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Signifying and bad taste

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« The black phallus is a dominant symbol in [*Invisible Man*'s] formal pattern of behavior, as its manifold recurrences attest.” (Baker, Jr. 181)

African American fiction, when embraced globally, shows little inclination to laughter. Protest usually follows other modes resting on the dignity of model characters. Born from the consciousness of a minority status, it pursues accommodation while resisting mainstream hegemony. The “bad taste” we are going to deal with here has roots in the 1930s and 1950s but flowered in the 1960s and 1970s, a short-lived spate of burlesque literature based on the most hardy of racist stereotypes, to wit black sexuality. Indeed, persistent clichés go back to the colonial period when white imaginations extolled the black woman’s eagerness for and expertise at luscious sex. A piece of 18th century anonymous doggerel published in a Southern paper will serve here as an illustration of that state of mind:

Next comes a warmer race, from sable sprung,
To love each thought, to lust each nerve is strung;
The Samboe dark, and the Mulattoe brown,
The Mestize fair, the well-limb’d Quaderoon,
And jetty Afric, from no spurious sire,
Warm as her soil, and as her sun – on fire.

These sooty dames, well vers'd in Venus' school,
Make love an art, and boast they kiss by rule. (Jordan 150)

Conversely, the fear of black-white miscegenation turned black males into oversexed bucks whose hunger for white ladies must be restrained. These fables are multiform. For instance, they resurfaced under a supposedly friendlier garb during the 1920s when return-to-nature whites celebrated the Harlem "hot nights".

Early black novelists countered these rampant stereotypes through the creation of exemplary characters. Just refer to Charles Chesnutt's melodrama *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) with pure Rena who resists mutual love in an interracial union while her more adventurous brother who broke the taboo is punished by his wife's early death in child birth. Such positive heroes became part and parcel of a fictional code representing loving and faithful couples who conform to socially approved behavior – "good taste". The question the conference title leads to is the fracturing of that code, i.e. the when and how parody and burlesque of white racist fabrications came into print. The call for papers mentions the intention to shock. That fiction went beyond the intention to shock white readers is arguable: settling an old account also belongs in the vengeful laughter studied below where three main stages will come under consideration. *Black No More* (1931), George S. Schuyler's unique story that ridicules both white racism and the "New Negro" will open the field. The 1950s will follow with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), a most provocative story deriding the national sexual mythology. Ellison's masterpiece remained fairly isolated as the Civil Rights campaign was rising, but, with the blues for an ideological backbone, it is widely considered as a precursor that jazzed up racist stereotypes and prepared the ground for Chester Himes's spirited detective series that may be regarded as part and parcel of the rambunctious "bad taste" of the 1965-1975 period when the Black Arts Movement flowered.

Black "bad taste" never lapses into graphic pornography. The odd isolated instance of Clarence Major's *All Night Visitors*, disfigured as it was under the cover of Ophelia Press, does not make a trend. Black "bad taste" is rooted in "signifying", a culturally specific form of irony which consists in portraying characters so gifted

they are able to carry out such sexual prowess as even white racism did not imagine. Signifying is a long standing practice where irony, exaggeration and double meaning come together to undermine the hurt of being dominated through laughter. Let us illustrate this briefly through Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* (1901): the Hamiltons are happy servants living a good life until the husband is falsely accused of theft. He is sentenced to prison, and his wife and family are thrown into exile in New York where the children fall into sin, gambling dens for the son, and, worst of all, dancing for the daughter. Hamilton's innocence is uncovered and he is granted his former position back. Husband and wife return to their modest house by the estate's gate. Taken at face value, the book seems to vindicate the white southern doxa of the time: that the northern Babylon spells ruin for black people, that happiness and justice prevail in the rural South and that blacks have no cause to migrate: they should rather "cast [their] bucket[s] where [they] are" (Grant 196), as Booker T. Washington argued in Atlanta in 1905, about one year before the massacre there. However, the title leads to a different reading: the "gods" amusing themselves are white, masters toying with the lives of their servants, and the whole book "signifies" by debunking white received ideas. Signifying is the sap of black life and literature. It irrigates Chesnut's "A Deep Sleeper", McKay's so-called nostalgia in "Home Thoughts" which both share the spirit lighting Etheridge Knight's "I Sing of Shine". The concept was taken over by H. L. Gates in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) when he built a theory in which signifying appears either as an intertextual revision or as a critical revision of established ideas. The "bad taste" studied below belongs in that perspective as it corners the white obsession with lusting and super sexed blacks, male and female, into satirical situations. Opting for a chronological presentation will, it is hoped, show that "bad taste" increasingly called upon black culture and grew more sexually explicit. The irony of it is that the more conservative blacks think that, as does Brother Wrestrum the white leader of the Brotherhood when advising the Invisible Man, that all racist stereotypes "cause confusion" and are best "kept out of sight" (Ellison, 1965, 321).

Bad taste, or all-round irreverence? The case of Schuyler's *Black No More*

Harlem Renaissance novelists became more flexible where the earlier code is concerned. Shining examples are Langston Hughes, Rudolph Fisher and Zora Neale Hurston whose stories do not shy away from everyday urban and rural life. However, the comic bad taste we are concerned with here found its way most prominently in one exceptional instance, Schuyler's *Black No More*¹ dedicated to "all Caucasians in the great republic who can trace their ancestry back ten generations and confidently assert there are no black leaves, twigs, limbs or branches on their family trees." So-called black primitivism is lampooned as the story opens with Max Dishner and his friend Bunny (a nickname that conjures up Brother Rabbit the trickster) bragging about their female conquests—mostly words as actual successes are yet to occur. Their lives change when Dr. Junius Crookman invents a process altering skin pigmentation. An ever enterprising rascal, Max is among the first to join the wave and the miracle occurs: his skin turns pink pork colored and his hair blond. He changes his name to Matthew Fisher and heads South where he wins the hand of a woman of his dreams, a "titian blond" (Schuyler 79) who is none other than the daughter of the Grand Exalted Giraw of the Knights of Nordica. Max quickly rises in the Klan hierarchy as he wages a vigorous campaign against "those damn white niggers" (Schuyler 78). Pandemonium breaks loose, especially in Dixieland because there was no way of "telling a real Caucasian from an imitation one" (Schuyler 118). A jet-black singer posturing as a plantation owner launches a pastiche of the blues that bemoans the departure and loss of his Mammy.² Sun tans become fashionable when it is discovered the sun has no effect on fake white skin, and the country becomes most moral as girls shy away from sex because imitation whiteness does not affect the genes. Precisely, Matthew and Helen become parents. Matthew is so white-looking that Helen who is madly in love with her husband persuades herself she is the one with a tainted ancestry because she is a genuine southerner. She forgets she ever was a racist, but the situation becomes urgent when the press spread the news the Giraw has mulatto grandchildren. They all flee to Brazil where they live comfortably off the money that was picked from their followers, and the book ends on a doting grandfather making sand pies on a beach.

While the book must have shocked racially right-minded whites for its transgressing a taboo, Max's infatuation with Helen also signified on the early code of black fiction that frowned upon interracial unions. *Black No More* caused quite a stir among intellectuals as the spirit of the black Renaissance was waning. Everything the black pride movement of the 1920s stood for was attacked. No one is spared among the ridiculed main political and cultural actors of the movement. W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey become Santop Licorice and Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard; the NAACP is renamed the "National Social Equality League", its periodical *The Crisis* has a new name: "Dilemma". Schuyler's novel is still as disturbing today as it was in 1931. In the epilogue titled "And so on and so on", Dr. Crookman has become Surgeon General. An announcement that new Caucasians are actually lighter-skinned than the old ones (who were never white in the first place) staggers the country and puts an end to the veneration of whiteness. Upper class people lie naked on beaches seeking as deep a sun tan as will allow them to lord it over paler-skinned individuals. Pharmaceutical companies start manufacturing drugs that darken the skin, girls are seen applying charcoal to their faces on the street and, worst of all, one Dr. Karl Von Beerde (whom some suspect to be none other than Dr. Beard – now also a new Caucasian) founds the Down-With-White-Prejudice League. Schuyler was a life-long dissenter from racial politics who, in Charles Larson's introductory words, proposed a *roman à these* proposing that "the new negro [would] be white or nothing at all!" (id. 10) He supported extreme conservative politics in old age arguing that concentrating on the color line could only maintain blacks in their second class citizenship status and titled his 1966 autobiography *Black and Conservative*.

Invisible Man: how to "change the joke and slip the yoke"

Ellison's *Invisible Man* takes the opposite racial road, insisting on the contrary that black culture is a precious treasure accruing to the wealth of the nation. Here is an unconventional novel in which Brother Rabbit leaves his briar patch with a vengeance. Where "bas taste" is concerned in the novel, black popular culture introduces a burlesque that allusively settles below the belt in unforgettably funny fictional moments. No less a commentator than a novelist, Albert Murray (who was

one of Ellison's fellow students at Tuskegee and established the blues idiom as the basis for his own writings) argued that *Invisible Man* was a literary outshoot of the blues. Indeed, while Ellison finally preferred a literary to a musical career, his mind was nourished with blues and jazz during his years as a trumpet player. Blues lyrics carry racial/cultural portents through double meanings out of reach of the uniformed listener who takes everything at face value.³ Deception means tongue-in-cheek laughter, and Ellison himself pointed out the importance of laughter, double talk and breaking the code: "Look, didn't you find the book at all funny?" (Ellison 1966, 180), he rather testily asked learned white critics who missed on black culture entirely. *Invisible Man's* burlesque borrows the tone of black laughter, a philosophy born from centuries of servitude and racism.⁴ However, the novel's main characteristic is the absence of emotion. With the exception of Tod Clifton's death, the story floats as if in a dream (some favor a drug-induced nightmare) out of reach of tragedy. The prologue presents the Invisible Man in his cellar-haven (Brother Rabbit's burrow) where electricity stolen from the utility company, a Great Depression fact of life in the ghetto, lights up an absurd 1369 bulbs and a Louis Armstrong record plays "What did I do to be so black and blue?". The epilogue shows him sliding his way in and landing on a coal heap, the best hiding place for a black man who can only be seen – so goes the joke – if he opens his eyes or grins. The whole novel follows the principle states in the titles of a spring 1958 article in *Partisan Review*.⁵ Laughter blooms everywhere. The "Brotherhood"⁶ leader's name, Brother Tobbit, plays on *two-bits*, the southern word for a quarter also used to designate anything of small value. And the Invisible Man's zealous chief instructor's name, Brother Westrum, naturally plays on the prosaic *rest-room*. Racial jokes are sustained throughout: a dull man is described as having "a black blank of a face" (*IM* 5), and the Invisible Man describes a look-alike black as someone who has been "burnt in the same oven" (*id.* 6). Stereotypes are debunked when the hero declares he is unable to sing and dance, gifts supposedly natural to black people. But the most unrestrained comedy plays on sex: there is the fair-haired stripper⁷ whose lower belly sports a tattooed stars and stripes. This patriotic upper pubis carries black humor aplenty as the word *stripes* also conjures up the slaver's lash. There also is the

pandemonium respectable Mr. Norton's visit provokes in "The Golden Day", the local bawdy house where inmates of the black lunatic asylum are marched two by two once a week. One of the ladies does not lose her cool and declares she would like Mr. Norton for a customer, not because he is wealthy but because older white men often enjoy unusual vitality and "monkey glands" (id. 76). Her eagerness fully overturns the stereotype of the supersexed black man because in coded black language *monkey*, which means black, places Mr. Norton, old and respectable as he is in the *baad* world of the clichéd black buck. Is this in bad taste? While readers will laugh at the description of the mock-epic fight in the bawdy house, only those conversant with black culture will get the full import of it all.

Other devastatingly funny "bad taste" passages directly involve the Invisible Man as the object of white ladies' desires. In the first one, he is enticed to share a lady's bed while her Brotherhood husband is away. Contact is established when the Invisible Man guides the lady "away from the others to stand near a partly uncoiled fire hose hanging beside the entrance" (id. 330). In other words, in coded black language, he is willing to oblige because the black slang phrase "to put out the fire" is understood in this context as "satisfying a woman's needs". The husband unexpectedly returns in the middle of the night, opens the bedroom door, takes the scene in "with neither "interest nor surprise" (id. 336) and leaves after asking his wife to wake him up early because he has a lot to do. She mumbles an agreement in her half-sleep. The Invisible Man is fully awake. He panics, conscious of peril.⁸ He dresses quickly and flees in the night. Could he have seen the husband without being seen, he asks himself, becoming conscious of another wrong in the party's ideology: the insistence on "confusing the class struggle with the ass struggle, debasing both us and them—all human motives" (id. 337). The wording, the opposition between *class* and *ass* hides a consciousness that bites deeply because *race* is the point, rather than *class*.

The second passage opens an even deeper racial wound, once again by satirizing white fantasies of black men hungering for white women. The Invisible Man takes the aging nymphomaniac wife of a Brotherhood higher official⁹ to his bedroom where she entreats him to rape her. He refuses to participate in this "very

revolting ritual" (id. 416). Though tipsy himself, he manages to inebriate the lady and uses her lipstick to write on her belly, "Sybil, you were raped by Santa Claus, surprise." (id. 420) There follows a cruel dialogue when she awakes from her drunken stupor. She wants to know whether he had to be violent because she "put up a good fight" (id. 422). He takes on the full weight of the yoke, and the reader's task (according to the advice of the *Partisan Review* article) is to change the joke: lapsing into Black English, he tells her not to worry: "I rapes real good when I'm drunk." (id. 425). Realizing he is no more than an "anonymous brute 'n booful buck" (id. 421) in Sybil's own words, he promises to rape her every Wednesday night at nine before putting her in a cab to take her home, spending his last five dollar bill.

The extreme parodic mood of this passage is so much more obvious than the Invisible Man's previous interracial encounter that it calls for no comment. On the other hand, the laughter targeting "white negroes" will shock the prudish more because it uses the coded language of the dirty dozens and the blues: a light-colored mixed blood woman shouts at the Invisible Man, calling him a "Southern nigger" when he throws a, to him, racially offending money bank in her garbage bin as he walks by. He submits to her injunction, rolls up his sleeve and plunges his arm in the smelly bin where bacteria are at work. Bad taste, if any arises here from the standard English signifier "garbage can" doubling up to mean another signified in black slang: the female vagina. The move from one linguistic level to the other is firmly established when the quarrel worsens: the Invisible Man calls the woman "a piece of yellow gone to waste" (id. 266) in which *piece* is an extremely vulgar slang term designating a casual sexual partner.

The lesson flowers: "bad taste" unbridled

The bold bad taste vein *Invisible Man* pioneered remained fairly isolated, at first only shared by Chester Himes's *The Primitive* which, the author said in a private conversation, opened the way to the Coffin Ed and Grave Digger stories when Jesse says about sex and race "It's funny, really. You just got to get the handle to the joke." (Himes 160) Ellison's novel appears, with hindsight, as a model that came to fruition when the militant stories inspired by the hopeful spirit of the Civil Rights campaign,

John Oliver Killens's *Youngblood* (1954) for example, were superseded by a sardonic mood.

The golden age of "bad taste" in black fiction arose with the Black Arts Movement as the Civil Rights campaign was being superseded by disappointment and impatience. Nothing is sacred in this surge of rambunctious signifying. Criticism knows no bounds. Racism is of course a favorite target. So are black people "following the white line" (Ellison 42) as the naïve Invisible Man does in college. And so are the American ideals shaken by protest against the Vietnam conflict. A prime illustration is Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) whose anachronistic episodes rewrite the Civil War history. Fugitive slaves fly to freedom on jumbo jets, as if the polysemic word "flight" had given wings to the Underground Rail Road. We also see president Lincoln sail up the James River (deep into enemy territory) on the presidential yacht to go beg money from a rich planter and industrialist who, by the way, also supports the Confederacy's war effort. This Swille is a good host and the president's befuddled mind allows northern racism to filter out:

"Compensatory Emancipation, that's it. Sure enough is, Mr. Swille. It goes like this. We buy the war and the slaves are over. No like this. We buy the slaves. That's it. We buy the slaves or the bonsmen and then they pay the South seven and a half percent interest. No, dog bite it. How did it go? My aides have been going over it with me ever since we started out from *The River Queen*. I got it! We buy all the slaves and then tell them to go off somewhere. Some place like New Mexico, where nobody's hardly seen a cloud and when they do show up it looks like judgment day [...] Other times I think that maybe they ought to go to the tropics where God made them. You know, I've been reading about this African tribe that lived in the tropics so long they trained mosquitoes to fight their enemies." (Reed, 1977, 41-42)

This long quotation deriding colonization, many times proposed (in Cuba and elsewhere), shows how far modern outspoken African American fiction has come from the deferential codes established at the turn of the 20th century. Black people are

fictionally “put in their place” with peals of laughter that have replaced the moralizing of old. Even Toni Morrison, who does not belong among the wildest satirists, participates in this change. In *Sula* (1972), Shadrack, a First World War veteran who has lost his mind rediscovers his identity by looking at his face reflected in the white bowl of a hospital toilet. A brief and severe episode that signifies on destitution and injustice, the wages of fighting for the liberty of others. The same novel also derides bourgeois blacks through Helen, a mixed-blood well integrated person who has made her home in Michigan with a husband working the ferries to Canada—the fugitive slaves’ route to freedom. When she travels home to Louisiana with her daughter to pay her respects to her dead grandmother, she panics in need of a segregated toilet in a Deep South rail road station until a compassionate fellow-traveler incites her to go and relieve herself behind the bushes where nature provides the necessary leaves. Is that bad taste? Is it not rather a fact of life, day-to-day history as black people knew it then?

Bolder scatological fancy pervades “The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff”, a short story in Alice Walker’s *In Love and Trouble* (1973). Dying several decades later, Hannah still resents being slighted as she stood in a Great Depression soup kitchen line and calls upon a voodoo woman to cast a spell on the offending white church lady. The wily voodoo woman sends her assistant on a seemingly friendly visit to Mrs. Holley whom she informs that somebody seeks to bewitch her and that she needs some hair, nail cuttings, urine and excrements to work a counter spell. Fear makes Mrs. Holley forget rationality and her religious certainties. She begins burning the hair she sheds, her nail parings too and, even distrusting the sewage system, she keeps her bodily waste in plastic pouches and barrels. The stench becomes so horrible her husband deserts her and only her faithful black wet nurse assists her in her soon-to-come dying hour.¹⁰

Excremental burlesque transcends all cultures, but one may argue Alice Walker’s story is directly inspired by the Dirty Dozens, traditionally aimed at one’s opponent’s parents (and ultimately at any authority) by transgressing all taboos, sexual, urinary and fecal.¹¹ In “The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff”, excrements

become white society's essence as well as its death principle: indeed, because Mrs. Holley is killed by "the relics of what she ate" (Walker 80).

One could also argue Walker's story signifies on Ishmael Reed's earlier satirical novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*¹²(1967). This most likely inter-discursivity rests on the Harry Sam emperor (whose first name is Sam, too) devouring and defecating on the throne-toilet of his east coast presidential motel. Sam has a particularly shameful secret: his staple food is the flesh of children –black– kidnapped from the projects (Reed, 1967, 143) and the conduit from his throne-latrine channels his bodily residuals directly into the ocean that swallows all traces of his guilty habit. Reed's pen has been one of the most unpredictable ones touching upon such social concerns as religion and leadership –communal and national–, family life, history, etc. As we have seen, *Flight to Canada* (1976), deconstructs Civil War politics and turns confused Abraham Lincoln into a secret racist. There is nothing scatological there, just merciless criticism based on the former president's inability to envisage a bi-racial nation and his well-known interest in colonization.

Let us now return to "bad taste" fictions parodying white sexual stereotypes. Novelists like Morrison and Walker did not shy away from female characters with a strong sexual appetite. A less known writer like Hal Bennett reaches further extremes, with oversexed characters, both male and female. *The Black Wine* presents young Dolly, eleven, strongly attracted to David, eight. Dolly teases David that "he [has] hardly no vanilla at all to flavor her cake", and shows him her own sex which David finds to look like "a plucked chicken's naked behind more than the confection she had bragged about." (Bennett, 1968, 57-58) *A Wilderness of Vines* (1966) describes an unusual couple: seventeen-year-old Neva, fresh from an orphanage but already knowledgeable about sex, and wealthy sixty-five-year-old Janus on their wedding day. Neva's sexual obsessions have her concentrate during the ceremony on a very black fly walking the rounds on the immaculately white fly of the preacher's trousers. Their wedding night is a piece of anthology. The bride and groom's lustiness is exacerbated by a drink too many –so much so that the bed, canopy and all, collapses under their vigorous love-making. In short, the young bride who feared the worst has everything she wished for – money and sex.¹³

The white phantasm Bennett derides most insistently is that of the oversexed black man. Only one illustration will come here, borrowed from *Lord of the Dark Places*. Our over-sexed man who goes by the name of Joe is the half-wit son of a jackleg preacher who created The Church of the Naked Disciple, whose main attraction was Joe's standing naked on the platform at the end of the sermon. We see him wandering, high from smoking marijuana, through the white section of a small Louisiana town. His attention is drawn by a notice planted on a neat lawn ordering "Niggers, Dogs, Catholics, Beggars Peddlers, & etc." (Bennett, 1970, 41) not to tarry around. The board is in fact a lover-catcher. A young woman fully dressed in white (even her hair is dyed platinum) comes out. She hitches up her dress, shows him the seat of her pride ("even the governor's wife's pussy ain't prettier than mine" [id. 42]) and demands intercourse through the fence, threatening Joe she will shout rape if he refuses to perform as her avid hands guide the object of her desire through the wire mesh. Her wish satiated, while Joe is ready to jump over the fence for another proper copulation, she sets the notice up again and disappears into the house. The generosity of Joe's member, indeed the whole extravagant situation may have been borrowed from the set Dozens verses ("And I fucked your mother between two splinters./I hung my tail and it stayed all winter.") quoted earlier.¹⁴

The white woman's hate for Joe, "She hated him. She loved his peter. *Love me, ma'am. Please.* But she loved his peter" (id. 44) signifies on a mentally deranged society. A preacher's son, Joe has nicknamed his penis – the show piece of his father's services – "Christopher". Sex, "Christ-offer" is his only religion. A half-witted young man, he has nothing else to offer the world and, fearing for his life, becomes the young lady's slave.

This sardonic burlesque leads us to William Melvin Kelley's *dem* whose title alludes to the black saying "let me tell you how dem people live". Tam, a middle class woman, becomes pregnant with fraternal twins, one illegitimate black baby, another one white – legitimate but still born. Mitchell the abused husband looks for his wife's seducer in Harlem to free his home of the infant – the fruit of miscegenation. His search through bars and cabarets is useless, as Harlem is of course a transposition of Brer Rabbit's briar patch – the trickster's sanctuary. This

impossible-to-find shameless libertine (in fact the maid's lover) is the "back door man" of the blues. The couple finally keep the baby in their home, passing him off as the maid's illegitimate son, which he might have been in a way considering Mitchell's own unfulfilled attraction to their maid. The fraud is thorough. Tam and Mitchell let it be known they have taken Opal and her infant in because her lover jilted her. This imposition signifies on the instability of the black family that, incidentally, was made official doctrine in 1965 with the publication of the *Moynihan Report: the Case for National Action*.¹⁵ Senator Moynihan certainly entertained good intentions in his effort to uncover the reasons for a dysfunctional black family and recommend solutions to improve the situation so as to provide a better family environment for black children. But his good intentions may have been trapped in received ideas. Albert Murray's *The Omni-Americans*, a collection of essays published about the same time as the *Moynihan Report* has a more direct comment on such impostures as the one Kelley's *dem* is based on. Murray denounces "the fakelore of black pathology" (Murray 97) which the white majority keeps alive to explain and vindicate the social status quo.

About three decades separate the publications of *dem* and *Black No More*. Both novels are based on racial mixing. Schuyler's novel can be looked upon as far-fetched comedy. Kelley's own is infinitely more scathing because its "bad taste" signifies on the real world with this couple mired in its lies and representing turpitude as charity. The specter of past abuses by white masters rankles throughout.

This description of "bad taste" approached as signifying suggests post-Ellison black fiction went through a movement of liberation comparable to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Many poems, ironical or starkly close to black life, by Claude McKay and Langston Hughes followed that vein while fiction took other paths, preferred protest such as found in Richard Wright, Ann Petry and Chester Himes's early fiction. It first fully came into its own with *Invisible Man*, the flowering of the oral traditions of black culture.

The signifying wealth of the socially impertinent instances brought up here was frequent during the Black Arts Movement period. Many a like-minded novel or

author has been left out here. Cecil Brown's *The Life and Loves of Mr. Jiveass Nigger* (1969) figures prominently, though it opts for a more sober tone of voice than Bennett's fiction with identity questions and the suicidal despair of a mature white woman rejected by her black lover. There is also John Oliver Killens, especially in *'Sippi* (1967) which is as socially incorrect, with sex expert Chuck Othello taking advantage of Carrie Louise Wakefield to humiliate her,¹⁶ as *Youngblood* (1954) had been racially correct. One should also name here Chester Himes, John A. Williams, Cyrus Colter, Al Young and Barry Beckham. John Wideman, also wrote scathing stories, especially "The Statue of Liberty", a nude white lady reclining on a deck chair, and looked at the black/white sexual scene from the inside, not excluding self-derision, in *The Island: Martinique* (2002). This "bad taste" meant to deride racist stereotypes, and, perhaps, hopefully, to correct them reaches different degrees of crudeness. However, salaciousness never lapses into pornography. Vulgarity and obscenity are held off by laughter – itself a means to keep the deep hurt underlying the fictionalizing at bay. Some readers may mention Iceberg Slim's¹⁷ potboilers and Clarence Major's *All Night Visitors* (1969) as counter examples. Everything should be kept in perspective. Slim's works are light compared to *Go Down Dead* (1966) by Shane Stevens, a white author whose descriptions of the dangers of ghetto life – especially unbridled adolescent sex – are overdone. And Major's boldly avant-garde manuscript primarily dealt with a Vietnam veteran's search for identity and was reworked, distorted for publication, by Ophelia Press that selected passages with open sex in them. A restored edition came out in 1999, published by The Northeastern Library of Black Literature. Major, with his tongue in his cheek, calls that thoroughly new book the "unexpurgated" edition of *All Night Visitors*.

The signifying "bad taste" described above draws from popular culture and *Invisible Man* seems to have acted as a release. Ellison's character rejects his blackness at the outset only to rediscover and make it his own. In this respect, he is different from the characters in later fictions, for instance Hal Bennett's and Cecil Brown's, who are at ease in their black skins from the start.

For blacks to laugh at whites (and at themselves) has always been an answer to their painful social situation. Damning racist clichés was long kept out of a protest

fiction built around role models. But they were consistently present in other forms of expression, hidden in the ritual insults of Dirty Dozens verbal jousts, in jazz¹⁸ or in the bluesy complaints in which tensions within the couples in the lyrics stand for racial and societal tensions at large. The “bad taste” of the sixties and seventies no longer reigns today, but it has left its mark. Prominent instances are to be found in Colson Whitehead’s *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), Alice Randall’s parody *The Wind Done Gone* (2001), Paul Beatty’s *Tuff* (2000) in which nothing is sacred, and Percival Everett’s *Erasure* (2001) whose spoof based on Richard Wright’s *Native Son* first of all signifies on books like Sapphire’s *Push* (1996) and Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) both based on clichés of “the back experience”, that is to say unhappy and dangerous ghetto life. And it seems natural in our perspective that Everett’s narrator be named Ellison.

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NOTES

¹ The books title and story line are inspired from « Kink-No-More”, a famous hair straightener of the early 20th century that, unlike Dr. Crookman’s medicine, called for new treatment every other week.

² Vanishing Mammy, Mammy! Of Mi – ne,
You’ve been away, dear, such an awfully long time
You went away, sweet Mammy! One summer night
I can’t help thinkin’, Mammy, that you went white.
Of course I can’t blame you, Mammy! Mammy! Dear
Because you had so many troubles, Mammy, to bear.
But the old homestead hasn’t been the same
Since I last heard you, Mammy, call my name.
And so I wait, loving Mammy, it seems in vain,
For you to come waddling back home again
Vanishing Mammy! Mammy! Mammy!
I’m waiting for you to come back home again. (Schuyler 148)

³ See Jean-Paul Levet’s *Talkin’ that talk*: “Accordingly, the blues is not this fatalistic litany, this song of resignation [...] such as generally described. It is a rite representing a tragic, painful past that must remain alive among all the members of the community. [...] The blues is one of the few places where a black point of view on American society is expressed.” (94, my translation) A concurring opinion is Sterling A. Brown’s article “The Blues as Folk Poetry” reprinted in Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps’ *Book of Negro Folklore*. Albert Murray shared this view and argued that the blues idiom functions like a classical tragedy, a means for making the best out of a very bad situation.

⁴ “And, oh, the cry of that train and the pain too big for tears!” (Ellison, 1965, 109) says the novel’s narrative voice as the Invisible Man is on the train taking him away from the campus.

⁵ Reprinted in *Shadow and Act*, pp. 61-73.

⁶ This is the name given to the Communist Party. The naïve Invisible Man at long last discovers they are not different from other white people because they push the interests of the party rather than that of the black community.

⁷ This happens during a stag party (see the battle-royal episode, Chapter I) where the Invisible Man is taken to with other young blacks after the graduation ceremony. Some white men encourage the young men to look at the stripper, others dare them to do so. Of course, no black man who cares for his life was supposed to look at a white woman, let alone a naked one. The young men are later blindfolded and made to grab coins from an electrified carpet and fight each other for the money.

⁸ That black men have been lynched for lesser supposed racial offences in the South is part of the Invisible Man's consciousness: "But it was as though she'd never been awake and if she should awaken now, she'd scream, shriek." (id. 337)

⁹ In anger and irony, the Invisible Man calls him a "great master of social change". (id. 422)

¹⁰ Ms. Holley's being so easily duped comments upon her fear of black people, just as in slavery days an accidental kitchen fire was suspected to be an arson attributed to black vengefulness. Such white fears were widespread after the revolts of the early 19th century.

¹¹ Here is an instance of a joust Lee Rainwater recorded in Saint Louis and transcribed in *Behind Ghetto Walls*:

Albert:

Well, I fucked your mama in a barrel of flour.
She shit tea cakes for a half hour.

Malcolm:

I fucked your mama between two splinters.
I hung my dick and it stayed all winter.

[...]

I remember in the old days I didn't have no dick,
I fucked your mama with a walking stick.

Albert:

I member in the old days I didn't have no dick,
I fucked your mama with a walking stick.
She has ninety-nine babies and a kangaroo;
Now tell me, motherfucker, who is you?
I took your mama to Niagara Falls,
Wouldn't nothin' fuck her but a broke dick dog.

The transcription of the whole contest between several late teenagers is pp. 346-355. The gist of the game is quickly remembering set phrases, either following the vein of the cues thrown by the opponent, or on the contrary breaking the expectations of the spectators who are in a circle around the players. The loser is the one running out of answers who is therefore thrown out of rhythm.

¹² Hoo-Doo runs through Reed's iconoclastic works. See the quotation from Henry Allen at the beginning of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*: "America is just like a turkey. It's got white meat and it's got dark meat. They is different, but they is both important to the turkey. I figure the turkey has more white meat than dark meat, but that don't make any difference. Both have nerves running through 'em. I guess Hoo-Doo is a sort of nerve that runs mostly in the dark meat, but sometimes gets into the white meat, too." (Reed, 1969, 5)

¹³ The comical tone is sustained throughout, but identity and social questions find their way through the narration: "Did all Negroes, Charlie wondered, use their sex as a source of pride? And identity? As a means of relating to each other? Were they all like Mamie Sperling and Billy, like Robert Bartley and Gene Manning — like himself — just a pair of overflowing

balls and a hairy slit, not only in the white man's eyes, but in their own as well...? (Bennett, 1967, 138)

¹⁴ Please turn back to note n°11 for a more complete excerpt.

¹⁵ Interestingly, this report mandated by the federal government was predicated on E. Franklin Frazier's 1939 study *The Negro Family in the United States* that presented urbanization as the cause of the disintegration of the black family. The report served to justify the many measures, like AFDC, the Johnson administration promoted. Many criticized the report among the black community. It can be considered to be at the origin of the new historical research by Herbert Gutman (*The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* [1976]) and others that revised Frazier's theory.

¹⁶ The narrative voice calls Chuck's expert sexual encounter with Carrie an "undeclared war" (Killens 336), and Chuck later thinks to himself he is "a mean black nationalist bastard" (id. 349).

¹⁷ Iceberg Slim is a penname for Robert Beck.

¹⁸ Without discussing the word's disputed etymology, it must be pointed out here that « jazz » is not a word to use in the presence of a lady outside a musical context. It can mean the sexual organs, intercourse itself or simply jive meant to seduce. (See Jean-Paul Levet, *Talkin' that Talk*, 175-177)

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