Well before the hapless protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) is chased underground, his grandfather leaves his family with these dying words:

"Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in Reconstruction. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open."

Underlying the grandfather's advice was a recognition that duplicity was the best foil for the treachery of white folks. His final admonition bewilders and terrifies the family, and the grandchildren are quickly whisked out of the room and told to forget his deathbed wishes. Four hundred pages later, blindsided by a succession of deceptions, each more damning than the last, the bedraggled protagonist has had the naiveté knocked out of him, and he seems finally to heed his grandfather's advice. Squatting in a forgotten room deep underground somewhere in Harlem, the invisible man collects on his inheritance, siphoning electricity from the grid to power 1,369 lightbulbs that illuminate his abode night and day. He exacts a small measure of revenge upon a world that has tripped him up at every turn by hustling the utility company, which cannot figure out why thousands of kilowatts of energy appear to drain mysteriously into a bottomless pit. He also assumes the mantle of a spy in the underground war his grandfather had long waged against white folks.
The grandfather in Ellison’s novel asked his grandchildren to practice a particular form of deception in the African American cultural tradition: wearing the false mask of deference, or, if you like, thinking like Nat Turner but shuffling like Uncle Tom. The art of subterfuge, like any high art worth its salt, has taken a variety of other forms, from the revolutionary and redemptive to the playful and irreverent: the embellishments of “swapping lies,” the playful ploy of an inside joke told within earshot of the boss, the subtle symbolism of a clever allegory, the subversive hidden messages in some spirituals, the double entendre in a dirty joke, and the stories of vengeful ghosts used as proxies for the storyteller’s own grievances. Over the course of American history, these forms have adapted and shifted as American society has adopted new racial mores and as the repercussions for speaking out have changed, but the underlying impulse to let one’s true self evade detection has remained culturally relevant and politically necessary for African Americans in the United States. Even in the present, certain strains of African American culture still turn to deception of one kind or another, for even though the need for cover and plausible deniability is less immediate in the twenty-first century, the disarming effect of deception—its tendency to catch its prey unawares—remains remarkably effective in undermining systems of oppression.

A young Richard Wright dabbled in this subversive tradition in the 1920s when, as he recounts in *Black Boy* (1945), he handed a note he had written to a Memphis librarian that read, “Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H. L. Mencken?” The libraries in Memphis, like its public parks and playgrounds, were off limits to African Americans, so Wright borrowed a white coworker’s library card to check out books. To perform convincingly the black “boy” on an errand getting books for a white man, he “doffed [his] hat, stood a respectful distance from the desk, looked as unbookish as possible, and waited for the white patrons to be taken care of.” The librarian eyed him suspiciously, despite his performance of deference and ignorance, but she eventually handed him a pair of books by Mencken. Wright carefully penned “nigger boy” on his note rather than just
“boy” to avoid raising suspicions that he had written the note, and his subversions—subversions in the plural because he repeated this ploy again and again—opened up worlds unknown to him: “new ways of looking and seeing” and “nothing less than a sense of life itself.” Through his literary awakening, he understood what feelings had been denied to him as a black man in the United States, and he sensed that by reading novels he somehow possessed a secret life—a dangerously secret life—but one that would take him far from the Jim Crow South.

Under the strictures of slavery and Jim Crow, African Americans knew that the mere mention of a cruel master or a lynching or a planter who swindled sharecroppers—much less an open condemnation of these injustices—could and often did have deadly consequences. In 1892 a mob in Fort Madison, South Carolina, lynched three black men for the minor social transgression of being “saucy to white people,” and in 1918 a brutal Georgia mob gathered to lynch Mary Turner, who was pregnant with her third child, for making “unwise remarks” about the lynching of her husband. In order to open up spaces to contest white supremacy, African Americans turned to institutions like the church, fraternal orders, and civil rights organizations certainly, but they also developed the art of subterfuge to undermine white supremacy, expose the hypocrisy of American democracy, and disrupt systems of power. Moral appeals to the nation’s conscience crowd the historiography of the black freedom struggle, but I envision a more expansive and culturally grounded understanding of African American political traditions—one that not only listens to the calls for national redemption that Martin Luther King Jr. shouted from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial but also heeds the subversive possibilities in a blues singer’s moan.

The art of subterfuge is suffused throughout African American literature, music, and film but also in the everyday lived experiences of African Americans, their folklore, and, for some, their very dispositions. Here, I drift between the historical and cultural. I peer into and across genres. I even temporarily pass from the realm of the living to that of ghosts suspended between this life and the next. The lines between these narratives may get fuzzy at times, but my point is not to
collapse real differences between the work of artists like Ellison and the lives of historical actors but rather to recognize that subversive acts are planned, constructed, and carefully laid out creations regardless of who crafts them. The rhyming between so-called high art and the everyday is far from accidental because, at its very foundations, subversion is a cultural sensibility mutually reinforced by life and art.

In making the case for subterfuge, I do not wish to diminish the importance of the more sincere and direct modes of criticism that have come to represent the African American freedom struggle, nor do I intend to impose an artificial binary onto a complex and nuanced political tradition. Rather, I map out these two modes of political critique because the emphasis on sincerity—that is, making a direct, moral argument for racial justice intended to appeal to the collective conscience of the nation—often overshadows less legible forms of resistance and antiracist critique that are sometimes the only viable (and safe) option available to African Americans. These momentary inversions of power, though fleeting, disrupt racial hierarchies, and they create private spaces beyond the white gaze for African Americans who are “in the know” to reimagine the world on their own terms and for each other. The privacy of an inside joke may seem trivial on the surface, but against the backdrop of a society set on the destruction of African American lives, “privacy,” which might be better described as “sanctuary,” ensures the integrity of the soul.

Scholarship by James Scott and others on “hidden transcripts”—the forms of everyday resistance to hegemonic systems of power most accessible to subalterns—has already demonstrated the political value of politics from below, but I carry this analysis one step further. Subterfuge also cultivates and celebrates a creative agility and clever wit that, in addition to its political value as social criticism, is intrinsically valuable for the pure pleasure of invention. In his introduction to Hokum (2006), the novelist and poet Paul Beatty divides African American writing into two canons that somewhat align with the two political modes (subterfuge and sincerity) I describe above: “One canon consists of songs, folktales, and insider apothegms that are deeply and invariably funny, whereas the other...comes out of a tradition of
abolitionist 'And ain’t I an intellect?' activism aimed, then as now, at whites.” To Beatty, writing in the abolitionist tradition is largely concerned with what white readers think, but the “deeply and invariably funny” canon, while not entirely impervious to the outside world, provides some tragic-comic insulation for African Americans and some not-so-sober truth telling. This style of humor, Beatty contends, may rough you up a bit but also brings “that ear-to-ear grin you flash to the crowd [like an out-matched boxer] to convince them that if you’re laughing, then you ain’t hurt.” The grin and the laughter are not merely cover for a pained grimace—not merely a means of survival, not entirely an artful disguise—because some part of that ear-to-ear grin is genuine delight.

When I speak of the art of subterfuge, I imagine something approximating a controlled, weaponized double consciousness—not a consciousness imposed from without, not the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” that Du Bois described in The Souls of Black Folk (1903). This is not to deny the ways that double consciousness has pervaded much of the African American experience, especially since anticipating how others perceive the black body remains critical for survival, but rather to consider the ways that the critical distance produced by doubleness can be wielded against white supremacy. A controlled double consciousness flips the script on the white rejection of the blackness at the core of US society. By “agree[ing] ‘em to death and destruction,” as the invisible man’s grandfather endorses, these performances of doubleness are no longer the “two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” that Du Bois lamented. Instead, these seemingly agreeable grins transform the pitiable victims of double aims into wily shapeshifters and masked tricksters who no longer suffer from double aims, despite being two-faced—in the most admirable sense of the term. The two-ness of these clever tricksters, well-documented and affectionately unmasked by Zora Neale Hurston, Lawrence Levine, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Robin Kelley, and others, is a product of an unwavering and exacting artifice that, as Beatty points out, may take aim at whites but also revels in black pleasure.
To some extent, elements of the trickster tradition, and subterfuge more generally, have slipped below the radar by design. Humor, for instance, has a tendency to disguise its critiques and to disarm an otherwise unsympathetic audience through laughter. In the African American cultural tradition, the art of subterfuge favors heavily cloaked subversions, but has also included thinly veiled subversions where one’s intentions peek through the seams. The thinner the veil, the more potentially dangerous the act of subterfuge, but part of the lure of pushing the limits of one’s cover—perhaps letting the icy glare of the eyes peering out from behind the mask betray a demure smile—is the thrill of destabilizing white folks’ sense of the world, making them wonder, question, doubt, and therefore suspect, but never know for sure, if they are the butt of a joke. The danger of white retaliation (or, should I say, the danger of unlimited shamelessness?) remains ever present. The dupe, once his suspicions are raised, may elect to allow real and imagined subversions to stand, in an effort to save face rather than suffer further humiliation. In fact, responding with retaliation would implicitly recognize disturbances in the racial hegemony and undermine the very logic of white supremacy. After all, how could one maintain white supremacy and admit to being bested by the wit and intelligence of those assumed to be inferiors?

Slave masters, for instance, might have delivered reassuring, paternalistic salves about their “civilizing mission” by day, but in the stillness of night, they might have lain awake in terror, wondering whether their slaves would slit their throats in their sleep. What exposed the fallacies of paternalism was precisely that suspicion on the part of whites that enslaved people were actually quite dissatisfied with their lot in life, suspicions that grew with every fawning grin and every “yes, ma’am” or “yes, sir.” Slaveholders had good reason to be wary, too. They were confronted with the standing threat of slave insurrections but also with everyday forms of subterfuge, from poisoned food and missing household items to absent field hands and broken farm tools. They were particularly wary of any gathering of enslaved people unmonitored by whites, especially religious gatherings. Even so, whites often mistook treachery for piety, not because spirituality was
any less heartfelt among the enslaved, but because religious gatherings often doubled as sites for this-worldly social organizing, and because the divisions between sacred and secular were less pronounced in the African American religious tradition. For instance, some of the spirituals that enslaved people sang to affirm their faith in a just and righteous God carried hidden meanings. The more literal religious messages of salvation and hope played a significant role in sustaining enslaved people through difficult times, but lyrics like “Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus/Steal away, steal away home/I ain’t got long to stay here” could also articulate a subversive desire to be free or even signal a plan to steal oneself away to freedom. “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” too, slipped between the literal desire for salvation and a figurative desire to escape slavery. In “Go Down, Moses,” the lyric “let my people go” hardly concealed enslaved people’s hatred of bondage in expressing a righteous demand for freedom, and yet by singing this spiritual enslaved people could plausibly tell whites they were simply worshiping from the Good Book.

By invoking the Old Testament story of the Israelites—God’s chosen people enslaved in Egypt—and by affirming the righteousness of a just God, enslaved African Americans gave divine sanction to their double message of otherworldly salvation and this-worldly freedom. They articulated, in coded language decipherable only to one another, an alternative to the dominant narrative about American democracy constructed by whites. The master narrative of American history rendered African Americans invisible and marginal—the objects of a history not their own, a problem, an unsightly blemish on an exceptional nation. But for enslaved African Americans, singing about their intent to escape from bondage allowed them to retain some control over their lives. Beseeching their just God to free them from their chains laid bare the profound injustice rotting the core of American society and revealed that their struggle for freedom provided the best chance the nation had to confront its original sin of slavery.

Since the spiritual lives of the enslaved were often less clearly disentangled from their secular selves, the duality of the Black Church unsurprisingly found expression in African American folk culture. Just
as the Church could slip seamlessly between its commitment to spir­
itual uplift and the struggle for freedom, folk culture provided enter­
tainment but also tools of subversion that African Americans could
bring to bear on their everyday lives. What might seem, on the surface,
to be just the teasing banter and storytelling more playfully referred to
as “swapping lies” could also contain strategies for surviving with one’s
dignity intact, impart community values and morals, express deeper
social critiques, and help people cope with all the ways life can be a
lowdown dirty shame.

An allegory from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935)—
about the gopher who found himself in a court with a turtle for a judge,
turtles for lawyers, turtles for witnesses, and a twelve-turtle jury—
sets a scene that loosely resembles just about any American courtroom
at the time, if one substitutes turtles for white people and the gopher
for a black defendant. And yet gophers and turtles provide just enough
personal distance from all-too-real all-white juries and white judges,
lawyers, and witnesses to crack a joke. In court, the gopher, unlike
an actual black defendant, asks the turtle judge if he can come back
another day and then “escused hisself from de place.” Even though
African Americans standing before a judge couldn’t simply “escuse”
themselves from a rigged courtroom the way the gopher could, the
allegory skewers the American justice system. And, in keeping with
the art of subterfuge, the gopher says he will return another day, pre­
sumably when the courtroom is less stacked against him, but perhaps,
instead, he has just slipped the yoke. Perhaps he has no intention of
coming back at all.

This story about the turtles and the gopher, like the desire for
freedom expressed in the spirituals, might be dismissed as the wish­
ful thinking of a daydream and nothing more, but the act of crafting
and telling (or singing) possesses far more value than mere talk or
idle chatter. Ellison, for instance, recognized the psychological and
material benefits that subterfuge could provide. The ingenuity of
African American folk wisdom runs through much of his essays and
fiction, including “Flying Home” (1944), his short story about a black
pilot training in rural Alabama to fight in World War II. The pilot,
Todd, flies too high—too close to the sun—and just as he tries to pull the plane out of a tailspin, a buzzard hits his windshield, causing him to crash into a field being plowed by a black sharecropper named Jefferson. To Todd, who is too citified and northern for his own good, especially down south, Jefferson embodies precisely that shameful, backward image of blackness he wants to leave behind when he soars through the air in his plane. As Todd worries about the humiliation he will endure in front of his white officers, Jefferson tries to take Todd’s mind off his troubles, swapping lies and cracking jokes while his son goes for help. Although Todd initially mistakes Jefferson’s kindness for mockery, the sharecropper—an older, southern man still tied to the land, whose sense of time comes from the position of the sun, not from a watch—ends up saving the pilot from a white man who kills African Americans for sport.

With Todd’s fall from the sky, Ellison transparently alludes to the ancient Greek myth of Icarus. In that parable, Icarus’s father, Daedalus, constructs a pair of wings for him to escape Crete, but when Icarus fails to heed his father’s warnings and flies too close to the sun, the wax holding the wings together melts, sending Icarus plummeting to the sea. Unlike Icarus, whose death serves as a warning against hubris and disobeying elders, Todd’s fate is not death, nor is his transgression simply an inflated sense of pride. Yes, Todd looks down his nose at Jefferson, but in Ellison’s more forgiving hands, Todd is a lost soul alienated from his own sense of self and the black community—a black man who too often sees himself through the white gaze and judges himself against impossible white standards. Through Jefferson’s interventions, Todd is redeemed after his fall. By the final lines of the story, Todd sheds his preoccupation with measuring up to white expectations and finds himself “lifted out of his isolation, back into the world of men,” by which Ellison means back into the African American community.

Ellison most acutely departs from the Icarus myth through a story within the story. To take Todd’s mind off his injured ankle and damaged plane, Jefferson spins a “lie”—a boastful tall tale—about the time he died and sprouted wings up in heaven. Despite being in God’s
good graces—being that he was in heaven and all—black angels like Jefferson have to wear a special harness, and only the strongest black angels can still fly while wearing it. Jefferson has no interest in wearing a harness and letting the wings God gave him go to waste, so he soars unharnessed around heaven, sometimes showing off by flying with just one wing, flying so fast he even knocks the tips off some stars and scares the white angels. To prevent heaven from descending into chaos, Saint Peter—"that old white man"—eventually boots him out of heaven with just a parachute and a map of Alabama.

Todd thinks Jefferson is mocking him for being foolish enough to dream of being a war hero flying planes abroad, but, in fact, Todd has become so out of tune with his folk-culture roots that he can't decipher the layers of meaning underneath Jefferson's "lie." Although Jefferson readily admits, with a smile, that he can't be so sure of the veracity of his lie "on account of it took place when I was dead," at its core lies a depressing yet reassuring truth: whites are just too afraid of being outdone by African Americans to allow them to compete unencumbered by whatever "harness" whites might conjure up. Even so, when the white angels gather and laugh at Jefferson's inglorious departure through the pearly gates, he snaps: "Well, you done took my wings. And you puttin' me out. You got charge of things so's I can't do nothin' about it. But you got to admit just this: While I was up here I was the flyin'est son-of-a-bitch what ever hit heaven!" Jefferson, in fact, flips the script on Daedalus's warning to Icarus. Todd can't reasonably demand that the white officers allow black pilots to fight in the war, just as no amount of pleading could convince Saint Peter to spare Jefferson the humiliation of being expelled from heaven. Todd can't erase his humiliation or stop whites from seeing in the plane crash the failures of an entire race, nor can he silence their cruel laughter. Yet Jefferson gives Todd the gift of recognizing that his white officers repeatedly postpone the deployment of black pilots, not because they doubt their abilities, but because they worry that their abilities will shatter their own illusions about white racial superiority. They worry that Todd might actually be "the flyin'est son-of-a-bitch" in the US Air Force.
Todd, however, is slow in coming to this realization. He lashes out at Jefferson for seeming to laugh at his predicament and his shame, but shortly after hearing Jefferson’s story, Todd hallucinates that he sees Jefferson holding another tiny Jefferson in his hand: Jefferson in miniature is belly laughing while the “real” Jefferson gazes blankly into the distance. Still reeling from his twisted ankle, Todd quickly becomes distracted by the throbbing pain before making sense of this peculiar vision. What Todd sees without quite understanding it just yet—his moments of clarity occur precisely when he teeters on the brink of hallucination—is the mask of remoteness that Jefferson wears to cover his true self, belly laughing at the absurdities of white supremacy. Or, perhaps the belly laughing is the mask that Jefferson wears so that he can maintain his distance from the humiliation he jokes about. As Ellison explains, “It was as though [Jefferson] held his words at arm’s length before him to avoid their destructive meaning.”

Echoes of tiny Jefferson’s belly laughing return at the end of “Flying Home” when Todd, restrained by a straitjacket and literally under the heel of a red-faced Alabama racist, bursts into uncontrollable, hysterical laughter. (Todd is restrained because, upon hearing that a black pilot has crashed a plane onto his land, the white planter, Dabney Graves, called orderlies from the asylum to put Todd away, reasoning that “you can’t let the niggah git up that high without him going crazy.”) In laughing out loud—in a white man’s face, no less—Todd makes audible the laughter of tiny Jefferson, who was only visible and audible in Todd’s hazy vision. Graves becomes even angrier when Todd’s loud, albeit anguished, laugh so flagrantly breaks the rules of Jim Crow etiquette. Todd is breaking in another way, too—the way a comedian does when she laughs at her own joke, letting the performative veneer of her routine peel back just enough to reveal a truer self. Todd has not yet honed the art of wearing the mask, nor is he equipped to keep his truer self hidden as his deepest fears begin to materialize before his eyes.

Acutely aware of his vulnerability and an overwhelming feeling of isolation, Todd once again looks to Jefferson’s ingenuity to save him from destruction at the hands of white folks, and Jefferson delivers,
convincing Graves that he and his son, not the white orderlies, should take Todd away on the stretcher. Once the trio has gone a ways from Graves, a hand gently wipes the sweat from Todd’s face, a kind gesture that lets him feel “lifted out of his isolation, back into the world of men.” Graves had killed five black men because, as Jefferson says, they “thought they was men,” but removed from the white world both physically and mentally, Todd enters a world where his dignity remains intact. Early in the story, when his disdain for Jefferson blinds him to the sharecropper’s generosity, Todd wonders why buzzards feed on rotting flesh and yet fly so beautifully, perhaps echoing some version of what his white superiors at the base thought of him. The final image of the story reflects his induction back into the fold of the black community, his return home: a buzzard glides across the sun and “glow[s] like a bird of flaming gold.”

Jefferson’s laughter is more empowering than a search for distractions to survive, more than the strategy of laughing to keep from crying. He finds a way to see himself on his own terms, rather than the terms of white supremacists like Dabney Graves, and the dignity in that realization is a dignity that Todd eventually shares. “Home,” to Todd, has less to do with the red earth of Alabama—the place itself—and more to do with his recognition that the black world isn’t just a reflection of the white world’s thoughts and measures. He might have to escape into “the world of men” through cunning, but that cunning rests upon an underlying ethic of genuine tenderness and care. Through Todd’s return home we see how a kind of two-faced ingenuity could be about more than simply survival and escape or even self-definition and revenge—though it is about all of those things—but about something much like love.

What Ellison captures in fiction African Americans have been honing and developing into a high art for centuries, especially in ghost stories and other tales of supernatural phenomena, some holy and others downright devilish. These stories came out of a culturally specific folk tradition, born in slavery and with roots in Africa, that used “haints,” spirits, and signs not only to entertain but also to give cultural expression to social critiques. Because ghosts were quite real for many
of those who swapped these stories, to call them fictional is somewhat dismissive of their spiritual worldview. My intention here is not to make determinations about the existence of ghosts but to consider how the subversive elements embedded in these stories functioned for those who told and listened to them. During slavery, white slaveholders used violence and other forms of coercion to dictate not only how African Americans lived but how they thought about their social position. Far from being quaint superstitions divorced from black people's material circumstances, folk beliefs provided the enslaved with what the historian Lawrence Levine called "sources of power and knowledge alternative to those existing within the world of the master class." These folkways empowered black people to subvert and reject a dominant white culture and master narrative of American history that defined them as inferiors who were undeserving of human dignity and human rights.

These stories operated under a different sort of cover from the false mask of deference advocated by the grandfather in *Invisible Man*. But it is cover nonetheless. Ghosts, for instance, could provide plausible deniability, and they were masters of misdirection, virtuosí in the evasive maneuver. Those who swapped ghost stories could claim that these were merely entertaining stories in order to placate whites who might overhear their conversations. Also, because the ghost became a medium for expressing moral disgust, they could claim that at issue was the ghost's vengeful wrath and the ghost's condemnation, not theirs, so if whites had a bone to pick, they should really take it up with the ghosts.

In the folklore of the enslaved, ghosts were, as Jordan Smith put it in his entry for the WPA's Slave Narrative Collection, "as common as pig tracks." Long after the American-born slave population outnumbered the African-born slave population, elements of central and western African belief systems persisted in African American culture, including the "good" ghosts of deceased relatives offering protection, guidance, and the way to buried treasure, and the "bad" ghosts of masters and overseers who had left thick scars crisscrossing the backs of the enslaved. In an interview from Reconstruction, a
self-emancipated man from Kentucky, Lewis Clarke, recalled watching two other enslaved men dig a particularly deep grave for their master, and when he asked them why they dug so far down, they replied that they "wanted to get the old man as near home as possible." Clarke and the two men "hauled the largest [stone they] could find, so as to fasten him down as strong as possible." They broke the code of black deference they would likely not have dared to violate while their master was alive, and in a small act of vengeance, they slyly condemned him to hell, too. Clarke knew another enslaved man, George, whose master told him that he would reward his loyalty by arranging for him to be buried alongside him and other (white) church leaders. George liked the idea of being buried in a nice coffin, but with a deliciously sly quip, he told his "pious" master some of his reservations: "Well, I fraid, massa, when the debbil come take you body, he make mistake, and get mine."

Near South Carolina's Congaree Swamp, African Americans passed on a tale of a particularly cruel slave trader, Ole Man Rogan, who took a fiendish pleasure in selling husbands away from their wives and children away from their mothers. A 1927 collection of local folklore, Congaree Sketches, chronicles how, well into the twentieth century, local blacks swore that the sound of clinking chains, the cries of screaming babies, and the wails of inconsolable mothers calling their children's names echoed across the moonlit creek called Boggy Gut, which had been Ole Man Rogan's favorite spot for fishing. Through the darkness, they might catch glimpses of distraught mothers and children and shackled men slumped over with their hands covering their faces while the ghost of Ole Man Rogan cackled at their misery. According to local legend, neither God nor even the devil would take Ole Man Rogan, so his spirit was cursed to wander the swamps without rest.

Sadistic white men like Ole Man Rogan might terrorize the living from beyond the grave, but since ghosts often remained suspended between the living and the dead due to unfinished business, ghosts of the enslaved also returned from the afterlife, often to avenge the injustices they suffered under slavery. According to Jane Arrington's
WPA narrative, an enslaved man in North Carolina named John May haunted the two white men who beat him to death. Every night as the terrified killers lay in bed, May tormented them with his groans and shrieks, and they fitfully tossed and turned in their sleep, moaning, “Go away John, please go away.” Like Ole Man Rogan whose soul would never rest in peace, the two men who killed May suffered for their sins for the rest of their lives. The tales of Ole Man Rogan and John May brought into stark relief the emotional and physical violence of slavery in order to expose the moral depravity of owners, overseers, and slavers, and this impulse to use ghost stories to condemn American racism as morally repugnant continues to inform African American folklore.

Ghosts and signs remained ubiquitous in black folk culture more than a century after emancipation, especially in the rural South, but these stories adapted to the times, in particular to new injustices that emerged after emancipation, the most violent of which was lynching. These stories translated landscapes haunted by lynching into discursive spaces for processing and confronting difficult memories that many white southerners silenced or even celebrated. African American communities across the South used local lore about lynchings to reclaim public sites of lynchings that had all traces of that violent past erased from the landscape and white collective memory. Denied legal justice because southern sheriffs and judges refused to prosecute known lynchers, African Americans found a measure of spiritual justice in stories of lynched spirits haunting courthouses and tales of tornadoes sent to destroy a city by a righteous but vengeful God. These ghosts remained suspended in the collective memories of African Americans for generations, and through the ventriloquy of storytelling, African Americans used ghosts and divine retribution to voice their condemnation of lynching.

By many counts, Brooks County, Georgia, recorded more lynchings than any other county in the United States. During one week in 1918 alone, mobs of white people lynched Mary Turner, her unborn baby, her husband, and between ten and fifteen other African Americans. That lynching rampage, especially the brutal killing of
Mary Turner and her baby, devastated the African American community in Brooks and neighboring Lowndes Counties, but faith in the righteousness of the Lord (and some incredibly courageous souls organizing a branch of the NAACP) sustained them through that difficult time. Members of lynch mobs escaped legal punishment in this life, but many members of the African American community believed that nobody, not the sheriff or even the wealthiest planter, could elude God’s judgment.

Robert Hall, who grew up just a few miles south of the site of Mary Turner’s lynching, told me in a 2012 interview that he used to see an elderly white man hunched over and slowly walking along the road near the lynching site in the early 1960s. Hall and his brother would laugh at the man until his mother shushed them, explaining, “Do you remember me telling you all [about] the lady that was lynched and her baby was cut out of her stomach? . . . Well, they say he’s one of the ones that did it.” When the man had cut open Turner’s swollen belly with a hog-skinning knife, her water broke and splashed onto his hands and arms. As an elderly man, he trudged along the road wearing long sleeves to cover open sores on his arms that appeared where her water splashed on him. When the man was dying a few years later, his black neighbors fed and cared for him, and in his death throes, he screamed over and over, “Y’all get that nigger woman and that baby away from me. Get that nigger woman and that baby away from me.” The physical manifestations of the old man’s sins were marked upon his arms and hands, and even though that man may not have believed that those sores were physical reminders of his guilt, his desire to hide his disfigurement only reinforced the perception that he carried his guilt and his shame on his body.

Hall told a variation of a story that circulated among blacks from neighboring towns for decades, and the idea at the core of that story—that lynchers would get their comeuppance—expressed the black community’s collective disgust and frustration with this-worldly legal justice. No white person ever faced punishment for these lynchings, and although telling those stories provided a modicum of comfort, they were not wholly comforting because punishment from
without—developing sores and the like—did not require introspection, much less feeling guilty or taking responsibility. The powerful deathbed scene in Hall’s story, however, made for a more satisfying ending. Perhaps the generosity of the white man’s African American neighbors moved him to feel the weight of his sins, or maybe the sheer barbarity of cutting open a dying, pregnant woman’s stomach with a hog-skinning knife made it plain that he should be worried about the fate of his soul. Regardless of what actually prompted him to dread the imminent final judgment of his sins, he clearly believed that after he drew his last breath he would have to reckon with the ghosts of Mary Turner and her baby. In fact, they had already begun to torment his conscience as he writhed on his deathbed. His deathbed guilt left his African American neighbors with the sense that some white people who had carried out or had been complicit in lynchings would suffer and therefore would fully and consciously understand that what they had coming to them was eternal punishment. His display of guilt may not have indicated that he felt remorse—the fear of spending an eternity in hell and genuinely feeling remorseful are not the same—so for African Americans, the prospect of divine justice articulated in this story served to reinforce their dissatisfaction with human justice. Divine justice was, quite simply, their safest option.

Supernatural stories laid bare the internal anguish of white folks, but they also exposed the costs incurred for defending white supremacy, namely justice and retribution from without. This folk tradition preserved and affirmed for generations to come the righteousness of their moral convictions when the dominant culture refused to. Tales of lynchers haunted by their crimes certainly provided an outlet for righteous indignation, but they also offered a counternarrative to the overwhelming tendency among white southerners to ignore the South’s violent past. These ghost stories provided just enough cover to empower African Americans to control the memory of lynching safely, at least within their own communities. By naming lynchings as crimes to be condemned and mourned, not celebrated or forgotten, this collective memory reclaimed the dignity and humanity of lynching victims, many of whom suffered unimaginable torture and mutilation.
The art of subterfuge contains a precious power in that it provides marginalized people with the delight of outwitting others, even if only in fleeting bursts, and the pleasure of being in on the secret, of knowing what is the mask and what is being masked. But deception and irony, in most cases at least, come at a cost. One risks having the mask mistaken for one's true face. One risks succumbing to the mask. One risks falling into bitterness and despair when placing faith in divine justice in the absence of worldly justice. One risks never knowing if she has successfully pricked the consciences of the targets of her deceptions. One risks a distortion of one's art. And what do you do, for instance, when your dupe is too blind and ignorant, when your attempt at manipulation is so blithely misunderstood that it produces the opposite effect? The comedian Dave Chappelle certainly confronted this quandary when he began to suspect that some white viewers of his popular sketch comedy show, Chappelle's Show, laughed at his jokes for the wrong reasons. These viewers seemed to think that his exaggerated caricatures of the rapper Lil Jon or a black white supremacist who is blind (and therefore does not realize he, too, is black) gave them permission to mock black people and yet refuse to see the absurdities of racism that Chappelle was actively trying to dismantle. Midway through taping the third season, he abruptly ended the show. Rather than subverting racist ideas as he intended, his show inadvertently emboldened some white viewers to believe they had license to use racial slurs and mock African Americans while failing to challenge their own racial privilege and ignoring the deeper meaning of Chappelle's social commentary. Chappelle wore a relatively transparent mask composed of that thin film of plausible deniability that separates the literal from the satirical on a sketch comedy show hosted by a comedian that appeared on a network called Comedy Central. Discouraged by the distortion of his comedy, he walked away, abandoning, temporarily, the mask.

Subterfuge has its limits, as Spike Lee masterfully captured in his satirical film Bamboozled (2000). The film's protagonist is Pierre Delacroix, a television writer whose boss chastises him for developing yet another failed sitcom about respectable black elites. Delacroix
decides he would rather get fired than work for a network that only wants to put black buffoons on screen, so he pitches *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show*, a neominstrel show so brazen in its offensiveness and so backward in its racism that it surely will get him fired. Instead of firing Delacroix, however, the white executives at his network delight in what they see: a dance troupe of mammies, Sambos, and pickaninnies in blackface; a watermelon patch and a cotton field in the distance; a house band called the Porch Monkeys; and the stars, two buffoons named Mantan and Sleep’n Eat. As Delacroix fills the stage with ever-more-outrageous minstrel mainstays—a blackface Uncle Sam and a black lawn jockey, for instance—the audience, the writers, and the executives find in the “satire” of the show permission to indulge racist fantasies about African American life and even to put on blackface themselves. Initially, Delacroix tells his producer that his neominstrel show is satire, but neither the white producer nor the white media consultant—she can be trusted, she assures us; she majored in Black Studies—bother to figure out just what is being satirized. And the viewer is left wondering if the only actual satire in this film is the metanarrative Lee has concocted.

Delacroix did not anticipate, as he crafted his plan to get fired, how quickly the thin façade of liberal white discomfort (and even indignation) with blatantly racist stereotypes could dissolve with the slightest prodding. With the meager reassurances from a black man that blackface minstrelsy in the twenty-first century was satirical, not racist, the American public eats up the show, making it a smash hit. He had wrongly assumed that, in the new millennium of colorblindness, his white colleagues would abhor the old stereotypes of blackness he threw back in their faces, but instead they swallowed them whole. The grandfather in *Invisible Man* advised his progeny to “let ’em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open,” but when the white executives and audiences swallow Delacroix, he can’t make these white folks bust wide open. And not all of them are white folks, either. The audience includes people of many races, including African Americans. Even more damning is the melding of Delacroix’s “authentic” self with his mask. In the end, rather than yessing them to death
and destruction, Delacroix dies and destroys himself. He succumbs to the mask; the blackface he wears becomes indistinguishable from his face as he bleeds to death surrounded by the blackface figurines that have become his obsession. The grandfather’s advice skirts the difficulties of maintaining one’s authentic self behind the mask and avoids the possibility that performing the grinning, agreeable fool might infect that authentic self. Although the grandchildren hovering around the deathbed are evocative of the blackface figurines staring down at Delacroix, the figurines mock and deride him for his failure to keep the mask clearly separated from his face.

Delacroix may have simply lacked the mastery of the art of subterfuge necessary to pull off his deceptions, or perhaps Lee suggests that the blame rests less with Delacroix and more with a sickness endemic to American society. After all, Delacroix is not the only person to succumb. Mantan ends up dead just after he shows his true face on the show. Sleep’n Eat quits the act even earlier, disgusted with the humiliation of smearing on a mask of burnt cork every night and pandering to the racist desires of the American public. Even the misguided black nationalists, the Mau-Maus, end up murdered by the police (all but the white one at least, who goes by the name 16th Blak). The Mau-Maus, whom Lee mockingly adorns with names like Big Blak Afrika, Mo’ Blak, and Double Blak, decide to kidnap and murder Mantan on live television to protest the television show in the name of “keeping it real,” but they, too, are driven to violence because of an artificial revolutionary posturing. Black performers in the film who “keep it real” remain marginal culturally and struggle financially, making visible the choice so many black performers face between struggling to maintain one’s “realness” and selling out for fame and fortune. Before becoming Mantan the neominstrel fool, Mantan is a homeless street performer, tap dancing for change and squatting in an abandoned building. When Mantan keeps it real he struggles; only when he acts like a minstrel clown does he become rich and famous. The only performer to stay true to his art is Delacroix’s father, a standup comedian named Junebug who packs small comedy clubs and lives on the road. As a director, Lee exposes the ways that Americans lack the maturity to
consume satire and irony just as they lack the capacity to recognize the insidiousness of racism, even when blatantly racist stereotypes are paraded right in front of them.

*Bamboozled* reveals many of the potential costs of subterfuge, in particular the ways even the most artful saboteurs may be foiled by the very ignorance they are trying to undermine. But Lee certainly isn’t warning against subterfuge entirely. His film is satire after all, and I suspect he took great pleasure in imagining audience members squirming uncomfortably in their seats as they debated whether to cringe or laugh or feel indignant. Besides, although Junebug drinks himself into a stupor every night, he lets the bitter truth about American racism slip through his wisecracks. Comedy has a way of catching a person off guard amid howling, cackling, belly-shaking laughter, of telling it like it is without sounding preachy. Junebug artfully infuses social commentary into his set when he quips, “Everybody wants to be black, but nobody *wants* to be black. It confuses me. They all act black, sound black. I hope they start hanging niggers again. I’m going to find out who’s black.” His joke exposes how white appropriation of blackness, itself a kind of blackface minstrelsy, is a borrowed “coolness”—borrowed, that is, until a white person must confront the real costs of living in a black body. (It is no accident that 16th Blak is the only member of the Mau-Maus taken alive, despite his pleas to be martyred like the rest.) And it is precisely Junebug’s point about appropriation that the white executives and the viewers of Delacroix’s neominstrel show miss. The selective consumption of blackness is a privilege available to nonblacks when convenient, and in Lee’s cynical, if not realistic, hands, Delacroix doesn’t succeed in busting anyone wide open, and neither does Junebug.

Spike Lee raises legitimate doubts that subterfuge may be too fraught and potentially self-destructive as a strategy to be worth the trouble, but sometimes the long game produces the most satisfying results. Consider the all-too-real world of Coffee County, Georgia, at the height of Jim Crow, described in William Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad’s *Remembering Jim Crow* (2001). As a teenager growing up in Coffee County in the 1930s, Thomas “Bud”
Chatmon put high school on hold for four years to help his widowed father support and raise his six younger brothers and sisters. One year, when it came time to "settle up" with the white man named Thomas Harper whose land they farmed, Chatmon and his father went to see Harper—through the back door as was expected of black people during Jim Crow. Chatmon had been keeping a record of their earnings all year, so when Harper told father and son that they didn't have any money coming to them that year, Chatmon went to reach for his notebook with his calculations. His father stepped on his foot to stop him because, as he said, "my daddy... knew them crackers would kill you if you'd dispute their word."

Chatmon's father acted less as a "traitor," in the sense that the invisible man's grandfather used the term, but as a father teaching his son how to survive, which was ultimately an act of self-preservation. Performing the role of a black sharecropper too ignorant to calculate how much money he had cleared or too meek to challenge the lies of a white man certainly took its toll. As the pair walked along the dirt road toward their home, Chatmon's father began to cry. Seeing tears roll down his fathers' cheeks in shame, Chatmon promised himself to earn enough to support himself and to finish school. Although being denied his earnings itself may have been enough to cause Chatmon's father to cry, his tears likely flowed, in part, because he had subjected his son not only to witnessing his own humiliation but also to learning to swallow the white man's lies.

If, as the grandfather from *Invisible Man* says, "our life is a war," then perhaps we hear echoes of his plea that the grandchildren "keep up the good fight" in the Chatmons's own multigenerational war. Bud Chatmon returned to Coffee County nearly thirty years later in the mid-1960s, after he had graduated from Morehouse College, married, and bought a big house in Albany, Georgia. He rolled up to Harper's house in a brand new Cadillac that he had paid for in cash and knocked on his front door to thank the elderly planter sarcastically: "I just wanted to thank you for taking my farm. Because if you hadn't taken all I had, I probably would have stayed out here and got married and had a bunch of children and made your children rich. So when you took
all our money, I left.” Chatmon had played the long game. He had bided his time until the moment when he so exploded the image of the ignorant, deferential sharecropper that removing the mask—telling Harper in exquisitely unambiguous terms how he felt—would lay bare Harper’s rottenness. As satisfied as Chatmon must have felt when he revealed his true distaste for Harper, that same satisfaction had been denied to his father and his mother. And even when taking the long view of the multigenerational war, the targets of subversion might not understand—or might refuse to understand—and asking for such patience, risking such miscommunication, is deeply unfair.

Chatmon made a point of saying that his son never had to grin and bear the bald swindling of white men like Harper, and in many ways the absolute necessity of wearing the mask has diminished over time more generally. Perhaps that is what the grandfather in *Invisible Man* envisioned as the course of the multigenerational war, that over time the masks could become more transparent. Or, more likely, the invisible man’s grandfather wanted his grandchildren to carry on “undermin[ing] ‘em with grins” to prepare for an eventual reveal: the invisible man emerging from the depths of his well-lit hole to “bust ‘em wide open” once and for all. Now, such destruction might be at cross-purposes with those who would prefer a less starkly “new” beginning, but, even so, the grandfather’s vision of subterfuge progresses toward what we could call action. (I suspect he would be too distrustful of sincerity to call for activism.) The historian Robin D. G. Kelley has argued in *Race Rebels* (1994) that “the emergence of the modern civil rights movement is a public declaration of the hidden transcript” and that, since World War II, what he calls “politics from below” has become increasingly militant. Kelley’s analysis confirms what three generations of Chatmons experienced, but masks of deference and feigned ignorance were never worn simply out of necessity or as a matter of viability. The art of subterfuge is, and always has been, political—but also a matter of aesthetics and pleasure. To reduce creative acts of subversion to politics alone, even if motivated by a desire to empower the oppressed and dress down the oppressor, strips from subterfuge its creative force, to say nothing of the genuine pleasure of
meticulously crafting a way to “agree ’em to death and destruction.” One could say that what gets lost in reducing art to politics is whatever it is that deflates a joke when a person utters the deadly phrase, “so the reason that’s funny is because...”

Besides, the moment for the big reveal is not upon us just yet, despite centuries of subversion and social justice movements. We live in a time when a white man can fire ten shots into a car of four African American boys, killing one, for playing music too loudly, and a child playing with a toy gun on a playground can be gunned down by police officers. We live in a time when a white supremacist can defile an African American spiritual sanctuary and commit mass murder. We live in a time when many Americans dismiss legitimate claims of racial discrimination as so-called political correctness and when the first black president of the United States is accused of playing the “race card” the moment he mentions race. What, at first glance, appears to some as the recent resurgence of “old-school” racism—a backlash or a throwback, which is to say, something the United States abandoned decades ago—never left us, even though the most overt expressions of white supremacy tend to be relegated to the margins of public discourse, the rhetoric of the current president notwithstanding. The imperative to challenge white supremacy through overt antiracist protest, as Black Lives Matter activists and others have done, is all the more pressing. Yet even though the transparency and sincerity of direct protest has its virtues and strategic value, the need for the art of subterfuge remains, given the violent realities of the moment we live in and the creative potential of subversion.