Ellison, Ralph

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Related Entries: Black Americans and Whiteness; Psychoanalysis of Whiteness; White Supremacy

1 Introduction

When his writing is mentioned in educational literatures, it is Ralph Ellison's (1952/1995) acclaimed novel, *Invisible Man*, that is most often referenced. Considerably less attention has been paid to Ellison's (1953/1995, 1986) two collections of essays, *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*. In addition to powerful reflections on and insights into literature, black experience, and democracy in the United States, these volumes offer resources for a compelling account of white racial identity (see Lensmire, 2017). Ellison believed that scapegoating rites or rituals were crucial to the creation and maintenance of white American selves, and that at the center of these scapegoating rites were black people.

2 Scapegoating, Stereotypes and White Racial Identity

In his readings of American literature and popular culture, Ellison drew special attention to racist stereotypes and caricatures. Ellison (1953/95) thought it a mistake to conceive of such stereotypes and caricatures as merely incorrect information or to imagine that their significance was exhausted in their role as "simple racial clichés introduced into society by a ruling class to control political and economic realities" (p. 28). For Ellison, racist stereotypes should also be recognized as a particular example or instance of a broader category of scapegoating rituals in which white people participated, as part of creating and maintaining their sense of themselves as white. Another example of scapegoating that Ellison (1986) analyzed was lynching, in which white people – in contrast to the symbolic killing performed by racist representation – literally killed black people in a "primitive blood rite of human sacrifice" (p. 177).

For Ellison, scapegoating rituals had three parts or moments (see Eddy, 2003). In the first, the scapegoat was thought of as part of or as a stand-in for the group. Then, in the second moment, the scapegoat was separated or pushed out from the group, was declared an Other. Finally, in the third moment, the group experienced a renewed and strengthened sense of its own identity.

In his analysis of scapegoating rituals in the lives of poor Southern white farmers during Jim Crow, Ellison argued that it was exactly the fact that the social and material conditions of these white farmers' lives were so *similar* to those of their black neighbors that caused anxiety for them. What if they weren't actually different from and superior to black people? Sitting, as they did, at the bottom of white hierarchies of social worth and standing, all that these impoverished farmers had going for them was their *whiteness*, which they asserted (and reasserted, again and again) in scapegoating rituals. They needed to reassert their whiteness because it was not secure, given their closeness to blackness. In other words, these white farmers needed ways to reassure themselves and others of their whiteness and superiority. As Ellison (1986) put it:

> In rationalizing their condition, they required victims, real or symbolic, and in the daily rituals which gave support to their cherished myth of white supremacy, anti-Negro stereotypes and epithets served as symbolic substitutions for the primitive blood rite of human sacrifice to which they resorted in times of racial tension. (p. 177)

Ellison thought it fortunate that the "Southern rituals of race were usually confined to the realm of the symbolic" (p. 177). However, when these rituals did not suffice in reassuring white people of their whiteness and superiority, the lynch mob did its work.

Ellison did not believe that it was only poor white people who engaged in scapegoating. He also analyzed the crucial role that scapegoating black people played in the creation of the United States. Ellison (1986) thought of the Constitution as a sacred document and a "script by which we seek to act out the drama of democracy, and the stage upon which we enact our roles" (p. 330). However, for Ellison, the Founding Fathers' actions clashed straightaway with their noble spoken lines. He argued that the Founding Fathers balked in the face of the economic consequences of dismantling slavery and retreated from the hard work and uncertainty that accompanied the pursuit of democracy:

> At Philadelphia, the Founding Fathers were presented the fleeting opportunity of mounting to the very peak of social possibility afforded by democracy. But after ascending to within a few yards of the summit they

paused, finding the view to be one combining splendor with terror... if there was radiance and glory in the future that stretched so grandly before them, there was also mystery and turbulence and darkness astir in its depths... So, having climbed so heroically, they descended and laid a foundation for democracy at a less breathtaking altitude, and in justification of their failure of nerve before the challenge of the summit, the Founding Fathers committed the sin of American racial pride. (pp. 334–335)

In other words, the Founding Fathers scapegoated black people and claimed that slavery would continue, and that actual democracy was impossible, because of the inferiority of black people (rather than because of the Founding Fathers' own inadequacies and failure of nerve).

This early betrayal of what Ellison thought of as America's sacred creed of equality had serious consequences for the generations of Americans that followed. Obviously, the consequences for black Americans were profound and horrific, including slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, mass incarceration, and racist representation (seemingly without end). However, Ellison thought that there were negative consequences for white Americans, as well. He believed that the continual scapegoating of black people required to reassure white people of their own superiority and to convince them of the goodness of the United States caused white people to live in a fog; that this continual scapegoating made white people unable to see themselves and their country clearly.

Ellison imagined white people as caught or stuck in a dilemma. He thought that, on the one hand, white people believed in equality and wanted to live in a society characterized by it. On the other hand, white people knew that U.S. society featured, not equality, but massive inequality. Ellison thought that scapegoating was the way that most white Americans dealt with this dilemma, this conflict of desiring equality and knowing that the United States did not pursue or live up to this ideal. Instead of taking up antiracist action to change society, white people scapegoated black people in order to get temporary relief from the tension between their noble spoken lines and their ignoble practices. Or as Ellison put it:

Whatever else the Negro stereotype might be as a social instrumentality, it is also a key figure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma arising between his democratic beliefs and certain antidemocratic practices, between his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not... Perhaps the object of the stereotype is not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man. (pp. 28, 41)

3   Conclusion

Ellison's writing on white racial identities makes at least two important contributions to work on whiteness and race in education. First, his work illuminates the significance of people of color to the ongoing social production of white racial identities. Since white people in the United States lead segregated lives, it is often assumed that people of color are not present in those lives. Ellison helps us understand that white people are always already in relationships with people of color and "know" them, even if these relationships and knowledge are rooted in scapegoating and stereotypes.

Second, Ellison's work contributes to our understanding of the persistence, functions, and effects of stereotypes. Stereotypes are typically conceptualized as representations of the Other that support oppressive racial systems, by justifying racism and violence against people of color. While this is an important function of stereotypes, Ellison's theorizing of stereotypes as essential to white people's sense of themselves as white in the United States helps us better understand why they are so tenacious. It also creates a space for us to consider the costs of scapegoating and stereotypes for white people. This is not meant to ignore the oppression, misery, and death that scapegoating and stereotypes have produced and continue to produce for people of color. However, Ellison's conceptualization of scapegoating rituals and stereotypes points to conflicts and struggles that attend playing the role of white American. A better understanding of these struggles should inform critical pedagogical work on race with white people.

References

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