

## Changing the Joke: Invisibility in Merleau-Ponty & Ellison

She seems to hide all looks that have ever fallen  
into her, so that, like an audience,  
she can look them over, menacing and sullen,  
and curl to sleep with them. But all at once

as if awakened, she turns her face to yours;  
and with a shock, you see yourself, tiny,  
inside the golden amber of her eyeballs  
suspended, like a prehistoric fly.

Taken from "Black Cat" by Rainer Maria Rilke

Literature and theory on race has long recognised the importance of vision and invisibility in the construction of racialized social mechanisms. This is one reason why the work of Jean-Paul Sartre continues to attract interest from African-American philosophers.<sup>1</sup> However, comparatively little has been written in this area about his compatriot and long-standing friend and rival Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>2</sup> This is odd, considering that Merleau-Ponty wrote at length on the nature of visibility and perception from the perspective of lived experience. This absence is even more strange when one considers the fact that Merleau-Ponty's approach to theorising vision - as reciprocal rather than oppositional - has attracted increasing interest in the past decade outside of race theory debate, in ways which lend themselves to extension into the field.<sup>3</sup> If anything, Merleau-Ponty's relevance to an existential approach to race is coming laterally, via phenomenologically or pragmatically inclined feminist theorists who are turning their attention to other modes of embodied difference.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper, I will try to expose Merleau-Ponty's concept of invisibility, and demonstrate its significance for engaging with and responding to a world divided by visually racialized social fabrics.<sup>5</sup> I will do this by staging an encounter between Merleau-Ponty and Ralph Ellison.

### *Invisibility, freedom and metamorphosis in Merleau-Ponty*

In his late works, Merleau-Ponty tells us that there is something invisible within the heart of the visible.<sup>6</sup> There has been little in the way of a direct attempt to expose this invisibility to the light of analysis in secondary literature. Perhaps this is inevitable. The logic of the invisible implies that it is forever immune to representation. As with light itself, visibility can never preclude its obverse, that of obscurity, occlusion and a 'dialectic of illusion.'<sup>7</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's conception of the invisible is part of a cluster of concepts developed in his later work: the ontology of the 'flesh', reversibility, the chiasm, ecart, vertical being, the *punctum caecum* and so on. This does not mean that in our search for clarification we dismiss his earlier work as irrelevant. In fact, the contrary must be the case. It is easy to link this later cluster with concepts, themes and metaphors from earlier in his career, notably that of depth, opacity, the night, the enigmatic nature of the object and blindness.

More significantly, it is *only* by situating Merleau-Ponty's notion of the invisible within the terms of a long-standing dialogue with Kant shall we begin to understand it.<sup>8</sup>

Rather than situating it immediately in relation to vision, we can explore the terrain of Merleau-Ponty's invisible further if we understand it as the *necessary* outcome of a folding back of Kant's notion of the transcendental into the world itself. Kant's 'transcendental' refers to a shared structure of meaning (the 'conditions of possibility') that enables us to make sense of the world. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant deduced that this structure must take the form of a set of logical rules that link each act of perception with the understanding, producing knowledge. For Kant, the transcendental rules are *apriori* and *universal*, that is, they come *prior to* experience and cannot be changed by it. We can introduce the difference between Kant's notion of the transcendental and Merleau-Ponty's via a topological analogy: if Kant were a slip of paper, Merleau-Ponty would be a Moebius strip. With Merleau-Ponty, the conditions of possibility are not derived from an originary, universal and unchangeable set of rules, rather, they are embedded *within* the existential complex. As Patrick Burke writes, intimating something like a Moebius logic:

The higher stages of Being's self-differentiation and self-transcendence, the conditioned, are the obverse side of the lower stages, the revelation and articulation of this invisible "other side," the conditions which, although subordinate, are continually there, exercising their presence as metamorphosed by the totality which they condition.<sup>9</sup>

The key word here is 'metamorphosed.' Not only do the conditions engender the conditioned, but also the conditioned condition the conditions. Contra a naturalism that implies some level of ontological permanence, and also against any renewed notion of an enduring substance altered by temporal accidents, this reflexive reworking of the transcendental implies an ontological dynamism that simply resists transparency. Beyond the spatial framework of topological analogies, this differentiation implies the work of *temporality*. Once the conditions of experience are actualised as temporal phenomena, a gap ('*ecart*') emerges between *apriori* possibility and *aposteriori* reality. The phenomena cannot simply be mapped back onto their transcendental horizon. In other words, Merleau-Ponty's thematization of the transcendental implies that shared structures of understanding are not inherently conservative. Whether stated in terms of the chiasm, of reversibility or even agency, the timely crossing over of obverse to reverse, of the conditioned conditioning the conditions, engenders an aporetic transfer, a differentiation, a new mode of presence,

Yes, there is agency, there is the subject as source of initiative, as, if you will, the conditioned which in its turn, in its self-appropriation, conditions the conditions, takes them up into itself, a taking up which is a metamorphosis of them and a self-metamorphosis through them, accomplishing thereby a differentiated self-presence.<sup>10</sup>

The 'taking up' or temporal metamorphosis that Burke refers to here is resolutely somatic. At the core of the later Merleau-Ponty's revision of Kant is an advanced conception of embodiment and the movement of a generalized corporeal schema. Beyond an

intentionality that still bears traces of its origins within the Husserlian noetic analysis in *Phenomenology of Perception*, the invisible "flesh" represents a perpetually emergent carnality that continually defines and redefines itself. Instead of transcendently deduced logic, the apriori rules of experience are now intertwined within a pre-existent matrix of body-world relations. The visualist language of reflection that lingers in his earlier work now drops out, in favor of a more shadowy metaphoric. Rather than an ontogenesis of the "I think" determining itself through the deployment of a schematic process, the world and its subjects emerge from out of each other through what chaos theorists would call 'autopoiesis.'<sup>11</sup> The question generally begged by epistemology - how subjectivity itself appears - is therefore directly addressed. As the above citation from Burke suggests, the subject switches from a node of logic or a synthesising point into an ongoing event of appropriation - a visceral logos at play with itself.

So far so good. But additional work is now required in order to understand more fully how this fleshy conception of embodiment relates to invisibility and a transformative notion of the transcendental. Merleau-Ponty's dynamically embodied conception of the transcendental field, of the invisible obverse of the Kantian schema, can be brought into focus if, by way of a short detour, we examine the analysis of the creativity at work in painting in his essay "Eye and Mind."

In this essay, Merleau-Ponty argues that painting is a kind of thinking which involves a visceral and invisible corporeal engagement. As we shall see, Merleau-Ponty's deliberate slippage between (for want of a better word) "artistic" and "ordinary" modes of perception in the essay demonstrates that his intention was to take his painterly model of thought as the template for thought-in-general, that is, thinking conceived as a pre-dualistic phenomena. In other words, the usual categorisation of "Eye and Mind" as an essay on aesthetics betrays its wider, more metaphysical intent.

Section 2 of the essay shows how, away from a Kantian emphasis on transcendental subjectivity, the *body* of the artist is fundamental to the genesis of the artwork. Merleau-Ponty writes,

Indeed we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body – not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.<sup>12</sup>

For Merleau-Ponty, the visual field makes sense only in terms of the motility that fulfils it. Beyond the obvious fitful movements of the eye, the world opened up through visibility is necessarily that which I may move within. Without this sense of potential movement, the visible world would lack both depth and sense. Again, the visible world is the very medium that enables the schematic sense of potential movement that I have in my body. It is the visibility of the world in part that structures my bodily schema. I cannot reach for the glass unless my body has a pre-habituated (and preconscious) sense of the visible co-ordinates that structure the potential movement. Vision and movement and the body's sense of itself are therefore necessarily interdependent; it is only on the basis of the movement secluded within vision and the implicit visibility at work in movement that either can have meaning for us.

This construal of the relation between movement and vision has ontological implications. Instead of privileging a “pictorial” representation of the world, which lends itself to a static and immanent conception of visibility, Merleau-Ponty’s conception introduces a *gap* between visibility and subjectivity. As much as the seer perceives the world from a particular place, the jointly constituted nature of motility and vision introduces the possibility of other locations of and for perception. I see from here, but necessarily implied within this situated seeing is the possibility of seeing from over there. Sight therefore designates of itself points of view that transcend my own. The gap between seeing and being seen therefore imposes alterity within the heart of vision. Merleau-Ponty writes, “That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognise, in what it sees, the “other side” of its power of looking.”<sup>13</sup>

Far from a disembodied Cartesian eye of perception that scans the visual field without being taken up into it or measured within its terms, this motile conception of perception leads Merleau-Ponty to consider the body as a system of exchanges between self and world. Rather than the visual field being merely “out there” or simply taking the form of exteriority or outer sense, visibility opens up onto a world which in its turn is repeated by the body itself as a sort of carnal inner sense:

Things have an internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence. Why shouldn’t these correspondences in their turn give rise to some external visible shape in which anyone else would recognise these motifs which support his own inspection of the world? Thus there appears a “visible” of the second power, a carnal essence or icon of the first.<sup>14</sup>

Merleau-Ponty wavered between calling this embodied and projectable notion of inner sense the “invisible” and calling it a “second visibility.”<sup>15</sup> Either way, in “Eye and Mind”, he connects this carnal formula of the visible with the *imagination*. Here, the hidden secondary internal equivalent of external visible sense is another name for the “image” – not the disparaged platonic copy – a derivative mode of reality, but rather what Merleau-Ponty calls a “diagram of the life of the actual”.<sup>16</sup> Against Plato, the image is re-instituted at the heart of things, as “the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside.”<sup>17</sup> Although he does not fully explore it in all its concrete depth, the embodied imagination that motivates vision is of course closely related to a sense of *desire*: “Vision is a conditioned thought; it is born “as occasioned” by what happens in the body; it is “incited” to think by the body.”<sup>18</sup>

It is at this point that Merleau-Ponty is able to clarify how invisibility works in terms of the creative process of painting. Given the blurred boundary between artistic and mundane perception mentioned above, this moment also hints at the transformative power of invisibility *tout court*. Rather than a simple representation of the external visible world through some abstract measure of *thought*, painting is an expression of how body and world communicate in the production of images - in the sense of the chiasmic “inside-outside” nature of the image just given. In this case, it is no longer clear in which direction the creation of the image works – from visible world to the painter or from the painter back out to the visible world. The intentional direction of agency is left unresolved. However, Merleau-Ponty’s awareness of this ambiguity is not sufficient for him to be able to control it in his text. For instance, at one stage, it seems that it is

exteriority that nonetheless produces images – when he writes (thinking specifically of Cezanne and Mont St. Victoire) “It is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter; it is the mountain that he interrogates with his gaze.”<sup>19</sup>. Later on however, the productive locus of the image shifts slightly, when Merleau-Ponty writes, “[b]ut the interrogation of painting in any case looks toward this secret and feverish genesis of things in our body.”<sup>20</sup>. These varying characterisations of the creative process do not contradict each other, rather, they express the two sides of the imagination – an inside-out and outside-in exchange between body and world that leads to the production of new images. In both cases, the image thus produced is “enigmatic” – produced in the context of an obscure travail, “The question comes from one who does not know, and it is addressed to a vision, a seeing, which knows everything and which we do not make, for it makes itself in us.”<sup>21</sup>

This account of the invisible genesis of artistic creativity has its precursor in Kant himself. In section 46 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant holds that because genius is an innate productivity that is not determined by conceptual understanding, it cannot comprehend the nature of its own activity. He writes,

Genius itself cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, and it is rather as *nature* that it gives the rule. That is why, if an author owes a product to his genius, he himself does not know how he came by the ideas for it; nor is it in his power to devise such products at his pleasure, or by following a plan, and to communicate his procedure to others in precepts that would enable them to bring about like products.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, beyond the romantic context for the notion of artist as genius in Kant, the key difference between the two accounts is that for Merleau-Ponty, the pre-cognitive imagination of the artist is powerful enough to rupture the categories (or the rule of "nature") themselves. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic conception of image, imagination and the embodied process of artistic creativity can be characterised as an ontology of the *natal* – a genetic phenomenology of continued re-birth where all the transcendental categories of understanding and judgment are continually transformed through the work of art. Merleau-Ponty writes,

It can be said that a human is born at the instant when something that was only virtually visible, inside the mother's body, becomes at one and the same time visible for itself and for us. The painter's vision is a continued birth.<sup>23</sup>

This metaphorical emphasis on birth and maternity continues throughout "Eye and Mind," as elsewhere in Merleau-Ponty's work.<sup>24</sup> Again, he writes later in the essay, connecting this thought of the artist back to ordinary perception, “For the soul, the body is both natal space and matrix of every other existing space.”<sup>25</sup>

As I have suggested, "Eye and Mind's" phenomenological excavation of the creative process of painting points towards a generalizable notion of creative freedom. This freedom is only brought about on the basis of an internal second visibility or invisibility that mirrors and transforms both the visible world and the conditions of possibility for visibility itself. Painting, awakening powers “dormant in ordinary vision”<sup>26</sup>, unblocks a

communication or system of relays between the imaginative body and that which lies beyond it:

Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible – a painting mixes up all our categories in laying out its oneiric universe of carnal essences, of effective likenesses, of mute meanings.<sup>27</sup>

Against the abstraction of deconstruction, Merleau-Ponty shows in "Eye and Mind" that it is through the invisible creative agency of *the body*, rather than through the perpetually renameable "x" of *differance*, that Being diverges from itself:

Vision alone makes us learn that beings that are different, "exterior," foreign to one another, are yet absolutely together, are "simultaneity"; this is a mystery psychologists handle the way a child handles explosives. [...] Every visual something, as individual as it is, functions also as a dimension, because it gives itself as the result of a dehiscence of Being. What this ultimately means is that the proper essence of the visible is to have a layer of invisibility in the strict sense, which it makes present as a certain absence.<sup>28</sup>

The creative freedom of the ordinary body, awakened into action by following the work of the painter, ultimately engenders a reconstitution of the conditions of possibility themselves: new ways of seeing instigated by the body responding to the world. This freedom is therefore the freedom of *difference* and of *dehiscence*. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, this thought brings about a new metaphysics – that of the event.<sup>29</sup> Prior to representation and visibility (the *re-cognition* of truth), the apperceptual body engages with its existential horizons in an ongoing ontogenesis. Through somatic relays and responses, the world changes before one knows that it has changed. The body *writes* difference into the present, as the form of its expression:

Given a perpetually new natural and historical situation to control, the perceiving subject undergoes a continued birth; at each instant it is something new. Every incarnate subject is like an open notebook in which we do not yet know what will be written [...] The very productivity or freedom of human life, far from denying our situation, utilizes it and turns it into a means of expression.<sup>30</sup>

Rather than voluntarism - a conception of freewill that claims too much for itself, at bottom, this account addresses the inexhaustible *contingency* of our relation to the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the other side of vision is at the same time the obverse of cognition, the tain of the mirror, the hidden mystery behind the cat's eyes in Rilke's poem. Invisibility is the name given to the transcendence that always faces the visible; as Merleau-Ponty writes, "But the thing is not really *observable*: there is always a skipping over in every observation, one is never at the thing itself."<sup>31</sup> Prior to the reflective function of recognition, and the visual logic that develops from Kant into the combat of the eyes in Hegel's master-slave dialectic, a different understanding of historical action (that of the event) opens up – and turns directly upon a corporeal invisibility and non-recognition. The body becomes a *palimpsest*, a surface that can inscribe or be re-inscribed, as history becomes a discourse shrouded in ambiguity and obscurity.<sup>32</sup>

### *Ellison's Cave*

When put alongside Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, Merleau-Ponty's account of invisibility appears problematic, to say the least. Although the French philosopher embeds alterity and difference within the structure of experience as we have seen, there remains a blindspot in his thought as to how this shadowy sensibility itself gets inscribed within the *social* field. The opening lines of the novel alone show how invisibility is social at least as much as it is metaphysical:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids - and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.

Ellison's novel has a circular narrative structure: the novel's prologue and epilogue are set within the same moment in time. *Invisible Man* begins and ends with the narrator, nameless and underground, living in secret in the basement of a whites-only building on the edge of Harlem, finishing off the account of his experiences. His abode is a blaze of light bulbs, courtesy of an unofficial arrangement with the wryly named Monopolated Light & Power. The story he tells is, on the surface, a picaresque of existential ennui, charting the tragi-comedies of failure at school, in a factory, in 'radical' politics and finally, Harlem. Ellison's speakerly and filmic voice sets out a series of scenes where one failed intention slips into another, against the shifting backdrop of brothels, passing voices, catchphrases, neon signs, authority and social unrest.

On one reading of the novel, the invisibility of the main character is thoroughly at odds with the notion of invisibility in Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, as has just been suggested. To begin, I shall explore this interpretation as a way of emphasizing the impact social constructions of embodied difference, such as race, can have upon metaphysical frameworks. It is at this point that another reading of the novel will emerge that contests the initial reading. This second interpretation synthesizes and therefore deepens the relationship between Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology of vision and invisibility and Ellison's text.

\*

Beyond the opening paragraph cited above, the following pages of the Prologue continue with the theme of invisibility. Invisibility, the Invisible Man explains, occurs as a "construction of the inner eyes" of those who refuse to see him. The Invisible Man is invisible because he is not *recognised* as a human being. Looking more carefully at the quoted passage, we can see that through unconscious metonymic reduction, the "people" that refuse to see the Invisible Man through inner-eye constructions are in fact *white* people. Invisible Man seemingly capitulates to and internalizes his enforced sub-human status by reproducing this ellipsis in his speech: all 'people' are *white* people. Moreover, his subterranean existence confirms this self-inflicted denial symbolically – living below ground one *remains* invisible, the street above being the level where recognition starts. The Invisible Man is, in effect, a 'sub-person' living in the "moral/political basement."<sup>33</sup>

As an anonymous and therefore generalizable figure, the Invisible Man's narrative reveals the visual status of black people in a white society that refuses to recognise them as human. Racism against black people deprives Merleau-Ponty's reversible maxim about "seeing and being seen" of any last vestiges of innocence or symmetry it may otherwise have had. The second part of the phrase becomes highly loaded, opening up the strange logic of a prejudice based on visibility. Being seen as black in a society that only recognizes whites as human means being seen as *invisible*. It would seem that an account of the objectifying gaze a la Sartre is exactly the theory required. Instead of invisibility guaranteeing freedom, the anonymity of the Invisible Man is 'perverse' in form; it is only through being highly visible in terms of racial markers that invisibility is achieved.<sup>34</sup>

Far from a human community whose freedom is guaranteed by pre-reflexive agency, Ellison's novel depicts a world cleft in two: a world of white humans and black sub-humans. As with Frantz Fanon's critique of Merleau-Ponty in *Black Skin White Masks*, Ellison's novel can be used to characterize the transcendental freedom of the flesh espoused by existential phenomenology as a false-universal. Black people live in the west under a state of affliction, whereby a corporeal schema is undercut by an *epidermal schema* whose name is white supremacy.<sup>35</sup> It is in these terms that invisibility, rather than referring to the expressive writing of the body's 'open notebook' as in Merleau-Ponty's formulation, denotes the primal scene of structural mis-recognition - the denial of black people as human beings.

This reading of Ellison's novel is highly consonant with Charles W. Mills' book, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*. Evidently strongly influenced by Ellison, Mills begins his text by defining black subjectivity in the west as a form of 'sub-personhood.'<sup>36</sup> Mills shows that it is necessary for the reproduction of this two-tier social structure that its normative rationale is concealed:

White experience is embedded as normative, and the embedding is so deep that its normativity is not even identified as such. For this would imply that there was some other way that things could be, whereas it is obvious that this is just the way things are. A relationship to the world that is founded on racial privilege becomes simply *the* relationship to the world.<sup>37</sup>

The social frame of white normativity is naturalized, thereby hiding from view the various mechanisms by which persons are reduced to sub-persons on the basis of an epidermal schema. For Mills, this process problematizes the very basis of modern western political theory. The Locke-Kant-Rawls axis is rendered illegitimate in the context of an ongoing history of apartheid. Liberalism, in its different guises, assumes a rational individual acting in conditions of equality. Whether it is a social contract, universalizability or the 'original position', in each case liberal thought reveals its complicity with white supremacy through its failure to even recognize it. For Mills, the quest for justice must begin with the acknowledgment of the actual procedures of injustice, otherwise political theory unwittingly narrows its constituency. In the context of generalized racial injustice, modern liberal political theory conceals its own form of metonymical reduction.

In terms of remedy, Mills contends that "first-world" theory, whether liberal or Marxist in persuasion, cannot simply be augmented with what he calls 'racial endnotes'. For Mills, white supremacy is analogous to patriarchy - a global system of oppression that requires a semi-autonomous platform of critical engagement. Moreover, Mills argues convincingly in favour of particular terms of reference. Racism, whether 'anti-black' or otherwise, suffers from nebulosity and a psychologicistic tendency: it can be individuated and thereby used to legitimate the suppression of a generalizable analysis. In contrast, 'white supremacy' points inalienably to a global structural-existential dynamic that pre-exists any localized or individuated phenomena: an anonymous virulence at large in the socius. White supremacy thus provides a broader context for understanding individual intentions:

...racial membership privileges or disadvantages individuals *independently* of the particular ideas they happen to have. (In that qualified sense, race is objective. Even so-called white renegades need to acknowledge that, no matter what their racial politics, they are privileged by their social classification.)<sup>38</sup>

The question that must be put in light of Mills' work is this: if neither liberalism nor Marxism, what methods and structures of thought can be used in order to advance a race theory gathered around the concept of white supremacy? Does the facticity of white supremacy invalidate *all* tools of engagement developed in western philosophy? It seems that Mills' argument is *too* effective: in demonstrating the ongoing structural force of white supremacy, we appear to be left without resources to contest it.

### ***Slipping the Yoke***

At this point, we should think again about Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Although the experiences the narrator recounts are of his previous invisibility above ground, his final mode of invisibility is simply that of living in a basement. The narrator therefore actively avoids the perverse logic of 'being seen as invisible' referred to above. Furthermore, the Invisible Man is not simply suffering; he has learnt how to pilfer electricity from the local supplier. His dormitory is by no means a damp and unforgiving cave. Although marginalized from the visible world, the Invisible Man is certainly not incapacitated by his condition; after all, it affords him the energy and opportunity to articulate a long and complex tale.

Returning to the text, evidence of invisibility turning from a passive to an active mode quickly mounts:

Please, a definition: A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action. [...]

Meanwhile I enjoy my life with the compliments of Monopolated Light & Power. Since you never recognize me even when in closest contact with me, and since, no doubt, you'll hardly believe that I exist, it won't matter if you know that I tapped a power line leading into the building and ran it into my hole in the ground. Before that I lived in the darkness into which I was chased, but now I see. I've illuminated the blackness of my invisibility - and vice versa.<sup>39</sup>

The Invisible Man's decision to live underground is not a retreat, the symbol of defeat or an escape. It is in fact the next stage on his path towards enlightenment and self-understanding, the conduit towards autonomy and activity. In this sense, *Invisible Man* acquires a spiritual context; the narrator's move underground parallels different spiritual traditions' emphasis on the need for a periodic retreat from the world in order to contemplate, such as the original 'quarantine' of going into the wilderness for 40 days in Christianity or 'going for refuge' in Buddhism.

That this interpretation matches Ellison's authorial intention is clearly underscored in his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," published in *Shadow and Act*. Here, Ellison is at pains to rebuff a critic who had reduced his work to African-American mythic archetypes (such as the trickster figure) - an interpretation clearly against the grain of Ellison's desire to have his work considered as a work of English literature and a contribution to American national culture as a whole.<sup>40</sup> Towards the end of the essay, in emphasising that interpretations of literary works must attend to the specific social reality in which they are couched, he returns to his magnum opus:

The final act of *Invisible Man* is not that of a concealment in darkness in the Anglo-Saxon connotation of the word, but that of a voice issuing its little wisdom out of the substance of its own inwardness - after having undergone a transformation from ranter to writer [...] In keeping with the reverse English of the plot, and with the Negro American conception of blackness, his movement vertically downward (not into a "sewer," Freud notwithstanding, but into a coal cellar, a source of heat, light, power and, through association with the character's motivation, self-perception) is a process of *rising* to an understanding of his human condition.<sup>41</sup>

Changing the joke and slipping the yoke turns Plato's metaphor of the cave upside-down. It is through descent and darkness that the Invisible Man achieves self-knowledge and truth. The "joke" he refers to is the way in which whites and blacks are connected to each other via mutual mistrust and misinterpretation. The joke has been an *historical* yoke - the story of interracial relations in the States. This link is figured in *Invisible Man* through the words of the narrator's grandfather on his deathbed, words that echo throughout the novel,

'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 the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. 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.'<sup>42</sup>

In "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ellison refers to this strategy as "a kind of jiu-jitsu of the spirit, a denial and rejection through agreement."<sup>43</sup> The purpose of the narrative sequence in *Invisible Man* is to suggest that instead of a struggle for recognition which will always be compromised and end in defeat for the black, maintaining a space apart from the visible world leads the way to greater self-knowledge and autonomy. The

decision to remain invisible and actively will its perpetuation can be transformative. Nothing that is *visible*, the public world of representation, actually changes through this decision; the transformation is *internal* and ontological and concerns the invisible marking out of a space of difference. In the Epilogue, the invisible man writes,

No indeed, the world is just as concrete, ornery, vile and sublimely wonderful as before, only now I better understand my relation to it and it to me. I've come a long way from those days when, full of illusion, I lived a public life and attempted to function under the assumption that the world was solid and all the relationships therein. Now I know men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health. Hence again I have stayed in my hole, because up above there's an increasing passion to make men conform to a pattern.<sup>44</sup>

This alternative reading of Ellison's novel suggests the way out of the theoretical impasse outlined in Mills. The first reading is not denied or dismissed - Ellison himself stresses the "duality" of his novel in "Change the Joke." Rather, the first reading is both available *and* surpassed within the text itself. Invisibility is not simply *affliction*; instead it becomes a *strategy* and a *praxis*. *Invisible Man* functions as a guide-book for how black people can exist and "stay healthy" within a two-tier white supremacist society that is visually over-determinative. Rather than confront head-on the mechanisms of racial injustice through an Hegelian struggle for recognition, the novel outlines an alternative strategy for survival and "covert preparation." Invisibility, as the avoidance of *being seen*, allows the Invisible Man to reconstruct himself as human, with potentiality, deeper self-knowledge and an active future ahead.

This reading can be generalized as a mode of effective praxis that has been articulated again and again by black thinkers in the twentieth century. Instead of facing continual self-negation in the public world, invisibility grants the 'victims' of white supremacy a platform for autonomous reconstructive agency. Actively willed, invisibility turns the black existential situation in the context of white supremacy from the inauthenticity of "the joke" towards encouraging self-love and self-knowledge. For instance, the significance of this desire to become invisible is explicitly recognized by Fanon. In his essay "The Lived Experience of the Black" in *Black Skins White Masks*, a personal account of his experiences on arrival in Paris, in the midst of an overburdened visibility, he "strives for anonymity, for invisibility."<sup>45</sup> Against the existential pain of an unanticipated white normativity, Fanon pleads that he would "accept the lot, as long as no-one notices."<sup>46</sup> Here, although expressed in the form of affliction, invisibility is nonetheless signalled as the condition that *allows for* agency, rather than being the framework for its restriction. Again, we should consider, in light of this emphasis on the power of invisibility, the positive and nostalgic perspective on segregation often at work in the African American writer bell hooks's texts;<sup>47</sup> the power of invisibility as a tool of resistance in various African contexts outlined in Hechte and Simone's wonderful book, *Invisible Governance: the Art of African Micropolitics*.<sup>48</sup> Of course, one of the earliest formulations of the power of contextual invisibility was Fanon's essay "Algeria Unveiled" in *A Dying Colonialism*.<sup>49</sup> Here, Fanon produces a multiple reading of the

Islamic veil – as a site for both colonial fantasies *and* as revolutionary camouflage, as a signifier for tradition and as an entrenched symbol of Algerian culture and resistance:

It is the white man who creates the Negro. But it is the Negro who creates negritude. To the colonialist offensive against the veil, the colonized opposes the cult of the veil.<sup>50</sup>

Fanon implies (here and elsewhere), as does Ellison, that the decision to *stay* invisible invites violence. The enigmatic allusion to shared "lower frequencies," addressed to his white audience in the final sentence of *Invisible Man* again suggests that withdrawing from visibility invites subterranean disturbances and a new, post-visual polemos. The decision to *will* one's invisibility puts one at odds with the relentless desire for everything to be *recognised* in societies of control. In our contemporary world of surveillance, the decision to stay invisible has become an even more dangerous proposition.

When put side-by-side with Mill's interpretation, this second reading of the power of invisibility in Ellison and theorized elsewhere inevitably produces ambivalence. On the one hand, white supremacy constructs the black other as sub-human. To this extent, on the intellectual level of a struggle for justice, this operation should be *recognised* and resisted with a critical theory suited to the task, as Mills proposes. Ultimately, this theory would have some proximate relation to Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic and a battle for recognition. Alternatively, the situations of invisibility produced *within* a society structured historically by white supremacy have both produced and engendered modes of resistance and autonomy which should not be overlooked, if the question of agency, expression and deeper modes of justice are to be taken seriously. In Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the narrator is fully aware of this tension:

And I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding.<sup>51</sup>

I suggest that the ambivalence of this *double reading* of white supremacy and its effects must be maintained, if both the force of its capacity for psychic destruction (the joke producing only jokers) and the counter-force of active resistance and resilient autonomy are to be acknowledged. In this way, *both* Dionysian (disintegration) and Apollonian (integration) forces, that of the tragedy and redemption that are the melody and harmony of black existence, are given their space. Against a Sartrean over-emphasis on inauthenticity and bad-faith, Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology of the relation between visibility and invisibility is of use in the project of understanding and contesting structures of race prejudice. The first reading of *Invisible Man* reminds those who pursue this course of action that socially imposed modes of embodied difference cannot be ignored in any philosophically motivated attempt at an engaged and critical concrete analysis of our times. Without this emphasis on the social, to paraphrase Kant, philosophies of difference are both empty and blind. In ontological terms, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment must be supplemented with an increased emphasis on the *socially differentiated* character of being. Ontogenesis is always *sociogenesis*: an autopoiesis or construction of agency that works within or against a normative structure.

Finally, the second reading of the novel demonstrates how the invisibility emphasized by the later Merleau-Ponty (and developed throughout his work through his dialogue with Kant) can be used as an argument for the positive significance of social contexts of invisibility, as the violent exclusionary forces of recognition come into play once again. Recognising and allowing for invisibility enables a creative change that can be at once artistic, mundane and intensely political. The new sense that Merleau-Ponty gives to the related concepts of "image" and "imagination" - as a chiasmic, inside-outside generative operation, show that becoming invisible should never be viewed as mere retreat and another contribution to the erosion of public space. With trans-contextual phenomena such as patriarchy and white supremacy, the public space and shared meanings on offer cannot be entertained without compromise (and potential insanity). Hiding away and "slipping the yoke" (if only periodically) is often the only way to stay healthy and, as with Merleau-Ponty's maternal conception, to be nurtured. Alone or among one's own, this protective space facilitates the imagination of different modes of shared horizons. Taking invisibility seriously means that we cannot simply assume that the world is "our" world and that visible structures of recognition can wholly represent the personal and social metamorphoses ahead. We have to negotiate and allow for differences that are always being invisibly produced in our midst.

---

<sup>1</sup> A key figure here is Lewis Gordon. See his *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism*, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995 & his edited anthology *Existence in Black*, New York & London: Routledge, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of their relationship, see the Introduction to *The Debate between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, edited by Jon Steward. Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1998, pp. xiii-xl. The rest of this fascinating book explores the many different philosophical aspects of their relationship.

<sup>3</sup> An important essay here is Martin Jay's "Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and the Search for a New Ontology of Sight," *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, edited by David Michael Levin, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 143-185.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*, New York & London: Routledge, 1999, Shannon Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism and Feminism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001 and Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, *In the Sea of Memory: Embodiment and Agency in the Black Diaspora*, unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Warwick 2000.

<sup>5</sup> I will not address the issue of geographical or national differences in the social formation of race in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969.

<sup>7</sup> I am reminded of Maurice Blanchot's incomparable words, "Light's deception, then, would be in the fact that it slips away in a radiating absence, infinitely more obscure than any obscurity, since the absence proper to light is the very act of its light, its clarity, and since the work of light is accomplished only when light makes us forget that something like light is at work.." *The Infinite Conversation*, 1998, p. 163. Blanchot is quick to point out the dangers of ignorance about this essential deception of light, "[b]ut the most serious problem ... remains the duplicity by which light causes us to have confidence in the simplicity of the act of seeing, proposing im-mediation to us as the model of knowledge whereas light itself, out of sight and in a hidden manner, acts only as a mediator, playing with us through a dialectic of illusion." (Ibid.)

<sup>8</sup> Of course and by way of caveat, just as the invisible in Merleau-Ponty's sense is not simply a negation of the visible, it would be a mistake to reduce it to the status of a unified concept. For instance, at one point in the Working Notes, Merleau-Ponty identifies four separate layers to invisibility, elsewhere, yet other associations are invoked. In general, the Working Notes give a good sense of the genesis of his thought in this direction; from the peeling away of Leibnizian monadology from its theological context in late 1959, producing the insight that the windowlessness of the monad is the perfect antecedent to a non-dualistic being-in-the-world, to the intense epiphanies on the invisible 5 months later in May 1960. In each case, the concept changes form slightly, slipping away from itself with subtlety like a moving figure dappled by leaflight.

---

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Burke, "The Flesh as Urpräsentierbarkeit," in *Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Seeing and Writing*, edited by M.C. Dillon., New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1997, p67.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p63.

<sup>11</sup> See Glen Mazis' interesting intertwining of the flesh ontology and chaos theory, "Chaos Theory and Merleau-Ponty's Ontology," *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, edited by Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," *The Primacy of Perception*, translated by James M. Edie, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p162.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p162.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p164.

<sup>15</sup> "My flesh and that of the world therefore involve clear zones, clearings, about which pivot their opaque zones, and the primary visibility, that of the *quale* and of the things, does not come without a second visibility, that of the lines of force and dimensions, the massive flesh without a rarefied flesh, the momentary body without a glorified body." Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining-The Chiasm," *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969, p148.

<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p164.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p175.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p166.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p167.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987, p175. As Kant goes on to note, the word genius derives from the Latin word for the guardian or guarding spirit that each person is given as his own at birth. In this sense, we can gather a thread from Merleau-Ponty's notion of invisibility back to an originary *daemonology*.

<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", pp167-8.

<sup>24</sup> Arguably one of the key differences between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger is that the latter tended to stress being-towards-death and finitude in his thinking, whereas Merleau-Ponty was interested in being-as-reproductive.

<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p176.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p182.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p169.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p187.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p179.

<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, "An Unpublished Text," *The Primacy of Perception*, translated by James M. Edie, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p6.

<sup>31</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p192.

<sup>32</sup> Merleau-Ponty thus challenges the view put forward by Foucault that the body is written on and destroyed by history. He writes in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", "[Genealogy's] task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body." *The Foucault Reader*, London: Penguin, 1991 [1984], p83

<sup>33</sup> Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998, p107.

<sup>34</sup> See Lewis Gordon, "Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility," *Existence in Black*, New York & London: Routledge, 1997. He writes, "The logic of anonymity is, however, perverted in an antiblack world. If a black is overdetermined, then to see that black is to see every black." p75.

<sup>35</sup> See my article "Fanon, Merleau-Ponty and the Difference of Phenomenology" in *Race*, edited by Robert Bernasconi, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001, pp169-183.

<sup>36</sup> Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, p6.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p10.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p105.

<sup>39</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, London: Penguin, 1965 [1952].

<sup>40</sup> The opening citations of Eliot and Melville in the novel bear witness to Ellison's self-perceived literary company.

- 
- <sup>41</sup> Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," *Shadow and Act*, New York: Vintage International, 1995 [1953], p57.
- <sup>42</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, London: Penguin, 1965 [1952], p17.
- <sup>43</sup> Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," *Shadow and Act*, New York: Vintage International, 1995 [1953], p56.
- <sup>44</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, London: Penguin, 1965 [1952], p464.
- <sup>45</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* translated by Charles Lam Markmann, London, Pluto Press: 1986.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> See for example bell hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance," *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, London: Turnaround, 1991.
- <sup>48</sup> *Invisible Governance: The Art of African Micropolitics*, New York: Autonomedia, 1994.
- <sup>49</sup> Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, New York: Grove Press, 1965.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid. p47.
- <sup>51</sup> *Invisible Man*, p34.