence is precisely the foundation of the outlaw hero's relation to society. Such heroes embody what Ellison yearns for in his letter to Wright: the harnessing of potentially criminal passions for social improvement. Positioning his hero in terms of these precarious ethics, Ellison invokes the world of "infinite possibilities" (576), where the fantasy that criminals can be heroes assures the reading public that antisocial and aggressive acts are not only healthy but necessary for upholding justice. As such, Invisible Man's world of infinite possibilities is a different articulation of the comic book world. What is necessarily simplified and idealized in comics is made much more complex in a novel. Since exacting violence upon those we consider undesirable is ultimately undemocratic and often hardly redemptive, Ellison is careful to stress that "there's still a conflict" within his protagonist; while he "condemns" and "denounces," he also "affirms" and "defends" and, most important, commits only a *near* murder in the name of social justice. The comic book tendency of divesting violent acts of their antisocial nature is too dangerous a slippage for Ellison to condone. It is also what Fredric Wertham's work at the Lafargue Clinic condemned. Nevertheless, Ellison does demonstrate the appeal of outlaw figures who, like Batman, seize the right to operate "free of procedural and institutional restraint" (B. Wright 17). Invisible Man's "danger potential" includes his capacity for violence and his achievements as a writer, both of which have the potential to be socially redemptive. Indeed, Ellison feels that "books represent socially useful acts" ("On Initiation" 541). Writing becomes a kind of democratic vigilantism free of subservience to institutions like law enforcement, where "speaking for you" is aimed at the common man.

Operating outside institutional tethers was appealing to an African American community that was disenfranchised to the point of invisibility. Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, as Thomas Hill Schaub mentions, had utterly failed as the "symbol of a leadership" for the Negro community (97), and the young Invisible Man overcomes his disillusionment when he understands that the answer to Negro leadership lies in *individual* power. Indeed, the outlaw hero ideal is about as far from Booker T's "cast down your bucket" ethics as one can get. Ellison was convinced that "American society cannot define the role of the individual . . . it is our fate as Americans to achieve that sense of self-consciousness through our

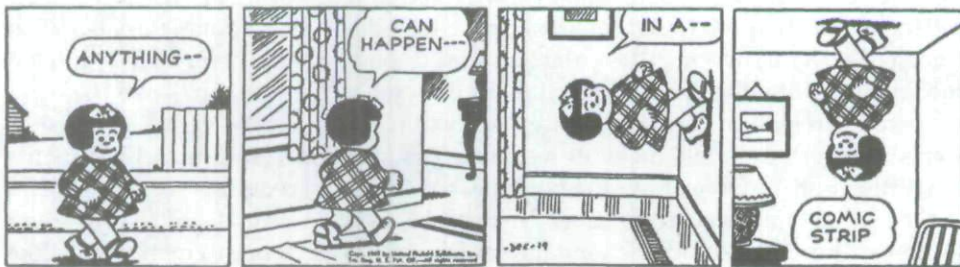
own efforts" ("On Initiation" 532). This statement echoes the comment cited at the beginning of this essay, in which Ellison sees comics as a source of self-awareness superior to the novel. Ellison's combination of individualism and certain surreal narrative modes, as Schaub suggests, "thus has a political motive . . . [H]is use of interior, psychological forms is an effort to take part in the redefinition of reality by presenting the effective reality of the 'sense of unreality that haunts Harlem'" (103–4). In the comics of the 1940s and 1950s, governments were forced to recognize the power and dignity of super leaders like Superman and Green Lantern, and this recognition moved beyond the national borders to become "a principle of hope" for the disenfranchised of the world in general. Superheroes, as fantastic projections of a heightened mythical, while urbanist, imagination, are apt symbols of what Ellison exploited as a writer and desired as a social activist.

A Comic Book Day in a Comic Book World

As a medium that combines words and images unbound by the exigencies of reality and the laws of physics, comics possess particular qualities that resonate with Ellison's aesthetic ideals. William W. Savage Jr. writes:

Comic books could carry heroes beyond the limits of possibility imposed by radio (sounds without pictures and thus without depth or significant personification) and film (sounds with pictures, but constrained by technology). . . . Comic-book artists and writers could produce that which could be conceived, which is more than the creators of motion pictures or radio programs could claim. (7)

Indeed, as Ernie Bushmiller's "Nancy" puts it:



Nancy, December 19, 1947. © United Feature Syndicate, Inc.

Ellison draws on comic books because, much like his description of Harlem itself, they embody a space where his ideal "infinite possibilities" can be recorded on paper and because twentieth-century America required "a superhero who could resolve the tensions of individuals in an increasingly urban, consumer-driven, and anonymous mass society" (B. Wright 10). Such American frontier heroes as Wyatt Earp or Davy Crockett no longer seemed capable of representing models of contemporary leadership, especially for African Americans.

Before the Comic Code Authority was implemented in 1954⁶ (two years after the publication of *Invisible Man*), superheroes often acted directly against figures of established authority in the service of "true" justice. Bradford W. Wright explains that Superman, for one, habitually "championed social reform and government assistance to the poor" (12). In an issue from the late 1940s, when a boy is arrested for assault and battery, the boy's mother tells Superman that poor living conditions are the real reason for her boy's crimes. As Wright recounts the story, Superman

tells the neighbourhood boys, "It's not entirely your fault that you're delinquent—it's these slums—your poor living conditions—if there was some way I could remedy it!" And remedy it he does, by demolishing the slums himself in defiance of the legal authorities, even fighting off the police and National Guard when they try to stop him. . . . In place of the demolished tenements, the government constructs splendid, shining public housing. (12–13)

The scene described above recalls a late moment in *Invisible Man* where Dupre leads some men, including the protagonist, into the Harlem slum tenement where he lives and burns it down. Dupre addresses the Harlemit crowd: "My kid died from the t-bees in that deathtrap, but I bet a man ain't no more go'n be born in there" (547). In this context, Dupre takes on the role of Superman by suddenly entering the "scheme" to "remedy" the situation. Once the tenement has been set ablaze, however, it is Invisible Man who captures the heroic spotlight: "I burst into the air and the exploding sounds of the night. . . . I stood on the stoop with the red doorway behind me . . . lost in the clamour of shouts, screams, burglar alarms and sirens" (549). As the emerging hero, framed as he is by the blazing red doorway, the protagonist feels "the whole surface of [his] skin alert," he has become "a dark mass in motion on a dark night, a black river ripping through the black land." His "personality blasted," he feels "as though a huge force was on the point of bursting" (550). Here Ellison is ascribing both power and a certain mystery to his hero, granting him entrance into those "universal myths" (*Collected Essays* 111) by virtue of the specific comic book reality he has established from the beginning.

Indeed, *Invisible Man* opens by distancing itself from the Hollywood movie genre—"I am not . . . one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms," the narrator states in the prologue (3)—and instead ultimately illustrates what the protagonist dubs a "comic-book world" (458) in the closing sections of the novel. Even from the outset, the very title, *Invisible Man*, is reminiscent of classic superhero eponyms like Superman or Batman that had already been in vogue for over a decade. In light of the fact that the protagonist remains unnamed, the hero's secret identity is preserved, for the reader knows him only as Invisible Man. Readers become the equivalent of the denizens of Gotham, inhabiting the comic book world, knowing only the heroic persona with its mythical aura of mystery and danger, an effect that Ellison clearly intends. At times, the protagonist seems invested in cultivating the

⁶ The Comic Code Authority (CCA) was created on 26 October 1954 as a response to adverse publicity that came from Wertham's efforts, his book *Seduction of the Innocent*, and the ensuing congressional hearings on juvenile delinquency led by Senator Estes Kefauver.

mythical status of heroism, a facet of his personality that manifests itself perhaps most strongly in the Rinehart episode, where attire is the means through which a special social status is achieved. Like a superhero, Ellison's narrator displays a wish to be larger than life and to have an identifiable mark of superiority and power over the crowd. Facing the audience at his first lecture for the Brotherhood, Invisible fantasizes: "[I]f only I were a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier, I could simply stand before them with a sign across my chest, stating I KNOW ALL ABOUT THEM, and they'd be as awed as though I were the original boogey man . . . they'd simply thrill at the sight of me" (409). Imposing physical girth, insignia on the chest, the ability to induce thrills by mere presence—all these are defining aspects of superheroes, whose costumes and size act as symbols of power in a burgeoning American mythology. Further, this desire on Invisible's part to be "recognized at a glance . . . by clothes, by uniform, by gait" (485) is a hint that the protagonist's superheroic ambitions are both a virtue and a flaw.

But the novel itself exhibits its most obvious correspondences with the comic book genre in the closing sections, where the narrator—along with all the other Harlemites with whom he interacts—comes closest to behaving like a comic book character. We must recall that, as Ellison's essay "Harlem Is Nowhere" testifies, "the most surreal fantasies are acted out upon the streets of Harlem." Here "[I]f becomes a masquerade; exotic costumes are worn every day" (322). When Invisible Man is about to be speared by Ras the Destroyer in the middle of a Harlem street, he sees Ras in full supervillain-like regalia, "dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian chieftain; a fur cap upon his head, his arm bearing a shield, a cape made of the skin of some wild animal around his shoulders. A figure more out of a dream than out of Harlem" (556). In retaliation, Invisible Man proceeds to fashion a costume of his own. First, he searches for his dark Rinehart glasses, only to find they have been crushed. Desperate, he slips Tarp's leg chain over his knuckles (as he had done in earlier situations of distress), and suddenly a "new mood" settles over him; he has a "certain new sense of self" and knows "suddenly what [he] had to do" (557). What I would call this scene's comic book effect is achieved in part though the prominence of dialogue articulated in urgent exclamations such as "Look!" "Betrayer!" and "Grab him!" (557–58). The comic book world the protagonist had prophesized in his eulogy for Tod Clifton has come to life, and as Ras the Destroyer and his henchmen attack, the next likely victim of a "comic-book killing" (457) might just be Invisible Man himself. Forced into physical combat, the hero wrenches free Ras's spear, "gripping it midshaft, point forward" (558)—a precise physical description that allows the reader to clearly visualize the scene, as it might be depicted within a comic book panel or a snapshot. While there is no denying the dynamic sense of agency conveyed in this scene, it also conveys the danger of such aggressive action. The section is charged with an ambivalence given voice by the protagonist. Taking in the "unreality" of the scene, he attempts an ironically anti-heroic self-definition in stark contrast to the self-magnifying tendency of the violent madness unfolding around him: "I no hero, but short and dark with only a certain eloquence and a bottomless capacity for being a fool to mark me from the rest. . . . I was now, just now, a leader" (558–59). Although he unequivocally feels

himself to be “no hero” and draws attention to his physical inadequacy for the role (recalling his earlier wish to be “a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier” [409]), the historical moment nevertheless positions him as a leader, and he is baptized as such through violent prowess.

Moments after spearing Ras, tellingly referred to as “the madman in a foreign costume” (558), Ellison slips in an allusion to comic book culture: overhearing some men speak of how Ras had shot a spear at a cop, one of the men says that Ras’s horse “shot up the street leaping like Heigho, the goddam Silver!” (564). The Lone Ranger, at the time Ellison wrote, had both his own comic book and a radio serial, which enjoyed a tremendous following.⁷ This casual allusion not only serves to plant the scene in a comic book–like fantasy but also illustrates how natural it was for Americans—and Harlemites—to use the reality of fantastic heroes as a method for apprehending the surrealist aspects of the urban world. Significantly, Ellison’s protagonist harbors some reservations about how the spectators trivialize the scene by comparing it to something out of the Lone Ranger and thinks: “Ras was not funny, or not only funny, but dangerous as well, wrong but justified, crazy and yet coldly sane. . . . Why did they make it seem funny, *only* funny?” (564). Here the presence of “comic” in comic book underlies Invisible’s statement. In this way, Ellison covertly advises the reader that the fantasies of American popular culture should not simply be apprehended as trivial.

The novel had already twice made a similar gesture in alluding to both high- and lowbrow comic strips, and in all these instances the allusions continue to serve as accurate reflections of the protagonist’s own sense of reality. During his intimate rendezvous with the married and lonely Sybil, and after a few too many strong drinks, Invisible’s appalled reaction to Sybil’s proposal to join her “in a very revolting ritual” is to wonder: “Had life suddenly become a crazy Thurber cartoon?” (517). This marks Invisible as a reader of the highbrow *New Yorker*, specifically the work of humorist James Thurber, whose contributions to the magazine as editor, writer, and cartoonist began in 1930.⁸ By following what Cold War culture would have probably dubbed a sexually perverted suggestion with an allusion to a publication such as the *New Yorker*, Ellison again engages the debate over mass culture by suggesting that the moral depravity that some diagnosed in comics could also be found in more socially sanctioned publications.

Another allusion to a specific comic strip occurs when Invisible Man’s relationship to the Brotherhood begins to unravel, leading Jack to question Invisible’s loy-

⁷ The radio series had begun in 1933 and the comic strip in 1938. The comics were so popular that by 1952 even Silver, the Lone Ranger’s horse, had his own title. A whole slew of superheroes including Superman, the Shadow, Green Hornet, and the Lone Ranger had radio serials in the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1940s, Superman’s “radio adventures,” consisting of “four 15 minute radio serials,” were broadcast over the Mutual Network “between 5 and 6 pm every weekday afternoon” (see Curtin 10).

⁸ M. Thomas Inge, in his study *Comics as Culture*, argues that in order to truly appreciate Thurber’s cartoons, as well as the others appearing in the *New Yorker*, the reader “must be well-read, in touch with culture of the past and present, sensitive to the eccentricities of human nature, and familiar with the latest trends in society, politics, and the mass media, to understand and appreciate them” (114).

alty. During the argument, Invisible's frustration with Jack's Manichean worldview leads him to ask aloud, "Is everyone reading Dick Tracy these days?" (404). Jack immediately replies, "This is no matter of Dick Tracy. . . . The movement has many enemies," acknowledging the strip as a widespread cultural marker for a certain kind of American fantasy. "Dick Tracy," created by Chester Gould, was extremely popular throughout the 1930s and 1940s and featured stock fantastic noir characters with names like Flattop, the Brow, Shoulders, etc. Eminent social theorist C. L. R. James was particularly fond of Dick Tracy and weighed in on the strips by claiming that they were "a result of the depression, rage, anger and bitterness [that] were surging through the people of the United States" ("Letter" 144). Invisible Man's question to Jack insists on a realism that is more nuanced than that of comics, even while it evokes the comic book world of Dick Tracy as an analogy appropriate for the situation. The accusation that everyone is "reading Dick Tracy these days" becomes even more judicious once the protagonist realizes that the riot was instigated by the Brotherhood itself.

Through these specific allusions, Ellison develops a comic book reality as the novel progresses, one that partakes of both danger and dynamism, culminating in a Dick Tracy-esque Harlem riot.⁹ Indeed, just before his loyalty to the Brotherhood is called into question, the new-picture-magazine man that had interviewed Invisible tells him that "we need all the heroes we can get" (396). This has become, as Invisible Man realizes, a world in which an "obsession with enemies" (405) is alive and well. It is always the heroes who have privileged insight into the villains that populate their world. These heroes are nevertheless obliged to *prove* the danger that such villains pose before society can accept their violent acts; a hero's failure to do so brands him as a vigilante. In crafting the confession of the background story of the hero's "pre-invisible days" (18), Ellison prepares the reader to see how such a heroic insight can eventually allow even a near-homicidal "I" to "speak for you" and bear the promise of redemptive action in the world. The underground location of Invisible Man's headquarters again associates him most with the figure of Batman, who operates from the depths of the Batcave. In short, the correspondences with comic book features allow the novel to draw on the appeal of superhero culture by engaging with its antisocial undercurrents.

The Zoot-Suit Riddle

Addressing Ellison's crafting of the novel's final sections, Arnold Rampersad notes: "To the very end, he searched for allusions and inferences that would make his novel resound with greatness" (246). Alongside this modernist impulse to pepper

⁹ My reading of the comics allusions during and leading up to the Harlem riot scene must necessarily disagree with Sara Blair's stipulation—in her captivating work on Harlem and photography—that Ellison "strategically suppresses the visual referents or resources of *Invisible Man* in its climactic episodes" and that in the novel "visual culture remains conspicuously, even puzzlingly, absent" (151). What is puzzling is the absence of critical attention to Ellison's varied uses—especially in the novel's climactic episodes—of comic book referents and resources.

novels with numerous allusions to popular culture, the novel expresses anxiety over becoming "victims of the topical," to use Kenneth Warren's phrase (4). In the practice of his craft, Ellison believed that the American artist could transcend the topical by achieving "some imaginative integration of the total American experience" ("On Initiation" 529). During the years in which *Invisible Man* was composed, namely between 1947 and 1952, just before televisions appeared in every home, the unprecedented popularity of comics on a national scale provided Ellison with a solution to the "question of how to fashion strategies of communication that will bridge the many divisions of background and taste which any representative American audience embodies" ("Little Man" 498).¹⁰ As Ellison explains in "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," an essay in which he explores the relationship between the American artist and his audience, there are particular sites in the American landscape where "the many divisions of background and taste" can unexpectedly collide. "[A]s a point of arrival and departure for people representing a wide diversity of tastes and styles of living" (503–4), the Chehaw Station of Ellison's Tuskegee days is one such symbolic site, and in his novel the site for the "motley mixtures of people" (504) is transposed onto the New York City subway system.

The subway platform episode of *Invisible Man* specifically addresses the antagonistic youth culture growing within the bowels of the city, an outreach Ellison attempts through an allusion to comic books. The narrator waits on the subway platform, focusing his thoughts on the new urban environment faced by many African Americans like himself: "Yes, I thought, what about those of us who shoot up from the South into the busy city?" (439). The familiar vocabulary used here shows that the community *Invisible Man* has in mind is precisely the one Ellison alludes to in his 1941 letter to Richard Wright and the one he describes in "Harlem's America." *Invisible Man's* gaze surveys the scene and focuses on three tall and slender black boys, zoot-suiters who mystify him with their novelty: "It was as though I'd never seen their like before" (440). They seem to be, as was once said of

¹⁰ As the Cold War began, the rise of Entertainment Comics (EC), an extremely popular publisher that produced horror and crime tales rather than superhero comics, critiqued the hypocrisy with which most superhero comics tackled serious social issues. In ways that may not have been obvious to readers at the time, much of what they attempted mirrors Ellison's underlying project in writing *Invisible Man*. EC, the company that also created *Mad* magazine, produced comic books that "worked to critique, satire, and subvert entrenched American values and institutions at a time when few other voices in popular culture did so" (B. Wright 136). EC's *Shock Suspense Stories* became for a time "the only form in popular entertainment debating the issue of racial segregation" (139). A particular EC story from the early 1950s deals with segregation in a manner surprisingly reminiscent of the plot Ellison had initially devised for *Invisible Man*. EC was "the only comic book publisher of the early 1950s to explicitly attack racial segregation. In the science-fiction story called 'Judgment Day,' published two years before the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, a black astronaut sadly surveys a planet where blue and orange robots are unequally segregated" (141). Obviously EC did not depict American society as a melting pot "that dissolved racial, religious, ethnic, and political differences into a national consensus" (142), and EC's comics were popular precisely "because of [their] willfully antagonistic cultural stance" (149). The challenge for the novelist, then, is finding a way of capturing the EC reader's sense of America as "a society at war with itself" (142).

the protagonist himself, "distorted in the interest of a design" (440)—that is, made to stand out for a purpose. He follows them as they sway forward, "their black faces secret," "men outside of historical time," wise enough, like Clifton, to reject the "mysteries" of the Brotherhood (440). Still staring at the zoot-suiters, Invisible Man wonders at their power and asks himself the types of questions one would ask before overwhelming conquerors or gods: "Do they come to bury the others or to be entombed, to give life or to receive it?" (440–41). He eventually comes to the trembling thought: "[W]ho knew but that they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious? The stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome" (441). Then, in a passage that associates the boys with his psychological state in the prologue, he thinks: "What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise! His own revenge? For they were outside . . . taking it on the lambo with my fallen brother, Tod Clifton (Tod, Tod) running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominating stand" (441). They partake of the protagonist's invisibility, which "gives one a slightly different sense of time," allowing "you [to] slip into the breaks and look around" (8). Their location "outside," as "agents" of history and possible future leaders, identifies them with those "little Negro Batmen" running around Harlem.¹¹ Just like the protagonist, they are in hibernation.¹²

Significantly, the last thing the narrator notices before exiting the subway is one of the three boys taking out some comic books from his inner pocket, "passing two around and keeping one for himself" (442). All three boys begin to "read in complete absorption" (442), one of them lifting his comic high before his face, allowing Invisible Man to clearly see its cover, a cover that seems to depict a bloody and violent scene reminding him of Clifton's murder. In fact, Clifton himself had been described in comic book clichés by the boy who had witnessed his altercation with the police: "Your friend sure knows how to use his dukes. Biff, bang! One, two, and the cop's on his ass!" (438). The addition of this detail—the reading of comic books in complete absorption—informs the entire scene. Indeed, comics seem to provide the answer to the "zoot-suit riddle" Ellison had posed as early as 1943. In his editorial comment to *Negro Quarterly*, Ellison expresses a need for Negro leaders to "come to terms with their own group" (299), as Invisible Man struggles to do in this scene. "[I]ndispensible [*sic*] to the centralization and direction of power," Ellison claims, "is that of learning the meaning of the myths and symbols which

¹¹ Robert O'Meally seems to be the only critic to have noticed that Invisible Man encounters the boys reading comic books at a moment when he has begun "to sense the significance of black leadership from the periphery" (130–31).

¹² "Perhaps, like them," Invisible Man adds, "I was a throwback, a small distant meteorite that died several hundred years ago and now lived only by virtue of the light that speeds through space at too great a pace to realize that its source has become a piece of lead. . . . This was silly, such thoughts" (442). Yet these silly thoughts resonate closely with the standard account of Superman's story: as an alien from the dead planet of Krypton (the "source that has become a piece of lead"), Superman comes to Earth inside a ship often drawn to look like a "small meteorite," and his source of power is precisely "the light that speeds through space" from Earth's yellow sun. Clark Kent is also, like Invisible Man, a country boy who shot "up from the South into the busy" Metropolis, intending to make his name as a writer (422).

abound among the Negro masses" (301). He goes on to pose the zoot-suit riddle that has inspired and intrigued many critics:¹³

Much in Negro life remains a mystery; perhaps the zoot suit conceals profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical frenzy of the Lindy Hop conceals clues to great potential power—if only Negro leaders would solve this riddle. . . . The problem is psychological; it will be solved only by a Negro leadership that is aware of the psychological attitudes and incipient forms of action which the black masses reveal in their emotion-charged myths, symbols, and wartime folklore. (301–2)

Ellison adapts the novel's form to accommodate the return of the zoot-suit riddle. He first reintroduces the mystery of the zoot suit through the questions the narrator asks as he beholds the three youths, and then implies potential solutions to this riddle. The comic books they carry, shoved in the face of Invisible Man as they are, reveal these young black men as ephemeral carriers of the new myths and symbols that make up the psychological map of an emergent counterculture. Ellison's contact with the Lafargue Clinic gives him an understanding of the psychological intricacies of Harlem's young delinquents and their fondness for comic books. He in turn gives his protagonist awareness into "the psychological attitudes and incipient forms of action" revealed by the intense symbolic charge created by the convergence of the zoot suit and the comic book.

It follows that the "vivid scene" (*Invisible Man* 442) depicted on the comic book cover is the source of the narrator's allusions to comics in the funeral eulogy. There the orator describes Clifton's murder to the gathering crowd with the cynical statement that "[t]he blood ran like blood in a comic-book killing, on a comic-book street in a comic-book town on a comic-book day in a comic-book world" (457–58). These two moments, which are in a way inseparable, are striking for congealing a whole matrix of concerns underlying Ellison's project: leadership, history, youth culture, migration to the city, violence, Harlem, fantasy, myth, power. The images the narrator uses suggest that the boys are making a dominant stand outside history and have taken up the task of "bearing" and becoming stewards of "something uncomfortable." At the same time, the narrator's seemingly ambiguous description of these boys, as at once beings he identifies with and beings he doesn't quite understand, mirrors the novel's—and Ellison's—engagement with comic books. The notion that the boys can be both "true leaders" and yet also avid readers of material that portrays lurid violence is at the heart of the debate over comics that overtook America during the Cold War, a period that directly associated comic reading with juvenile delinquency.¹⁴

¹³ See Robin D. G. Kelley's chapter "The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics during World War II" (*Race Rebels* 161–82) and Larry Neal's essay "Ellison's Zoot Suit."

¹⁴ Juvenile delinquency was regarded as a national problem, but it was especially associated with Harlem. An article found in Ellison's Lafargue Clinic folder at the Library of Congress states that "juvenile delinquency in Harlem reached a high of 53 percent of the city total" (Martin 798). Ellison also scribbles this statistic on the margins of various drafts of "Harlem Is Nowhere."

The Fate and Promise of Juvenile Delinquents

The comic book industry did not take all the criticism directed at it lying down, and one of the early lines of defense for comic books is reiterated in Ellison's position regarding youth culture. This defense came from William Moulton Marston, a psychologist and feminist theorist who was also the creator and writer of *Wonder Woman* comics. As Bart Beaty recounts, Marston believed that superhero comics "were good for children because they cultivated a wish for power" (114). Marston argues for a brand of typical American toughness and violence based on the underlying assumption that humans are inherently violent conquerors:

Do you want [your child] to cultivate weakling's aims, sissified attitudes? . . . The wish to be super-strong is a healthy wish, a vital, compelling, power-producing desire. The more the Superman-Wonder Woman picture stories build up this inner compulsion by stimulating the child's natural longing to battle and overcome obstacles, particularly evil ones, the better chance your child has for self-advancement in the world. (qtd. in Beaty 114–15)

Although this perspective was mostly criticized for not only accepting but also fostering violence (and ultimately fascism), the underlying notion of self-reliance and courage in overcoming obstacles is certainly one that would have appealed to Ellison.¹⁵ When speaking of American children, whether in lectures or essays, Ellison almost always emphasizes the need to go beyond inherited notions of what is "possible to achieve and to become in this country" ("What These Children" 546). In "What These Children Are Like," a lecture Ellison gave in 1963, he explains that the education he received at Tuskegee, as Marston would say, cultivated "weakling's aims" by offering "an education *away* from the uses of the imagination, *away* from the attitudes of aggression and courage" (546–47). Ellison's solution for dropouts and other delinquent youth, objectionably called "culturally deprived" children (549), seems to be fostering a contrary spirit: "We need aggressiveness. We need daring. We need the little guy who, in order to prove himself, goes out to conquer the world. Psychologically Napoleon was not different from the slum kid who tries to take over the block; he just had big armies through which to amplify his aggression" (549–50).¹⁶ For Ellison, this type of daring and aggression is necessary to "endure in a hostile world," as he puts it in his 1948 essay "Harlem Is Nowhere," to which I turn now since it is there that Ellison begins to develop the

¹⁵ Rampersad broaches the topic of Ellison's aggressive tendencies in his biography of the troubling novelist: "Ralph could be gracious, Al Murray said, 'and also potentially violent, very violent. . . . He was ready to fight, to come to blows. You really didn't want to mess with Ralph Ellison'" (455). Rampersad also reminds the reader that James Baldwin called Ellison the angriest man he knew.

¹⁶ In the same lecture, Ellison adds: "It does me no good to be told that I'm down on the bottom of the pile and that I have nothing with which to get out. I know better. It does me no good to be told that I have no heroes" (547).

blueprint of the "comic-book world" one finds in *Invisible Man* (327). In discussing the Lafargue Clinic and the work of anti-comics crusader Fredric Wertham, "Harlem Is Nowhere" points to comic books and their influence upon American youth.

The importance of "Harlem Is Nowhere" to the composition of *Invisible Man* is, I believe, deeper than previously acknowledged. In his recent biography of Ellison, Rampersad states that "Harlem Is Nowhere" "should be seen as a kind of apologia for both the substance and the style of *Invisible Man*" (220). Before Ellison's gaze, Rampersad points out, Harlem had become a "masquerade," a madhouse of terror and violence to which Ellison thought the Lafargue Clinic could provide an "antidote." There are many reasons why Ellison was able to perceive the clinic in this favorable light. First of all, at the time it opened in 1946, Lafargue was the only clinic that served both blacks and whites in New York, and in fact Wertham, the clinic's founder, was directly involved in key desegregation battles during which the clinic "became a leading New York center for the promotion of civil rights" (Beaty 89).¹⁷ This explains why Ellison calls Lafargue "an underground extension of democracy" that represents "perhaps the most successful attempt in the nation to provide psychotherapy for the underprivileged" ("Harlem" 320). In addition, Wertham's studies of the psychological effects of segregation among black and white children conducted at Lafargue at the behest of the NAACP, as well as his subsequent courtroom testimony, were instrumental in 1954's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.¹⁸ Yet in his psychiatric treatment of Harlem youth, Wertham became convinced that comic books acted as a "school for sadism" that perpetrated violence and brutality among children. He concluded that "comic-book reading was a distinct influencing factor in the case of every single juvenile delinquent or disturbed child" he had studied in Harlem (Crist 22). Beaty notes that when the clinic opened, *Time* magazine reported that "Harlem accounted for more than half of New York City's delinquency cases" (90). In Ellison's Fredric Wertham folder, stored with his papers at the Library of Congress (which contains multiple pieces by Wertham beginning in the mid-1940s and spanning his lifetime), an article by the doctor titled "The Comics . . . Very Funny!" argues that the "common denominator" (6) of many of the youth crimes in America is the influence of comic books, an argument he would eventually elaborate in his book *Seduction of the Innocent*. In the article, Wertham speaks only briefly of the violence between young citizens and the police: "A twenty-year-old in New York City has just killed a policeman. Is that so astonishing when he can see anywhere a typical comic book cover showing a man and a woman shooting it out with the police . . . ?" (7). This confrontational

¹⁷ Ellison was actually the one who secured the clinic's location—two rooms beneath St. Philip's Church—by contacting the church's influential Reverend Shelton Hale Bishop; and he also provided the clinic with its very first desk. Ellison had been introduced to Wertham and his dream of opening a psychiatric clinic through Richard Wright, who served on the clinic's board of directors.

¹⁸ Multiple copies of Wertham's tract "The Psychological Effects of School Segregation" can be found in Ellison's papers. For a full account of the legal ramifications of Wertham's work commissioned by the NAACP, see Reibman; and Beaty 94–97.

scene is exactly like the one depicted on the comic book cover that Ellison puts in the hands of one of his fictional zoot-suiters and carries out when Tod Clifton is murdered by a city cop.

Ellison looks to the Lafargue Clinic to provide the patient with the skills to survive in this concentrated hotbed of violence that Harlem has become—to develop “an insight into the relation between his problems and his environment, and out of this understanding to reforge the will to endure in a hostile world” (“Harlem” 327). The imperative of reforging the “will to enduring in a hostile world”—a phrase he borrows from Wertham—simultaneously implies both the terror currently coursing through Harlem and the promise of overcoming this hostility through a will that has been reforged in the smithy of Harlem, a place, as Ellison describes it, “where the body of Negro myth and legend thrives” and finds “metamorphosis.” Similarly, while comics offer new archetypes of superhuman willpower through outlaw heroes like Batman, the horror, bloody violence, and scientific threats featured in crime and horror comics also indicate the intense cynicism of such a world. As Fiedler suggests, the comic book world represents “the patented nightmare of us all, a packaged way of coming to terms with one’s environment sold for a dime” (126).

In sifting through the draft fragments for “Harlem Is Nowhere” among Ellison’s papers, one finds that the section of the published essay describing “the most surreal fantasies” that were “acted out on the streets of Harlem” underwent multiple stages of revision. The list of fantasies could easily have been taken straight from horror comics, and indeed the presence of Judith Crist’s “Horror in the Nursery” article—the first publication to reveal in detail Wertham’s argument against comics—in the “Nowhere” folders lends credence to the influence of comics on Ellison’s thought. Although it went through multiple versions, Ellison’s final list of the “surreal fantasies” runs as follows:

[A] man ducks in and out of traffic shouting and throwing imaginary grenades that actually exploded during World War I; a boy participates in the rape-robbery of his mother; a man beating his wife in a park uses boxing “science” and observes Marquis of Queensberry rules . . . ; two men hold a third while a lesbian slashes him to death with a razor blade; boy gangsters wielding homemade pistols (which in the South of their origin are but toy symbols of adolescent yearning for manhood) shoot down their young rivals. Life becomes a masquerade; exotic costumes are worn every day. (“Harlem” 322)

In a late draft, Ellison follows the list with this explanation: “This is a world in which the major part of the imagination goes not into the creation of works of art, but into overcoming the limitations placed upon it by social discrimination.”¹⁹ Taken together, these observations diagnose the frustration faced by the little Batmen of “Harlem’s America” in terms of typical horror comic scenarios. Yet this entire section, in the essay’s earliest drafts, was not labeled “fantasies” at all, but rather “crime.”

¹⁹ Box 100, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC 20540.

In what appears to be the essay's first draft, Ellison states baldly that in Harlem, "adolescents commit crimes learned from comic books." Several subsequent drafts offer the following variation: crimes are learned "from movies and comic books." Only later in the history of the manuscript do crimes go from being "learned" to "inspired by" movies and comics, until suddenly the emphasis on crime is dropped in favor of a focus on "surreal fantasies." These later drafts no longer directly allude to comics, and in the published essay Ellison omits any mention of possible media sources for these fantasies, in effect heightening the sense of unreality his essay tries to diagnose and present. By refraining from identifying direct sources for either crimes or fantasies, Ellison not only paints a more complex picture of what currently grips Harlem and America but also distinguishes his essay from the argument of the clinic's founder. Where the early drafts saw Ellison buying into Wertham's theory, his subsequent erasure of comics (indeed, it is the first medium to appear and the first to disappear) suggests that he may have felt differently. The fondness with which he recalls his comic-drawing friend in eulogizing Bearden exists in striking contrast to the murderous undertones of the comic book world of Clifton's eulogy. Ellison's early struggle with the effect of comics leaves an indelible mark on *Invisible Man*. To use one of Ellison's own rejected—yet compelling—images from his "Nowhere" drafts, the allusions to comics were "sinking, but, like a sunken log that shapes the currents between a river's banks, remaining to affect the tide of the speaker's moods."²⁰

Ellison kept a file on the Lafargue Clinic in which a yellow sheet addressed "Dear Dick" (Richard Wright), dated April 4, 1946, offers a little advertisement and praise for the clinic and seems to be one of Ellison's early attempts at what would eventually become "Harlem Is Nowhere."²¹ At the bottom of the sheet, as a kind of note to self, Ellison writes: "Wright as example of fate and promise of juvenile delinquents, i.e. BLACK BOY."²² This wonderfully resonant line is an indication

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ A copy of this letter can also be found in the Richard Wright papers.

²² Box 203, Ralph Ellison Papers. A few key passages in *Black Boy* describe a Richard Wright whose juvenile delinquency has more than a mere passing affinity to the kind of youth being treated at the Lafargue Clinic. Wright reveals his youthful fascination with pulp magazines and adventure stories like *Flynn's Detective Weekly*, *Argosy All-Story Magazine* (133) or Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (128). These stories are typical of the ones that would soon be churned out in horror comics. Wright confesses that all he wants to do is "get home and lie in bed and read the next installment of a thrilling horror story" (130). While this reveals a taste for the morbid, exposure to these fantasy tales nevertheless becomes Wright's "gateway to the world." As he recalls:

When I returned home at night, I would go to my room and lock the door and revel in outlandish exploits of outlandish men in faraway, outlandish cities. For the first time in my life I became aware of the life of the modern world, of vast cities, and I was claimed by it; I loved it. Though they were merely stories, I accepted them as true because I wanted to believe them, because I hungered for a different life, for something new. The cheap pulp tales enlarged my knowledge of the world more than anything I had encountered so far . . . they were revolutionary, my gateway to the world. (129)

Here then in Wright we have yet another ambiguous stance toward popular and pulp publications; they enthrall and introduce youth to the largeness of the world, to urbanity and grit-

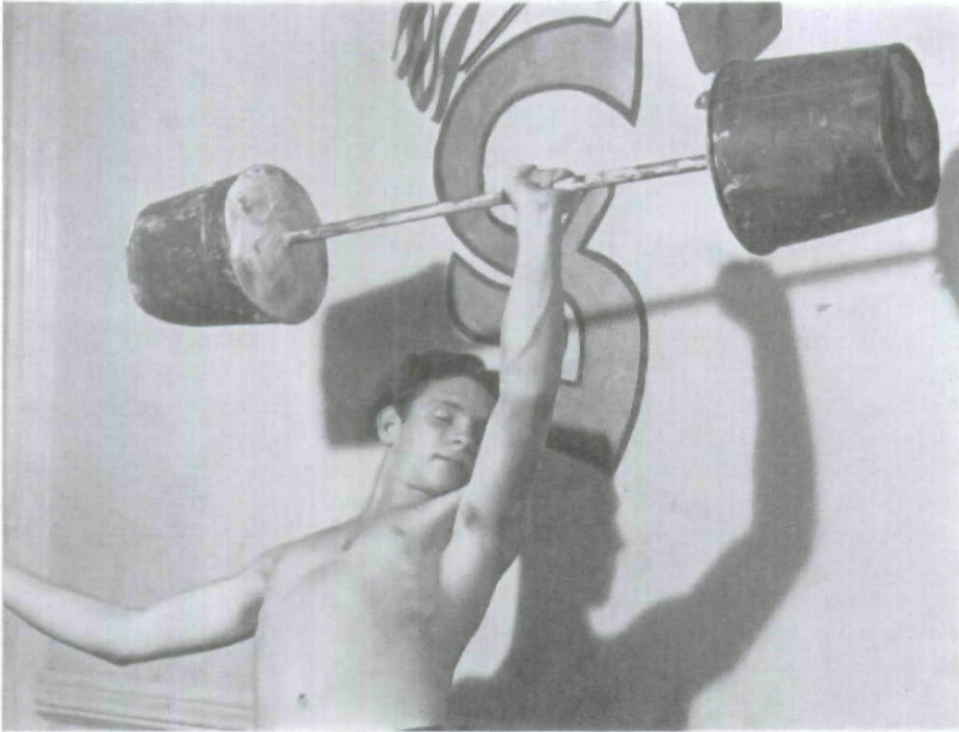


Figure 2 "Leader of New York Saxons." Photograph by Tony Linck from "The Story of a Delinquent" section of the *Life* magazine "Juvenile Delinquency" photo essay. The original caption reads: "Leader of New York Saxons, a gang now devoted to constructive ends, lifts weights at club headquarters." By permission, Elizabeth A. Kelly.

that Ellison never abandons the association of juvenile delinquency with fate and promise that becomes the core of his stance toward comic books—both its antisocial absurdism and optimistic dynamism. Also included among his papers is an entire folder Ellison assembled on juvenile delinquency that contains articles dating from the mid-1940s to the late 1950s. Among the articles, a big spread from *Life* magazine dated April 8, 1946, and titled "Juvenile Delinquency: War's Insecurity Lifts Youthful Crime 100%" contains several photographs taken in Harlem of both black and white gangs and concludes by offering a portrait of a "reformed" juvenile delinquent. The youth's progress is represented by a picture of a muscular ex-gang leader lifting weights with one arm (figure 2), an image whose iconography recalls the famous 1939 issue of *Detective Comics* that shows how Bruce Wayne trained to become the Batman (figure 3). Ellison's juvenile delinquency folder contains articles depicting the trials of delinquent youth who have suffered from sud-

tinues, yet also seem to thrive on antisocial drives and impulses. Moreover, Wright eventually realizes that the stories that so enthrall him are published in racist publications. Indeed, the racism is deployed in "lurid cartoon" form (130).

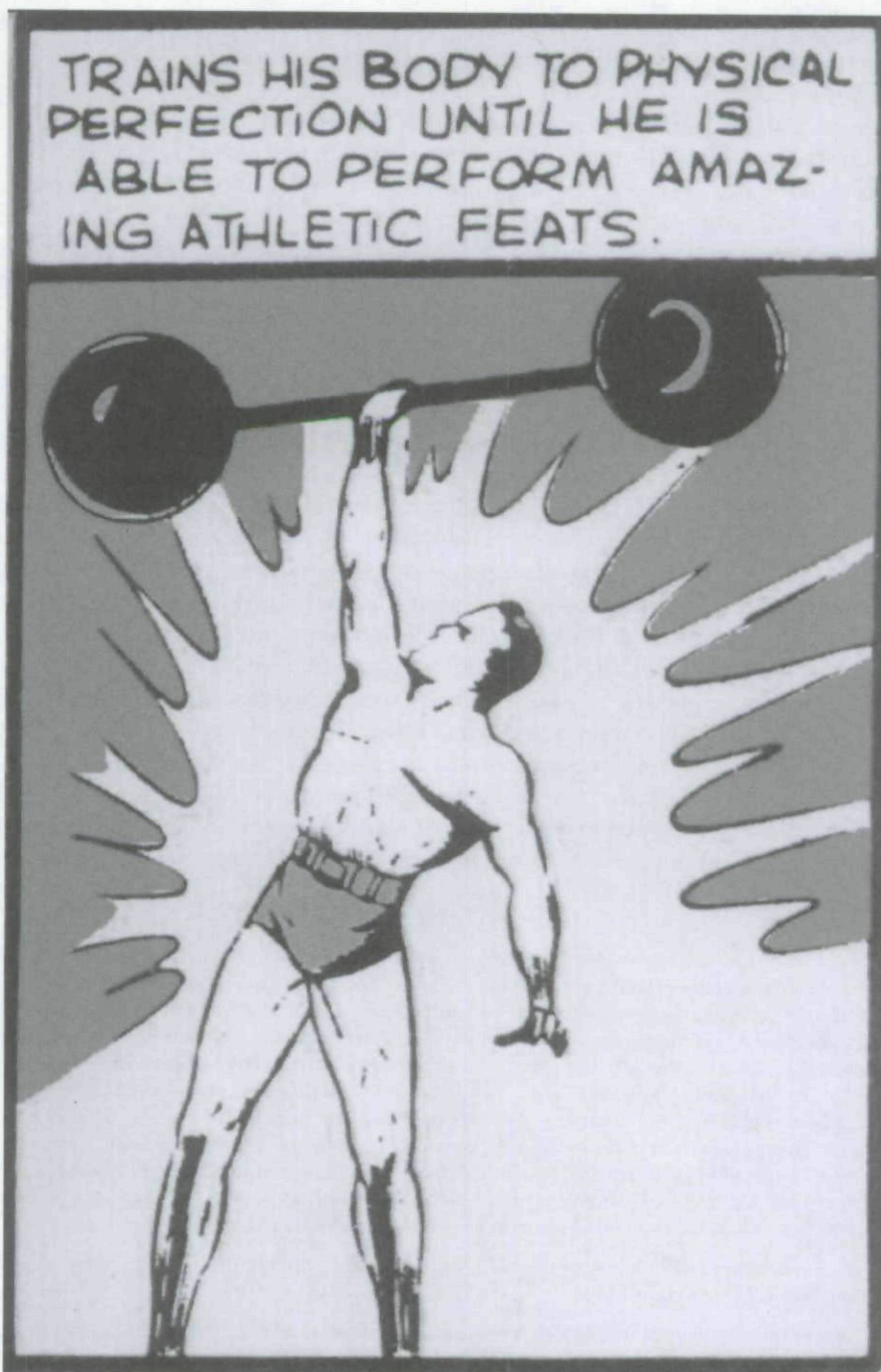


Figure 3 "Trains his body to perfection." Panel from "The Batman and how he came to be." After his parents are murdered by a robber in an alley, the young Bruce Wayne decides to train his mind and body. From *Detective Comics* 33 © 1939 DC Comics. All rights reserved.

den migration to the urban North from the rural South. Focusing on certain gang leaders, these articles recall the promise Invisible Man sees in the zoot-suiters as well as the character of Tod Clifton.²³

In sum, Ellison seems to be suggesting that the restless, mobile, and daring little Batmen whom society regards as delinquents may in fact be “protecting the higher interests of society.” Precisely because they are “not the numbed, but the seething,” their fate and promise may enable them to become the kind of leaders African Americans need most. The “I no hero” who also becomes “just now, a leader” after spearing Ras the Destroyer thus embodies this seeming contradiction.²⁴ Comic books are how Ellison makes even the most radical and unreal elements of American culture fit within the contours of the novel form.²⁵ All allusions to comic books in the novel—be they the subway scene, the funeral eulogy, Thurber cartoons, Dick Tracy, or the Lone Ranger—have something in common: in each instance, comics offer the protagonist the most accurate analogy for his own sense of reality, a sense intimately grounded in what Ellison called the “unreality that haunts Harlem” (“Harlem Is Nowhere” 327). It is “a world so fluid and shifting that often within the mind the real and the unreal merge, and the marvelous beckons from behind the same sordid reality that denies its existence” (322). In other words, Ellison’s gaze sees the promise behind the delinquency, just as Invisible Man sees the “principle on which the country was built” beckoning from behind “the men who did the violence” (574). The novel’s defense and denunciation of mass culture mirrors how its protagonist manages to retain the dynamism of hope despite being surrounded by the “Old Bad Air” of a segregated American democracy (581). It offers a glimpse of a world where criminal passions can be harnessed to socially useful ends. This is the register on which we can understand Ellison’s striking statement that “the individual man is more apt to get a sense of wonder, a sense of self-awareness and a sharper reflection of his world from a comic book than from most novels.”

²³ In addition, in a folder labeled “Harlem, New York, NY,” Ellison kept a copy of Gordon Parks’s first *Life* magazine assignment, “Harlem Gang Leader” (1 November 1948). The article is a chronicle of seventeen-year-old Red Jackson, leader of the Midtowners, and contains many of Parks’s now iconic photographs. One picture shows Jackson with Father Bishop, the reverend who provided the two basement rooms from which the Lafargue Clinic operated. Indeed, Ellison’s “Harlem Is Nowhere” was intended to be a collaborative photo essay with Parks, as I explain in greater detail in an essay provisionally titled “Harlem is Nowhere Is Now Here,” a work in progress. In the same folder, Ellison also kept a copy of an actual comic book: Harlem Youth Report #5, “YOUTH IN THE GHETTO and the Blueprint for Change,” the voice of Harlem Youth Unlimited (Custom Comics, 1964). The comic was only distributed around Harlem and was commissioned by the social activism organization HARYOU.

²⁴ For a compelling elucidation of the hero-leader figure created in the closing scenes of *Invisible Man*, see John S. Wright, ch. 3.

²⁵ As an example of cheap ephemera with a wide circulation, and in light of its use as a unifying narrative device, one could say that the comic book is to *Invisible Man* as the “throwaway” is to Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

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