Black Image and Blackness: Rewriting Myth as Cultural Code in Ralph Ellison's "King of the Bingo Game"

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“Short stories work well as tools for learning” (xiii), novelist Clarence Major writes in the introduction to *Calling the Wind*, his innovative collection of African American short stories. Indeed, whether it is seen as a paradigm of human experience or an artful play of language in what Edgar Allan Poe used to define as a prose narrative with a magnitude of its own serving a single effect, the American short story offers us workable metaphors for our lives while creating its own reality. African American writers have long practiced the short story form: rooted in the oral tradition, it tends toward an approach that would address differences. If we consider that all knowledge is perspectival, and therefore metaphoric, it is easy to understand why African American story-tellers have set out to test irony. Irony is a clue to understanding the African American experience; it is also a metaphor of opposites and has become the main device in the organization of texts that frame an inner story within the story. This can create disruption, deceptive talking and give way for the Othering process to emerge—it being understood that in Othering enunciation, the subject relinquishes the central position of conventional discourse, exchanging agency for some form of contact with the world. This exploration of the self’s multiple positions was established as early as 1899 with Charles Chesnutt’s short story “The Goophered Grapevine.” The text deviates from the model of subject-centered discourse since the white protagonist’s narrative voice in the framing story is overridden by the growing authority of the black hero—that is Uncle Julius’s voice—in the inner story.

In the present discussion, the starting-point will be Houston Baker’s assertion that the framing mind of the South “has been and remains a liminal zone, a middle passage of the imagination, a space of performance” (*Turning South Again* 36). Such an idea makes it
possible to appraise the framing of blackness in Ralph Ellison’s “King of the Bingo Game” and question whether the rewriting of myth as a cultural code can give birth to a new black image akin to Baker’s view of “blackness in motion toward modernity” (Blues 154).

Introducing the Language of Myth

There is a set pattern of rites and myths marking the African American experience that involve “the black person’s separation from a dominant, white society” (Baker, Blues 153). The symbolic content of African American culture demonstrates that the term carnival culture, as coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, would not be out of place in relation to the various definitions of African mythmaking. Indeed, these definitions introduce an intellectual perspective of the African Diaspora into African American literature and make of ethical and cultural legacy the spiritual reservoir of ancient wisdom into which African Americans have sought inspiration. Myths are challenging concepts and make up an important part of the way African Americans have organized their lives, most particularly in the South. To a disengaged observer, African American mythmaking has grown into a cultural construct very much like Alice’s Looking-Glass—both difficult to break into, and difficult to break out of. The salient trend of the narrative pattern present in African American folk culture, with central trickster figures brought from Africa, is that the language of myth is illustrated by the power of the word to reinvent reality. There is even an argument that holds that an adaptive skill in deception was, originally, a fundamental basis of survival for Blacks in America (Blauner 352). This ability to move to transformation represents some sort of anticipatory self-defense generating the capacity to switch enacted roles when obliged to do so. Ralph Ellison, for his part, chooses to define the process of mythmaking as the art of concealment when he refers to Black people’s “long habit of deception and evasion” (Shadow and Act xxi).

The contradictory values of confrontation and assimilation inherent in America’s ethnic founding are, on the other hand, reflected in the language of myth that opens up on the mystery of a life not entirely under our control since “all societies have myths or stories that tell about who they are” (Christensen 116). Besides, mythmaking is clearly more than one culture’s attempt to “make sense in a senseless world” (117). It is also “a creative resource from which the larger cultural values are derivative” (Okpewho 25). In this light, the art of self-concealment can be said to have clearly contributed to advance myths serving behavioral survival strategies, such as the myth of the happy slave. In fact, African American myths may adopt the trappings of legends or magical stories with a Bakhtinian outlook, and borrow from fable a potentially subversive rather than ratifying form. This is notably the case in fables of the astute Brer Rabbit, Uncle Abrahams, or again John, the human trickster, who can outsmart his master again and again, make him look foolish, and thus expose the myth of white omniscience. For all the differences between the animal trickster that can replace the master, win great victories, and the human trickster whose exploits describe slaves’ patterns of behavior, the ultimate purpose of the mythic approach to reality is to offer black people a minimum of shared perspectives through inter-generational transmission. The ethno-cultural dimension of myth—notably emphasized by Ellison in Shadow and Act—is therefore to be seen as a way to keep black people from engaging in a pathological adjustment to the ethnocentric context of white American society thanks to the socialized ambivalence of a complex double vision. Not surprisingly then, African American social myths borrow from black
folklore where the weak can outwit the oppressor, all the while taking distance from the world of the powerful. This is notably illustrated by the Blues lyric that runs:

Got one mind for white folks to see,
’nother for what I know is me;
He don’t know, he don’t know my mind. (Oakley 15)

Clearly, by building on Signifying, the Blues, and Conjuring, in other words by sustaining “the disingenuously conciliatory habit, perfected by Blacks on these shores, of maintaining the critique oblique” (Cooke 15), myths, legends and rituals deeply rooted in the African American experience convey a sense of intimacy because they are cultural codes for the attitudes, beliefs and behavior of communal life. Being closely intertwined, social and cultural myths can thus be considered as the appropriate signs to represent the socialized ambivalence of African American life. Given the fact that the language of myths is rooted in the particularity of the black American experience, the awareness born of the intimate combination of Christian and social myths takes the form of a reaching out of the self, extending into the world with a final interaction of the self with the world.

The present work involves revisiting the rediscovery of myth by Ralph Ellison in a short story whose main protagonist is an ambivalent Southerner, living in the North, but still marked by the mental attitudes, habits of mind, and cultural paradigms of the South. Myths and rituals are part of these paradigms and constitute the connective tissue between art and audiences. But should a distinction be established between ancient myths characterized by their universality and residually oral African American myths that are both the product of a fundamentally collective African culture and the symbolic representation of meaningful life situations shared by a people? Myth, Roland Barthes writes in Mythologies, has the ability to transform the meaning of history. It must first be freed from its historical truth, and then be re-conceptualized to serve another purpose. That is the reason why, straddling the religious and political worlds, the myth of the suffering Black Christ righting the wrongs of the weak developed in opposition to, the myth of white omnipotence; it is also the reason why, with the rise of black militancy, it evolved into the myth of the Black Christ as an avenging deity. At a time when the social and intellectual life of black Americans centered on religion and was shaped by the churches, this racial Christianity represented, in the South at least, the basis of black - intellectual consciousness. Numerous conceptual frameworks are involved in the definitions of myth, varying from the cosmogonic, value-laden discourse explaining the origin and nature of the human universe to Branislaw Malinowski’s functionalist approach to mythmaking as a charter for social action. The emphasis here will be on the importance of black folklore for African American novelists of the fifties, their rejection of the universality of Greco-Roman myths for the combination of Christian and social myths rooted in the particularity of African American experience. The myth of white supremacy can therefore be seen to offer symbolic resources to be used in juxtaposition to the social myths of black American folklore that are meant to counterbalance the Manichean black and white, evil and good dual structure of western mythology.

Consequently, it is not without significance that the universe of African American myths should sustain the signs of black cultural tradition and the art of Signifying, through a message naturally veiled. Taking Bakhtin’s point that culture is formed both out of consensus and dissent, we will turn first to American colonial discourse to view the complexities of early American attitudes on race in a master-slave dialectic before we focus on Ralph Ellison’s short story “King of the Bingo Game” where the story-teller
proceeds to a rewriting of African American myths that refers to the shattering of reality as an eruption of the unconscious. This will open a new perspective on the inner reality of the black image, which Ellison links to the presupposed self-enclosure of the individual.

African American Mythmaking as a Way to Come to Terms with the Master-Slave Dialectic

The beginning of African American myth-making as a way to come to terms with the master-slave dialectic is to be found in the ethnic grounding of American culture in the years before 1800. Ethnic stereotypes in the framing of blackness are worth considering first, as they show how the colonists began shaping racist stories—that evolved into myths—in order to protect their social order and superior status by marginalizing transplanted Africans. The myth of the simpleton Sambo, for instance, was obviously a way for white Americans to assuage their guilt for enslaving Africans in so far as they conveyed the idea that Blacks were by nature inferior beings and simple wits. The myth of white supremacy, and the social rituals that have perpetuated this myth through the substitution of a color caste system to a social caste system account for the socialized ambivalence sentencing blackness to exclusion. An illustration of the psychological meanings of the myth of white supremacy is provided by Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on Virginia*. In 1786 this document gives reasons for believing that the black man is condemned by nature to an inferior status. Not only does Jefferson disparage the black image, arguing that the Negro is ugly, while the whites are of superior beauty, he also cites the mental and moral characteristics of Blacks as obvious proof of their inferiority, reaching the conclusion that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous. The performativity of African Americans in their reaction to the disparagement of the black image is however to be found in the expressive move from the myth of white supremacy to the framing of a black Southern mind with the grins and lies of Sambo hiding behind a black mask.

Within the context of jest books and gallows narratives—that were two major genres of popular culture in early America—myths have come to provide a wide-ranging survey of ethnic representations, all of them aiming to protect white people’s superior status. In early rape narratives, such as *The Life and Dying Speech of Arthur*, published in 1768, we notice at once that the rapist is a black slave. Not only is the narrative filled with ethnic prejudices, but it marginalizes Arthur, the rapist, for moral and sociological reasons. This character is meant to represent a lack of self-control, but also to stand as a threat to hierarchical authority and cause a disruption of the social order. The dramatization of the stereotype of the immoral black slave sets the foundation for the myth of the primitive nature of the black man whose inferiority is inherent in his black whole. In reaction to the stereotypical discourse on the black man’s primitiveness, the emergence of the framing of the black mind of the South and the expressivity of rhetorical masking are to be associated with a performative image of blackness linked to black and blue memory. To be more precise, it is related to black male subject formation as well as to the Blue Man, a nightmarish grotesque being who is both stealthy and ferocious. From a sociocultural standpoint, black Southern male subject formation is to be understood as a confrontation with the blue, scrutinizing eye of the Southern white. While the myth of white supremacy extolling white American values emanates from a providential vision of Caucasian Americans as a Chosen people, African American myths grounded on black
American values reflect a tragicomic vision of life that illustrates African Americans’ resilience of spirit, and “figuration” (Baker, *Turning South Again*) as a mode of resistance. In this regard, myths often have the effect of presenting irony as the only plausible remedial option for expressing a symbolic double vision of blackness. Drawing on black American folklore and storytelling, African American myths are therefore clearly inherited from a residually oral culture relying on collective experiences and values with a hard grip on reality. But they also spring from moral and speculative stories (such as faith in the redemptive power of suffering and patience, the art of dissimulation, the gusto of life and an acute sense of humor). African American myths also capitalize on a subservient behavior pattern due to the unbridged gap between white ideology and black reality. They offer antinomies, embrace hybrid transformations and at the same time participate in the regeneration of cultural identity, they reflect an interactive ethnic mix evoked in *Shadow and Act* as “the group’s will to survive” (172).

The hero of “King of the Bingo Game” is clearly framed and indexed in the South. As such, he is made to behave in a way meant to symbolize a reaction to a dominant discourse while wearing a mask. In the context of black people’s experiences in the South, cultural codes have been associated with the symbolic representations of crucial life situations shared by all. Two moments are simultaneously operating. They are unambiguously for and against white supremacy. Hence, the speculative stories that make up African American myths are both archetypal in pattern and ethnic in cultural content. On the stage, blackface performers parade the idiocies of mythical black rustics: while morality, beauty, refinement and culture are restricted to Caucasians.

As far as African American storytelling is concerned, a blend of residually oral African American myths influenced by the impact of ideological racism can be found, together with a new system of shared symbols constitutive of a network of understanding that informs black consciousness. Just like writers of European descent, writers of African descent have practiced the short story form for capturing highly focused moments with a tragicomic vision of life symbolically inscribed in myths.

### Deconstructing Myth or the Empowerment of the Black Figure in “King of the Bingo Game”

“King of the Bingo Game” is centered on the experience of a nameless black man who sits impatiently in a movie theatre in the North where he lives. He is watching a movie he has already seen three times and keeps waiting for a bingo game to begin. The scene takes place in the early 1940s when this sort of entertainment was very popular. As he has been unable to get a job because he lacks a birth certificate, the protagonist is playing the bingo game in the hope of winning enough money to pay for a doctor to save Laura, a woman he cares for. The bingo game begins and the nameless protagonist eventually achieves bingo. Called up on stage, he is to try his hand at winning the jackpot. For him to do so, the spinning wheel, whose button he has to press, must stop at the double zero after he releases it. But, as he stands on the stage the hero realizes that he is unable to release the button. And so, as long as he forces the wheel to continue spinning, he feels empowered to control his own destiny and Laura’s. While refusing to let go of the button, he forgets who he is and fancies he is the King of the Bingo Game. As a consequence of his refusal to leave the stage, people in the audience fly into a rage while the bingo caller is losing his temper. Eventually, as two policemen manage to wrest the button from the -
protagonist, the wheel spins to a stop on the double zero. Still unaware of what is brewing, and convinced that he has finally won the jackpot, the protagonist is beaming with happiness when he is violently hit in the head and collapses on the stage.

Adopting an original perspective, Ellison draws basically on the machinery of Southern myths, and skillfully combines the myth of the deceptively submissive black Sambo with that of John the human trickster, who knows how to cheat his master and fight back. Leaving aside the performance of black vernacular, what Henry Louis Gates calls Signifying, Ellison proceeds to a re-writing of Southern myths. While the nameless hero is faced with a battle between self-protection and self-sacrificial love for a woman whose life has to be saved, Ellison rhetorically negotiates new frames for blackness. The focus of the pseudo-allegorical story is on an individual—on stage under the lights—whose intense cultural, emotional, mental and physical isolation enables the writer to depict—in a parodic way—the war between reason and irrationality. As the initially naïve Southern character sheds the mask of innocence to acquire the self-assertive language of the one that masters his fate, the framing of blackness is made to progress toward modernity when the black protagonist demonstrates his power to reinvent reality, control the bingo wheel, so that something new and unexpected may arise. Basically, Ellison resorts to mythic realism, the particular sort of magic realism generated from inside the psyche—sometimes referred to as “psychic realism” (Delbaere-Garant 112). This process opens on a questioning of cultural hegemony. It also reflects the idea that culture has passed from Euro-Americans to African Americans. By relating the concept of race to the themes of rules and order, madness, fate and free will, Ellison develops appropriate strategies for overcoming the “hidden signs of racial superiority” (Powell 747) deeply woven in the canonical vision of African American subservience and white omnipotence.

It is first to be noted that the world of “King of the Bingo Game” is governed by a set of rules that somehow symbolize reason. From the beginning, when he chooses to play with five cards (which is not allowed), the nameless black protagonist attempts to break free of the rules and do away with reason. Facing him, the white bingo caller—with his tiresome chattering and excessive gesticulating—functions as a grotesque figure in the narrative. He clearly has a parodic function as in the tales of the African American oral tradition. He is the conceited white man who fails to recognize the black protagonist as a person and constantly refers to him as “boy.” The bingo caller embodies the disguised creature of African American myths bloated with his own power and importance. Cracking jokes and smiling at the crowd, the pomaded man with the microphone can be seen as some kind of freak meant to comment on the war between reason—symbolized by the rules he is expected to enforce—and the irrational, the fantastic that is integrated into the story when the protagonist feels he is being controlled by the bingo wheel. The intrusion of the fantastic corresponds to the depersonification of the black hero haunted and dramatically fractured by his inner conflicts. In Ellison’s re-writing of Southern myths, the black protagonist functions as the eternal thwarted. He stands as the symbol of the irrational twists of circumstance. But, in so doing, he serves as an agent of the world’s irrationality and a reminder of man’s fundamental helplessness.

The way Ellison’s short story revisits black Southern myths with a philosophical approach outlines the transformative power of black Southerners. This brings a new perception of the black image: the bingo rules serve indeed as a proxy for the rules of a white-dominated society, which is the reason why the black protagonist’s determination to break free creates a universe of fictional meanings where blackness no longer connotes
the passivity evoked by the stereotype of the acculturated African American or the acceptance linked to the myth of the dim-wit Sambo. Instead, it stands for the resilience, the astuteness and the will-power of another mythical character: John the human trickster. Thus, by refusing to let go of the button on the spinning wheel, the black protagonist is not just trying to subvert the game. He is symbolically breaking one of the rules governing the society he lives in, convinced as he is that he alone can be in control of his fate. Interestingly, his obstacle-ridden mission to win the jackpot parodies the quest novel since the protagonist’s selfhood—his blackness—which should normally be a central element in the story, is constantly subverted by the projection of people’s desires in the audience. In this context, the protagonist’s liberated subconscious can itself become a new tyranny. Each detail is significant in the short span of the story. For instance, as he is sitting in the movie theater waiting for the bingo game to begin, the black protagonist falls asleep briefly. The dream he has is meant to stand for the racial oppression that he has been experiencing as an African American from the South; it is also an embodiment of the submissive black figure in the Sambo myth. In fact, the choice of breaking free of the bingo rules can be read as a deconstruction of the myth of the slow-minded Southern black. Indeed, when he shakes the man with the microphone away, telling him to simply watch because he wants to show the whole world how to win, the black protagonist is then able to momentarily escape his past and his situation of submission by becoming “King.” As his subconscious erupts through his conscious self, he somehow reaches a transcendent perspective: that of superior knowledge.

When the protagonist yells out to the audience that he wants to show them all how to win the jackpot, he does not just question the validity of the myth of the dim-wit slave but enforces signs of the black man’s artful alternatives to resignation. Ellison’s description of the black protagonist’s discovery of what it is like to feel in control of his own destiny for the first time is part of a quest-for-identity structure. It is as though, when breaking free of the rules, the black protagonist were discovering the meaning of life. In fact, the nameless hero firmly believes that the wheel will control his entire life. The allegorical framing of blackness can be said to progress toward black modernism when the narrator sharply alters perspectives and shifts to a life-enhancing project in resistance, a “stride toward freedom” (Baker, Turning South Again 34). Symbolically speaking, the hero is the only one that has acquired superior representational capabilities. What is suggested here is that although to the outsider all of it looks insane, there is something about the extreme nature of insanity that allows for insights otherwise hidden from view. In fact, by resorting to rhetorical, or dramatic irony as appropriate strategies for questioning the hidden signs of cultural hegemony, Ellison proceeds not merely to a deconstruction of the myth of the subservient black man but to a decentering of the white logos and a rebuilding of the center with a black logos. The emphasis is put on the protagonist, a downtrodden African American from the South who feels as though he had finally been given the opportunity to shape his own destiny. He is no longer in the margin; he himself is the center in a story that raises the issue of how well a man who has been doomed as a descendant of the “sons of Ham” can succeed in controlling his fate in an unfair system.

The process of deconstruction of the myth of “blackness as a negative essence” (Gates, Signifying Monkey 237) is paralleled by the rebuilding of blackness as a presence in a mythic quest of transcendence. Ellison’s short story suggests a possible logocentric reading with a black logos while simultaneously subverting it through the evocation of a moment of transcendence rising from self-discovery. This way of writing is at the core of
the central debates in current African American literary theory, more particularly if we confront Timothy Powell’s view of blackness as metaphysical essentialism with Henry Louis Gates’s opposition to “the idea of a transcendent signified, a belief in an essence called blackness” (Figures 53).

The significance of Ellison’s attempt to empower the character of the naïve, Sambo-like Southern protagonist with the authority of a black logos when he achieves bingo can be understood through the understatement that all knowledge concerning mythmaking is metaphoric. Ellison finds strategies for imposing the Black Figure on the page of white myths and overcoming their hidden signs of racial superiority. The choice he makes of dialectical irony operating as a metaphor of opposites is here particularly suited for illuminating the sociological and philosophical issues at stake in his rephrasing of myths. For instance, as the black hero is on stage refusing to release the button that forces the wheel to continue spinning, the reader’s attention is drawn to the exposition of the myth of white omnipotence along with a de-centering of the white bingo caller and a sudden focus on the black protagonist who ignores the angry crowd and yells back at them: “This is God” (130). The clash of challenging images, like the one of the once assertive white man with the microphone, bowing to a black figure that stands for affirmation, highlights the reversal of opposites. The white bingo caller, who was used to making a fool of the black protagonist as of a simpleton Sambo, is overwhelmed by the black contestant’s sudden empowerment. This contributes to deconstructing a myth where blackness used to connote absence and negativity. Numerous race quotes could be made on this subject, but the hint at the negativity of blackness is undoubtedly introduced by the black protagonist’s remark revealing how much he empathizes with the other African Americans in the audience for experiencing the same sense of self-loathing as he does, and sharing the same shame of being black: “All the Negroes down there were just ashamed because he was black like them. He smiled inwardly, knowing how it was. Most of the time he was ashamed of what the Negroes did himself” (132). However, this quote also reflects the protagonist’s detachment from African Americans’ self-loathing since he admits knowing “how it was,” and his “smiling inwardly” reveals that he is now in a new mindset. The reversal of opposites occurs when the black protagonist rises to a superior status, and looks patronizingly at the white bingo caller, relegating him to the margin: “And because he understood, he smiled again to let the man know that he held nothing against him for being white and impatient” (131-32). The hero’s body language, when gripping the button, brushing the white bingo caller’s hand away and facing the crowd with defiance, indicates that he has mentally transcended racial boundaries. This accounts for the mixture of fascination and fear aroused in the hero who nearly falls fainting into the footlights.

One way to shed light on Ellison’s posture toward myths and stereotypes is to observe how he deals both with memory and the subversion of personal identity. As a matter of fact, the nameless hero is indirectly sent on a quest for transcendence whose final outcome involves penetrating the very kernel of his being. And yet there is a gap separating the original formulation of the myth and the way Ellison’s remakes it. Irony has a special value for sociological thought in the text. In fact, Ellison’s main strategy aims at doing away with the hidden signs of racial superiority through the use of dialectical irony, “a master trope in the discovery and description of ‘the truth’” (Burke 503), which does not consist in having one character opposed to another character, but in having one character become his very opposite. This crisscrossing has a subversive effect
in the story by gradually blurring the line of distinction between the assertive white bingo caller and the submissive black protagonist who eventually has the upper hand by ignoring the white man’s orders. The story-teller offers a confrontational vision of two myths through a shift from the naïve, subservient Sambo to the astute, resilient John, the human trickster. By so doing, Ellison deconstructs the canonical concept of the white logos to reconstruct a mythic appraisal of blackness in a self-discovering act.

**Interpreting Ellison’s Rewriting of Myths in Reference to Slavoj Zizek’s Logic of Internalization of Negativity**

According to William Bell, the myth of the Negro past is a myth that contributes to relegate Black people to a debased social status. This is due to an underlying assumption, derived from the sociological theories of Gunnar Myrdal and E. Franklin Frazier, that culture passes from Euro-Americans to African-Americans whose own cultural values and identity have been negated. If we shift perspectives and read “King of the Bingo Game” from the ideological point of view adopted by Slavoj Zizek in his essay on the paradox of the impossible choice, paying attention to his claim that “the only subversive thing to do when confronted with a power discourse is simply to take it at its word” (237), we may consider that Ellison is aiming at a philosophical rewriting of the myth of the Negro past that corresponds to what Zizek calls “a necessary ‘step back’ from actuality into possibility” (2). Ellison’s remaking of the myth wears the guise of a philosophical and somewhat artificial detachment from the human condition. He does this by grappling with the issues of isolation, fate and freedom and their interplay with the question of race.

The context of American society in the 1940s can be grasped in the broad point Ellison makes about race by opting for a nameless protagonist. It operates like a code conditioning African American cultural signifying. This is a way of illustrating the depersonification of the black man since the protagonist could be any one of the millions of African-Americans who travelled north during the Great Migration out of the South. While it is true that Ellison is telling a story about an African American individual, this man is meant to represent a broader collective. The reality of white dominance in the South is to be understood through dreams, metaphors, or occasional comments from the protagonist whose cultural notion of identity is subverted by the theme of isolation. This intellectual construct is outlined during the episode of the protagonist’s dream. The hero dreams he is a young boy walking on railroad tracks down South. Such a dream is not anecdotal. It is based on an incident in the protagonist’s childhood—he used to run in front of trains on the tracks before jumping off to the side. However, in the dream he is having now, it is with terror that he sees the train leaving the track and pursuing him right down the middle of the street with all the white people laughing at him as he is running for his life. The protagonist’s emotion is so intense that he is screaming in real life as well as in his dream—so much so that the men sitting next to him complain. The nameless hero undoubtedly experiences intense isolation as he feels apart from the other participants. And yet, through his dream, he is able to incorporate some elements of shared history into his sense of the present where the train he has just dreamt of stands as a metaphor of the oppressive system he is trying to escape. As the story progresses, the protagonist steps back from what is real, and feels drawn to what is possible. The narrator notes that as soon as the nameless hero (acting as John the human trickster)
steps on the stage, “he felt a profound sense of promise, as though he were about to be repaid for all the things he’d suffered all his life” (129). Symbolically speaking, the hero’s move from sitting in the darkness of the hall to standing in the glaring light of the stage corresponds to his mental shift from negativity and “radical decenteredness” (Zizek 68) to self-consciousness and transcendence.

Now, if we connect the mention of the hero’s suffering to his being black, we realize that the bingo wheel represents the symbol of what is possible. It is the means for the protagonist to transcend the real, rise above his past and be reborn since he can then discard his old name—a name originally bestowed on his grandfather by a white slave owner. In opposition to it, the name he chooses for himself—“The-man-who-pressed-the-button-who-held-the-prize-who-was-the-King-of-Bingo” (133)—is predicated on the bingo wheel that is a stand-in for fate. The choice of this inventive name entails awareness of the philosophical nature of the elements that refigure the myth of black consciousness, intertextually related to the Hegelian notion of simple force, considering that “force driven back into itself must express itself” (136). Rhetorically speaking, symbols, imagery, and allegory combine in the text to give evidence of the modernization of the black hero. Thus, the emphasis is put on the growth of the black protagonist’s individual powers. As he becomes the man who can control the wheel of fortune, he acquires the elements of the extended man, in other words the man endowed with extensive powers mastering Fate: “He was running the show, by God! They had to react to him, for he was their luck” (132). He does not merely take the form of the self-contained hero who violates the stereotyped role of the subservient individual as it is set aside for black people in the white society of the South. He turns into the superman who is a central figure in modern America. In addition to changing the original perspective of the myth of the Negro Past, Ellison calls attention to some aspects of the trickster in the protagonist’s performance and unpredictability while he is on stage. The hero’s astuteness and body language as he pushes the white official away and keeps pressing the button nervously while yelling at the raging crowd are significant. A double of the trickster John, he can all of a sudden manifest super powers and be turned into a superblackman through his rejection of the real and his choice for the possible. Ellison borrows from mythic realism to reconstruct a vision where the African American individual is close to the universe of the possible with the revelation about the powers over life and death he thinks he has but is unable to share. He is undoubtedly close to Kant’s view of the transcendental subject that is known only through the concept of an immanent and unfolding order in nature.

The underlying quest-for-identity structure that fits within the remake of the myth of the Negro Past is served by several literary devices. The most prominent is the use of a jazzy style whose irregular beats, improvisation and syncopation connect with the inconsistencies in the behavior of the nameless protagonist of the story, a young man from the South whose social status is key to understanding he is the product of larger forces. There is a meta-narrative at play that draws on different styles, reflecting the musical form of jazz, to express the protagonist’s beaten-down, suffering self, his isolation as he is misunderstood by the audience, his attempt to alter his destiny, his hope to forgo his African American identity, give himself a new name “King of the Bingo Game” so as to reach a sense of self, his descent into madness, and eventually his final collapse. Thus, using a complex mix of voice pitch, intonation contours and glides, word—and phrase—rhythm, Ellison first depicts the protagonist as fully isolated in the midst of the...
crowd. He is a poor, hungry man sitting miserably in a movie theatre, craving desperately for a handful of his neighbors' peanuts but nobody pays attention to him. People just see through him. He is the void, an invisible man to them. His destitution can be seen as an echo to the deprivation of the acculturated African American of the Southern myth. The rhythm is slow, illustrating the difficulty of attempting to break free of the rules of a white-dominated society. Then a shift occurs through the move from realism to surrealism with successive repeats of the main theme of isolation / destitution with some variations as we are left to probe into the protagonist's consciousness. We are not only led to share his dream sequence, but also allowed to sense the interaction between the hero and the spinning wheel, and made to react at the rhythmic and vivid descriptions of how “the whole audience had somehow entered him and was stamping its feet in his stomach” (133).

What marks the break in the perception of a symbolic rewriting of the myth of the Negro Past is that Ellison’s short story deals with a subverted personal identity. The protagonist is sent on a quest whose final outcome involves discovering that he himself is, from the beginning, implicated in the object of his quest. This self-discovering act is complicated and inconclusive in so far as the lack of collective memory involves the fabrication of characters in the crowd that could be considered as ‘replicants’ (borrowing the word and the image from fantasy films, such as Ridley Scott’s), that is to say as beings virtually identical to surrounding people but differing from them because of their naivety and altered emotional responses. In so far as these characters are not their true selves, they are unaware of their status as ‘replicants,’ even though there are other African Americans in the audience. When we read about all the Negroes in the audience being ashamed because the man on stage was black like them, and of how it was for him, most of the time ashamed too of what Negroes did, we are to understand that if the protagonist empathizes with the African Americans in the bingo hall it is because he is experiencing the same self-loathing for “the encounter with a zero image” (Baker, Blues 158). The other African Americans in the crowd are clearly used as doubles to mirror the protagonist’s feeling of shame at being black and they amplify it by turning this self-loathing into a communal attitude. In the tradition of African American storytelling, indications are given of acculturation to a Euro-American ethos. Although the writer invites the reader to diagnose the position of an African American individual in a society under white dominance, he shifts the emphasis away from race by endowing his nameless hero with universality. None of his features is really his own; even his fantasies are artificially planted. What characterizes the protagonist’s move as philosophical is always his step back from what is real in order to find what is possible. It involves, first, the power to abstract from his starting point—exemplified by his attempt to break free of the bingo rules—then his determination to gather all the transcendental conditions of possibility. The question is: how far can a downtrodden African American individual control his own destiny? At this point, it is important to note that, in the text, the perception of transcendence accompanies the representation of a transcendental object. This object is the bingo wheel. For the protagonist, it is “God” and makes him feel like a “King.” As he presses the button controlling the spinning wheel, he gets hold of a positive phenomenal entity, res cogitans, the Thing which thinks. In other words, as the protagonist believes he can control his destiny by controlling the wheel of fortune—that is to say as long as he refuses to let go—an interaction occurs between the spinning wheel and the protagonist. In short, he renders self-present the wheel of fortune that is the thing in him which thinks.
The hero exorcizes the dark demons of the past when he is on the stage under the lights, after going through a symbolic interplay of light and darkness. The glaring light of the stage constitutes a space where the black protagonist is able to experience revelation, where a literal shift occurs from entrapment in the myth of the subservient black man deprived of cultural heritage, to the expression of transcendence as he controls the spinning of the wheel of fortune. When seen from the perspective of the rites of the black Southern mind, the protagonist no longer knows who he is because he does not possess the imaginative version of himself—a feeling the protagonist of Michelle Cliff’s “Screen Memory” also experiences. It is at this very moment when he thinks he fully controls the wheel of fortune and feels most powerful that Ellison’s hero realizes he has no idea of who he is. This accounts for his asking the crowd desperately: “Who am I?” (133). In fact, Ellison capitalizes on this sudden amnesia to question and rewrite the myth of the Negro Past. When he writes “It was a sad, lost feeling to lose your name, and a crazy thing to do” (132), Ellison represents the protagonist’s rejection of his old identity as a refusal of the construct of white culture whose transmission he objects to, not merely for himself but for the other African Americans in the audience. Indeed, when he calls them “poor nameless bastards” (133), it is not a feeling of acculturation that predominates but the expression of a total loss of the hero’s symbolic identity.

Conclusion

The different levels of consciousness within a myth cannot be separated out by the native mind. It is rather that everything happens as if the levels were provided with different codes, each being used according to the needs of the moment, and according to its particular capacity, to transmit the same message, as Claude Lévi-Strauss argues (27). What is crucial in Ellison’s rewriting of African American myths in “King of the Bingo Game” is indeed the choice he makes of new philosophical codes to grasp deeper levels of consciousness. He emphasizes the moment of externalization, with the protagonist’s jump into the unknown when he passes to the act, and shifts from subservience to transcendence as he feels empowered to control the rules of the game.

The black protagonist everybody had been ignoring becomes visible the moment he traverses the path from individual subject to “He or It (the Thing) Which Thinks” (Zizek 35) and is forced to assume that he is not what he thought himself to be, but “somebody-something else” (Zizek 29). The inherent logic of the story is that the protagonist seems to exist only as a ‘replicant,’ that is to say as a clone, an estranged self deprived of his identity. The text provides a brief survey of his personal mythologies. It is as though he went through a total recall of his life experience and discovered the meaning of life represented by hunger, depression, and liquor-induced mental experience. The black protagonist wants to share his great secret with the world—how to win, how to escape his past and his situation by becoming “King”—but his perception of reality including the actuality of his innermost self has been blurred by a society where white dominance is to be understood through dreams. Being nameless, the black hero represents a broader collective, although he stands as the symbol of an unfortunate individual. The paradox here is that the subversive effect creates the blurring of the line of distinction between humans and symbols that hinges on the perception of reality—including the protagonist, the audience, the wheel of fortune spun by Fate. “King of the Bingo Game” alternates
between the protagonist's madness and the surrounding reality. However, Ellison takes the position that one can find truth in madness.

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ABSTRACTS

Partant du postulat que les nouvelles afro-américaines instruisent leur lecteur, cet article s'attache à la réinterprétation du mythe inscrit dans le contexte du vécu afro-américain que propose Ellison. L'écrivain tente de déterminer si la réécriture du mythe comme code culturel donne naissance à une nouvelle image du Noir proche de la vision, chère à Houston Baker, de la négrité en marche vers la modernité. Ce but est atteint en variant les perspectives, en repositionnant le centre et la marge, en liant l'accès à la transcendance à la possibilité d'une découverte identitaire et en associant la construction de l'essentialité noire à la modernisation de l'image du héros noir. La dimension ethnoculturelle du mythe mise en exergue par Ellison doit dès lors être comprise comme un mode d'évitement, grâce à l'ambivalence d'un double-jeu, des contraintes imposées aux Noirs par le contexte ethnocentrique de la société blanche américaine. On argumente, sans surprise, que dans la nouvelle d'Ellison, les mythes sociaux afro-américains sont issus du folklore noir où le faible se joue de l'opresseur, parvient à échapper au système et à marquer une distance vis à vis du monde des puissants.

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