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Invisible Man and The Bluest Eye***

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## ***"Regarde le nègre!": Race, (In)Visibility and Subjecthood in Invisible Man and The Bluest Eye***

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The moment in *Black Skin, White Masks* where Frantz Fanon, the Martinique-born theoretician, psychiatrist and anti-colonial thinker, finds himself the object of a young white boy's horror and fascination, is an experience dizzying in loaded meaning. "*Maman, regarde le nègre! J'ai peur!*" I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible [...] assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema,"<sup>1</sup> writes Fanon, describing an instant where his subjecthood is brushed aside for the sheer signifying power of his skin colour. The child's fearful and objectifying utterance is all the more capable of such a psychically-inflicted and -inflected blow, for it is an expression both unconscious and revelatory of vast socio-cultural layers of racialised thinking. This is a useful place from which to begin because it also demonstrates the important role of (in)visibility in the complex relations between race and subjecthood. Fanon's position as "the Negro" here has him "snared visually by the accusatory look of the young white child"<sup>2</sup> as much as by the weight of the historically sanctioned racism haunting the exclamation. Under the gaze of Whiteness, his body has become both a site of erasure - the "corporeal schema crumbled" - and it has simultaneously been reduced to its most visible, superficial, "epidermal" component. With the exclamation, "see the Negro!" comes the unspoken but psychically reassuring, "see we are *not* Negroes", an interdependency that

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<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lamm Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 84.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Lane, *The Psychoanalysis of Race* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), 30.

Fanon foreshadows in his impassioned introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*: "the Negro is not. No more so than the White". The signifying capabilities of both are complex and above all, interdependent. Race is used "both as a category to organise group self-awareness and as a concept organising individual subjectivities".<sup>3</sup> Fanon is thrown by the child's accusatory look, because within it lies a demand of identification. Be, *for* an Other; be Negro, so as to secure our collective investment in Whiteness as a sign of "whole" subjecthood.

*Black Skin, White Masks* is an exposé of the ideological apparatus of colonialism, but it is also thus deeply concerned with how race and subsequently racism is constituted at a psychological level, both in the individual unconscious and its eruptions in the form of collective, socio-cultural practices. Fanon argues that insofar as the black man thinks and acts subjectively like a white man, he encounters himself as a phobic object. Linking the beginnings of this to the Lacanian mirror-stage, he reads the Antillean child's disavowal of his colour alongside the white child's inability to introject the Other's image: "for the Antillean the mirror hallucination is always neutral [...] I always ask them, 'What colour were you?' Invariably they reply, 'I had no colour'".<sup>4</sup> To read the implications of Fanon's observation, Homi K. Bhabha in his foreword to the 1986 edition points out that in this case, the image of "the Other [in the mirror] must be seen as the necessary negation of a primordial identity - cultural or psychic - that introduces the system of differentiation which enables the 'cultural' to be signified as linguistic, symbolic, historic reality".<sup>5</sup> In no ambiguous terms, Fanon's reading of Lacan posits the real Other to the white man as, always, the black man. The Antillean's disavowal of the "fact" of his blackness is a latent manifestation of this basis of exclusion: excluding, in effect, their own colour, and misplacing their ego ideal of wholeness onto an Other that has "no colour".

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen P. Knadler, *The Fugitive Race: Minority Writers Resisting Whiteness* (Jackson: Mississippi UP, 2002), xii.

<sup>4</sup> Fanon, 125.

<sup>5</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, by Frantz Fanon (London: Pluto Press, 1986), xxx.

The political urgency of Fanon's writing is at times accused of resulting in a simplification of psychoanalytic concepts in service of delineating the cultural and racial fantasies of colonialism, as possibly is the case with his reading of the Lacanian mirror stage. Vicky Lebeau argues, for instance, that Fanon's insistence on "the black man legitimated as object of phobic rage [...] risks collapsing the distinction between unconscious and cultural formations of fantasy".<sup>6</sup> Yet Fanon has here taken psychoanalytic concepts and imbued them with corporeality, keeping connected the bodily, visual and symbolic in relation to his concern with the psychological effects of colonialism. Indeed, the "foregrounding of race by both Fanon and Bhabha raises the question of historicising psychoanalysis more forcefully",<sup>7</sup> without the implication that such a psychoanalysis which does not recoil from situating the self culturally need be a "reduction" of theory. Indeed, the two facilitate one another, especially with regards to an exploration of race in conjunction with (in)visibility and the constitution of subjecthood. This conjunction is illustrated by Kalpana Sheshadri-Crooks, who proposes their interdependency lies in that "racial anxiety, the unconscious anxiety that is entailed by the sight of racial difference, has its cause not in ideology, but in the structure of race itself, and in the functioning of its master signifier, "Whiteness".<sup>8</sup> The black body is therefore *de facto* deformed or fragmented. Fanon argues this is precisely what is interiorised at the sight of the black body in the mirror, where the Antillean claims the "uncoloured" Self instead of the visible, black self-image, which is Othered. The misidentification reveals anxiety at the sight of racial difference. Investigating the functionings of this master signifier, Whiteness, as the "regime of visibility"<sup>9</sup> Sheshadri-Crooks proposes it to be, reveals how it creates raced subjects then denies them subjecthood at the level of the individual unconscious. This invokes, as with Fanon's Antillean child, the internalisation of the colour bias.

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<sup>6</sup> Vicky Lebeau, "Psychopolitics: Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*," in *Psycho-Politics and Cultural Desires*, eds. Jan Campbell and Janet Harbord (London: UCL Press, 1998), 116.

<sup>7</sup> Jan Campbell and Janet Harbord, *Psycho-Politics and Cultural Desires*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Kalpana Sheshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (London: Routledge, 2000), 32.

<sup>9</sup> Sheshadri-Crooks, 21.

Subjecthood is also thus denied at the level of *collective* socio-cultural practice, in what Toni Morrison identifies as "the age-old ontological utility of race".<sup>10</sup> To investigate this requires both the aid of psychoanalytic theory, particularly Lacan's thought on the symbolic order in his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1973), and texts that contextualise race-relations and their psychic dimensions within the corporeal realities of the *hyper-visibility* and *invisibility* of the black body. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) are two such texts that contain rich meditation on the complex, harrowing, objectifying and sometimes empowering negotiations demanded, often at a psychological level, from the subject raced by the functionings of Whiteness. Examining where race is located within these novels, how it is signified and made (in)visible, and questioning its mechanisms in granting or denying subjecthood requires an interrogation of its system of signification; this is where psychoanalysis can provide crucial tools. We must ask, how and why is seeing oneself as "lacking in Whiteness" a desubjectifying psychic and social experience, and what role does (in)visibility have in both *securing* that desubjectified status, and in the *reclaiming* of subjecthood for the raced self?

In *Invisible Man* and *The Bluest Eye*, "history, memory, toleration, hatred and racism are inscribed on the bodies and minds of the characters, and in this, they 'become'".<sup>11</sup> The characters in the text are black bodies, corporeal Others, who both look out at and absorb dominant discourses and standards. Before the texts can be unpacked for their nuanced instances of assimilation and resistance, however, the racialised interior and exterior landscape they are working within need a vocabulary that problematises the identificatory power of race. To *be* for another's wholeness; to be there (seen) and raced, because there is a seer and it is Whiteness, is a system of signification that enables the ontological power of

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<sup>10</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (London: Harvard UP, 1992), 63.

<sup>11</sup> Katherine McKittrick, "Transverse Racial Geographies in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," *Journal of Feminist Geography* 7 (2000): 129.

race. It must be read through psychoanalytical theory, rather than kept separate as too material, cultural or political. This vocabulary can be supplied by Lacan's understanding of the unconscious as an entity that bridges the subject to the general economy of signification, rather than a Freudian reading of it as an inchoate inner space of repressed libidinal energies and instincts.<sup>12</sup> It is also Lacan's symbolic order, particularly the realms of the symbolic and the Real, which are helpful in sourcing the structures through which the sign of Whiteness functions to make race visible. From there, Sheshadri-Crooks provides a useful framework from which to understand how Whiteness thus sets off a chain of signification that produces the visibility of race. As meaning, for Lacan, is "something into which [man] integrates himself, which through its combinations already governs",<sup>13</sup> Sheshadri-Crooks reasons that "'Man' must find confirmation of his place in the chain of signifiers, but paradoxically he is 'man' because it is unavailable to him [...] in relation to 'race', we can assume the prevalence of a master signifier that we identify with in our unconscious, and which gives us our sense of having a racial identity".<sup>14</sup>

It is ultimately due to its visible inscription upon the body, a site fraught with the fear of fragmentation in all psychoanalytic thought, that Whiteness can function as a signifier of wholeness. Yet it is "unavailable"; it attempts to retain a lack about it, because on the level of symbolic meaning, the actual biological mark, or phenotype, does not on its own generate a hierarchy of meaning. This, for instance, keeps "race" in the symbolic realm rather than the Real (where, for Lacan, sexual difference dwells), but like everything pertaining to linguistic representation, "race" feels the disruptive effects of a brush with the Real. The self-effacing practice of the sign of Whiteness is an attempt at projecting itself to the extra-symbolic, to "wholeness" - in doing so, attempting to fill what can only be a lack, located in the Real. As

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<sup>12</sup> Sheshadri-Crooks, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II, 1954-1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1991), 307.

<sup>14</sup> Sheshadri-Crooks, 27.

"race" exists in the symbolic, the impossibility of this (the false promise of Whiteness, which itself cannot be in the Real but attempts to *appear so*) traps blackness forever as "object" (seen) by means of a false authority in what it can and cannot signify. Hence "Whiteness, by attempting to signify that which is excluded in subject constitution, the more-than-symbolic aspect of the subject, produces anxiety. There is a lack of the lack as [Whiteness] appears in that place that should have remained empty".<sup>15</sup> Sheshadri-Crooks is here again drawing from Lacan to define anxiety, which, in the case of race, Whiteness generates as it tries to signify *out* from the symbolic. It aspires to being - groundlessly signifying total, whole, human, subject, within its own hierarchic significations of part, fragment, nonhuman, object. In doing so it blocks access to lack, making it a signifier rife with anxiety in the Lacanian sense. Its attempts to imply racial difference is extra-symbolic makes the raced subject experience this anxiety, but its failure ultimately re-emphasises that "race is captured and produced by language",<sup>16</sup> it has historicity, and it cannot promise the unsignifiable, such as "wholeness" or "humanness".

For Ellison's unnamed narrator in *Invisible Man*, these racially determined discourses and racist structures persist both before and after his move from his native South to Harlem. His awareness of these structures, however, and his partaking of this "regime of visibility", gradually changes from a search for subjectivity through *high-visibility* to a self-empowering, temporary recourse to *invisibility*. The narrator recalls the time when he was a promising young orator and a keen student, [REDACTED] and describes this young self as both naïve and loaded with feelings of guilt in relation to "racial" loyalties. His grandfather advocated a kind of resistance to white racism that Bhabha echoes in his colonial discourse theory of "sly civility": on his deathbed, the narrator's grandfather tells the younger generations to "overcome 'em with yeses, agree 'em to death and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 44.

destruction".<sup>17</sup> This troubles the narrator, who is "praised by the most lily-white men of the town", "considered an example of desirable conduct", and yet in being so feels a constant twinge of guilt. Interestingly, the narrator in his retrospective clarity differentiates this guilt from what today's readers may first suspect: that he harbours some feeling of betraying his black heritage or identity with such self-effacing humility. However, we learn that this is a guilt arising from *being like* his grandfather - of being "afraid that one day white folks would look upon [him] as a traitor and [he] would be lost".<sup>18</sup> The young narrator seeks assurance against the variety of "yesses" in this world that his grandfather has alerted him to. He worries that he may be unwittingly thwarting his own chances of rising within the narrow lines delineated by white racism. Shelly Jarensky points out that it is from such a position of "powerless visibility" that the narrator's experiences lead him onto an "empowered invisibility on the lower frequencies of the cultural imaginary".<sup>19</sup> This initial position of psychic turmoil and racial anxiety, "that other life that's dead that [he] can't remember anymore",<sup>20</sup> marks the start of a growing understanding of the "relationship between visual power and discourses of dominance - patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism and whiteness".<sup>21</sup> Thus while an initial reading may determine the narrator has been rendered invisible by racist society, it is indeed this initial "high visibility", cherished by the young narrator at first, which marks his lack of agency, his objectification, and the commodification of his blackness.

His attempts at visibility under the terms set out by the master signifier of Whiteness are by default assimilated and hierarchised within the structures of seeing that sustain the signification. He aspires to Booker T. Washington, an influential leader in the African

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<sup>17</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, 2001), 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Shelly Jarenski, "Invisibility Embraced: The Object as a Site of Agency in Ellison's 'Invisible Man'," *MELUS* 35 (2010): 86.

<sup>20</sup> Ellison, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Jarenski, 86.

American community in the U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century, who was criticised as "the Great Accommodator" by civil rights organisation NAACP and figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois.<sup>22</sup> Though Ellison's satirisation of Washington here suggests he sees through accommodationist rhetoric, he is not advocating separatism either. Anne Cheng perceives that these aspirations to visibility on the young narrator's part reveal Ellison's suggestion that "such 'assimilative' fantasies are all mutually contaminating: each incident [of assimilation or accommodation in *Invisible Man*] bespeaks a mutual counter-incorporation, where the white man and the black man mime each other, both trying to approximate the certitude of their identity through the other, supported by their fantasmatic staging of the other".<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it is the extreme visibility and extreme disempowerment of his body during the scene of the Battle Royal that best illustrates this interdependent system of signification. In this scene, where the workings of the regime of visibility enabled by Whiteness construct and enact an intersection of male power and white power, the narrator, along with the other black boys and the white woman, are desubjectified and forced to fulfill the performative demands of the white male gaze. Staging black male "animality" while manipulating white female sexuality, the white male gaze can here be coded as policing black male bodies. However, it is difficult to ignore the complex sexual connotations under the visual politics of this scene as well; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reading of male homoerotic desire in the exchange of female bodies<sup>24</sup> gives rise to the likelihood that this scene utilises the extreme visibility of the white female body to render invisible the white male sexual gaze towards the black male body. "The men on the other side were waiting, red faces swollen as though from apoplexy as they bent forward in their chairs",<sup>25</sup> to watch a spectacle that this description reveals as unmistakably cathartic; if

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<sup>22</sup> See Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington, Vol 1: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856-1901* (New York: Galaxy Books, 1972).

<sup>23</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 128.

<sup>24</sup> See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992).

<sup>25</sup> Ellison, 28.

not sexually, then certainly in terms of a power-play that allows the release of covert fascination and fear. Their provocations betray their fixation on black male sexuality: "Let me at that big n-----!" "Get going black boy!" "Kill that big boy!"<sup>26</sup> The repetitive invoking of size and colour suggests the objectification of the black man as purely genital. "Since [the white male] ideal is infinite virility", Fanon writes, "is there not a phenomenon of diminution in relation to the Negro, who is viewed as a penis symbol? [...] Is the Negro's superiority real? Everyone *knows* it is not. But the prelogical thought of the phobic has decided that such is the case".<sup>27</sup> In the Battle Royal scene, racial visibility (signified in relation to Whiteness) renders the black body the phobic object, giving consistency to the signifier: to castrate, before *its* Ego is castrated. This serves to restate the apparent *wholeness* of Whiteness, under threat of imminent fragmentation from the raced body. The naked woman is utilised as an object that facilitates this theft of agency from the black boys to the white men.<sup>28</sup> The latter's empowered gaze can then render the black body the phobic object that shall re-enable the signalectic authority of whiteness and masculinity in conjunction. The phobic object, continuing to read through Lacan, functions as a signifier by representing elements in the subject's world that require a solution. The phobic object itself exists in the Imaginary, but brings these elements into the Symbolic for the subject.<sup>29</sup> A rite of paranoid castration, the Battle Royal is the creation of a visual spectacle that sets the scene for miscegenation. Both "black" and "female" can then signify what the white male gaze requires (their object-status) which can constitute its subjecthood *through* and *against* their objectification. "The subject's corporeality is itself constituted as a coherent image through the intervention of the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 21-3.

<sup>27</sup> Fanon, 123.

<sup>28</sup> Shelly Jarenski engages in detail with the gender politics of this scene in "Invisibility Embraced", and Johnnie Wilcox with its use of capital in "Minstrelsy and Electricity in Ralph Ellison's 'Invisible Man'." *Callaloo* 30 (2007): 987-1009.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Seminaire Livre IV: La Relation d'Objet, 1956-1957*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 307.

signifier,"<sup>30</sup> Sheshadri-Crooks suggests, and Whiteness signifies *through* the visual politics of this horrific and complex scene, in an attempt to link racial visibility to subject/objecthood at a "pre-symbolic" level. The narrator comes to realise that the kind of "high visibility" available to the black body in this system comes at the price of signification under Whiteness. However, following the narrator's move to Harlem and his involvement with the Brotherhood, he finds the black body can also become a visual commodity in the service of ideology.

After giving an impassioned speech to the onlookers in a Harlem eviction, Ellison's narrator is overheard by a member of the Brotherhood and initiated into its ideology and political aims, becoming a representative voice of the interests of black Harlem. Even though the narrator aligns himself with the Brotherhood against the black nationalist movement led by Ras the Exhorter, he begins to chafe at the clearly delineated identity thrust upon him by the Brotherhood's highly corrective and scientific application of a socialism that both sees "the people" as the agent of history, *and* makes sole claim to knowing the collective will. The narrator at first relishes in the class- rather than race-based Brotherhood ideology: after his first speech for them, he walks away feeling like his "possibilities had suddenly broadened. As a Brotherhood spokesman [he] would not only represent [his] group but one that was much larger. The audience was mixed, their claims broader than race".<sup>31</sup> However, following his speech, many Brotherhood members accuse him of provoking the audience into mob psychology. The tension foreshadows that another kind of self-effacement is expected from the narrator in order to access these "broadened possibilities". After Brother Westrum accuses him of self-promotion, the narrator soon begins to see how the subordination of individual identity within the Brotherhood often functions in favour of authority struggles rather than in service of Harlem: "'Brother, you were not hired to think.' He was speaking very deliberately

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<sup>30</sup> Sheshadri-Crooks, 35.

<sup>31</sup> Ellison, 353.

and I thought, So... So here it is, naked and old and rotten. So now it's out in the open..."<sup>32</sup>

Although the narrator has long-renounced the kind of visibility he strove towards by pleasing the white and powerful in his youth, he finds himself subject to a system utilising some individuals to suit certain others. These uses can often turn out to be racially objectifying yet again; at the first Brotherhood meeting he attends, some voice misgivings about the narrator being "black enough" to relay the pulse of black Harlem. Throughout his work the narrator begins to see that "racial unconsciousness may not exist as a bedrock or foundation but rather as a technology - a technology that must be disguised as nontechnical and internal",<sup>33</sup> even by those who profess commitment to social progress in terms that apparently reject race-rhetoric. The narrator is objectified and his identity effaced even in his moments of high political visibility. Since Ellison draws from and criticises aspects of group ideology and radical politics throughout *Invisible Man*, the narrator's disillusionment with the Brotherhood, his non-identification with Ras, and his retreat underground can easily be read as a renouncement of political action for private contemplation and individualism. Thomas A. Vogler<sup>34</sup> and Julia Eichelberger<sup>35</sup> argue that a "suspicious humanism" or a heteroglossic, democratic individualism is being posed instead. However, keeping in mind the connections between subjecthood and (in)visibility Ellison sustains throughout the novel, the epilogue hints that Ellison's seemingly politically disillusioned and psychically drained narrator is actually experiencing a heightened sense of self and collective potential. For instance, his identity is, interestingly, at its most invisible when his presence is *most* visible, imitating a man called Rinehart around the streets of Harlem. A chameleon of a figure, Rinehart is recognisable through all the objects that collectively signify him; the narrator easily passes for the man himself by dressing like him and performing his various "types": "poppa-stopper", "daddy-o",

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 469.

<sup>33</sup> Cheng, 167.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas A. Vogler, "Invisible Man: Somebody's Protest Novel," in *Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Hersey (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 149.

<sup>35</sup> Julia Eichelberger, *Prophets of Recognition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1999), 57.

the "stylin" one, "Reverend". Rinehart is form without substance, and as the narrator begins to realise these various "types" and their ontological power are a question of *positionality*; he finds such *strategic* de-individualisation is easily accessible and not nearly as socio-culturally "invisible" as he originally thought. As Cheng identifies, Rinehart interrogates racial essence *alongside* critiquing an uncompromising individualism: "a parable for plurality, a continually resignifiable sign [...] he exposes that racialisation is always a matter of style rather than essence - a performance of type that can be either self-stereotyping or self-identifying".<sup>36</sup> Only through that brush with disidentification, of consciously done identity-play, can the narrator then come to see that neither psychically internalising his racialisation (whether in service of the Mr. Nortons or Brother Jacks of the world) nor disavowing its signifying power ("Must I strive towards colourlessness?"<sup>37</sup>) can expose and negotiate the constructedness of the link between Whiteness and subjecthood. Yet negotiate he must, in order to arrive at a subjecthood that is both aware of the signifying limits of Whiteness-as-wholeness, and has "a socially responsible role to play", from a *position*, not a self, that is fragmented.

Multiple positionality, Ellison's narrator finds, is neither desubjectifying, nor overdetermined by the system of signification installed by Whiteness. "Why, if they follow this conformity business they'll end up forcing me, an invisible man, to become white, which is not a colour but the lack of one,"<sup>38</sup> he thinks. William Schafer reads both black and white as here negative,<sup>39</sup> but negative in more senses than that the invisible man is socially invisible in his blackness, or that whiteness is exempt from the raced bodies it generates. The "negative" positionality or lack of a racially determined embodiment that here suggests "an invisible man" is one of a humanistic, anti-essentialising transparency. In a Kristevan "abject"

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<sup>36</sup> Cheng, 132.

<sup>37</sup> Ellison, 575.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 577.

<sup>39</sup> William Schafer, "Ralph Ellison and the Birth of the Anti-Hero," in *Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 123.

position, Jarenski identifies, the narrator's invisibility in the epilogue is "the liminal space between 'I' and 'other' [...] allowing him to experience the fiction of these positions [black and white] and imagine possibilities beyond them".<sup>40</sup> The narrator's underground retreat is a non-position in which to assimilate these implications, and to reconstitute imagination as the key to "a new form of agency that acknowledges embodiment and difference without objectification".<sup>41</sup> Subtly, rather than implying the narrator now believes *race* does not exist - as its socio-cultural functionings are undeniable - his meditation on conformity is pointing out *Whiteness*, as a sign of wholeness rather than the mere biological phenotype, does not exist. From this position, the Lacanian mirror stage as the basis for subject-constitution is separated from the signifying of the colour of the subject that looks back. As a visual act, the psychic effort at self-identification within that moment is inevitable, but if that identification with wholeness can be severed from the visibility of the marks upon the body through a *collective reimagining*, the moment of subject-constitution need not be, simultaneously, the moment a regime of visibility implements itself. Though Ellison's narrator acknowledges the intimidating depth and breadth at which this reimagining needs doing, he defends that its tools are there "not in prophecy, but description".<sup>42</sup> In taking direction from the "many strands" of humanity, and exposing the impossible promise of a system of signification valorising singular wholeness, the narrator does indeed engage in an act of citizenship in his temporary retreat. There he formulates his argument "for the mobilisation of visuality in support of humanism and tolerance"<sup>43</sup>; his self-identification with invisibility is anti-hegemonic rather than anti-visual in its eventual aim. Whatever role of social responsibility

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<sup>40</sup> Jarensky, 105.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>42</sup> Ellison, 577.

<sup>43</sup> Kamyar Cyrus Habib, "Visible but Unseen: Imagination, Insight and Identity in 'Invisible Man' and 'The Satanic Verses'" (MLitt diss., University of Oxford, 2006), 79.

he will emerge to undertake will be "transparent" and open enough to imagine *through* and *from* the "chaos against which that pattern was conceived".<sup>44</sup>

Utilising the discourse of the visual to overcome the psychically damaging equating of blackness with fragmentation, Ellison's narrator leaves us having negotiated some extent of self-empowerment, with the imagining of a potential space for collective empowerment to follow. However, the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove, is a young black girl from the Ohio of the 40's; psychically vulnerable and living in a difficult family environment, she has thoroughly internalised the lack of worth she has received from others. Justine Baillie points out that indeed the strength of Morrison's critique of codified and institutionalised white language and ideology lies behind the deceptively simple story of this "lonely black girl, whose desire for blue eyes as both the ultimate symbol of whiteness and the key to acceptance and love drives her to madness".<sup>45</sup> *The Bluest Eye* addresses these intertwined issues of race, visibility and subject/objectification through places, characters and symbols delineating both their personal and public manifestations. Many of Morrison's characters despise their own blackness and participate in a collectively willed positioning of fellow victims within that regime of looking, to create for themselves a position of "false" subjectivity. Having accepted racialised thinking for a degree of self-orientation in a social and economic hierarchy otherwise unexplainable, they measure their private decisions, social customs, and domestic arrangements according to this very "hierarchy of dominance, usually hoping to receive affirmation within a racist value system".<sup>46</sup> The psychic hostility towards selfhood and identity-building in such an environment is encapsulated by Morrison's evocation of a barren land, invoked at both ends of Pecola's story: "It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds. Once

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<sup>44</sup> Ellison, 580.

<sup>45</sup> Justin Baillie, "Contesting Ideologies: Deconstructing Racism in African-American Fiction," *Women: A Cultural Review* 14 (2003): 25.

<sup>46</sup> Eichelberger, 63.

we knew, our guilt was relieved only by fights and mutual accusations about who was to blame [...] It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding".<sup>47</sup> So Claudia, Pecola's classmate, begins to narrate. In closing, she readdresses this misplaced blame with clarity and anger: "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers [...] and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live".<sup>48</sup> The hegemony of the white ideal renders the land toxic to the social groups and its most vulnerable individuals that look to it for psychic self-valuation and socio-economic sustenance. Pecola sees all around her the advantages enjoyed by those who appear to have what her hostile society values. She internalises its teachings in her unquestioning acceptance of an identity constructed *for* her - a "pit of blackness", a lack, a siphon for *dis*identification, for those who could gain "beauty astride her ugliness".<sup>49</sup> The love shown Maureen Peel, a "high-yellow" and green-eyed classmate, her mother Pauline's tenderness towards her white employer's child, and even the unseeing eyes of Mr. Yacobowski as she purchases Mary Janes, tells Pecola "that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights - if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different".<sup>50</sup> The eyes that "held the pictures, knew the sights", or the eyes that see rather than being seen, that can signify Whiteness and thus partake of the subjecthood denied her racialised object-body, reveal her internalisation of the colour bias. However, Morrison suggests more, as they also function as the psychic indicator of the tipping-point, or identity-result, of her final sexual victimisation.

In a disjointed internal dialogue which takes place after she miscarries Cholly's child and her mental health further deteriorates, Pecola comments on her new blue eyes:

"Everybody's jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off. *Is that why nobody has*

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<sup>47</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage, 1999), 4.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

*told you how pretty they are?* Sure it is. Can you imagine? Something like that happening to a person, and nobody but nobody saying anything about it?"<sup>51</sup> In its naïveté, it is a question both tragic and chillingly applicable to her mother's and her community's refusal to acknowledge Pecola as a victim of incestuous rape, and of much more psychic damage besides. In underlining the complicity of all in the investment of Whiteness as a subject-/object-constitutor, Morrison suggests it is the extra-symbolic "bluest eye" itself that creates fragmentation from where there is none. It is the superlative, yet the singular: half-blind towards others (eye) and trying to signify itself alone ("I"), it sustains this self-referentiality through the collective performance of its system of signification. The master signifier Whiteness and its system of "race" as differences that make sense only in their referring back to Whiteness is firmly dependent on this exchange. "In the Imaginary and Real orders, we always have more or less, a threshold, a margin, continuity. In the symbolic order," Lacan reminds us in *Seminar III*, "every element has value through being opposed to another".<sup>52</sup> In exempting itself from the system of differentiation it establishes, Whiteness disavows its symbolic origins, but this origin reveals itself through the dependency of its signifier on the performance of its oppositions. Thus, such cyclicity subsumes not just the Pecolas of the world, but "nobody saying anything about it" become the crucial missed opportunities to call out the groundlessness of its signifying to wholeness.

Continuing to articulate through the discourse of the visual, Morrison's characterisation of Pauline and Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye* is a powerful critique of integration, as much as Pecola's psychic trauma is one of segregation, that draws from the workings of (in)visibility within race. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison frequently asserts the need to unpack and analyse "how Africanism [in white American culture and literature] is the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>52</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III, 1955-1956*, trans. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Routledge, 1993), 9.

vehicle by which the American self knows itself".<sup>53</sup> However, she is also sensitive to the individual narratives of the least socially visible, like the Pecolas, and the ease with which they can be brushed aside by an African-American nationalist vision as well as a white-supremacist one. So she "uses her representations of the past in order to create possibilities for the future of African Americans, to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not"<sup>54</sup>; such ontologically recuperative work involves both denouncing assimilational yearnings and suggesting a "return" to Africanist identity insufficiently captures the psycho-social complexity of the black community. The visual is a category she clearly finds to be key to this recuperation. Pauline Breedlove has internalised the white beauty ideal through the visual onslaught of Hollywood, and the socio-economic disparity between her life and what she sees on screen is unsurprisingly intertwined with race, aesthetics, and their power to grant or deny her subjecthood. Junior, a "coloured" boy whose mother Geraldine continuously tries to keep culturally separate from the black boys, is another example of budding identity intervened with and socially re-oriented under the system of differential relations to Whiteness. Morrison is as acute in calling out the detrimental effects on the most vulnerable of the hierarchies within collective racial identification as she is of inter-racial differentiation. "Brown girls" like Geraldine are constantly uneasy with the (in)visibility of their bodies, as the site of marks through which they may be seen (objectified) within the "wrong" category. They straighten their hair and dust themselves with talcum powder; their bodies are a source of constant visual anxiety, with all its signifying potentialities hierarchised in strict relation to Whiteness. As Christopher Douglas points out, Morrison is here "describing a typology of cultural loss. Geraldine can't change her race, but she can change her culture, and this process is described

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<sup>53</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 52.

<sup>54</sup> Baille, 32.

as loss rather than gain or transformation".<sup>55</sup> However, Douglas reads Morrison's work as unproblematically advancing the Black Arts movement of making "the trope of blackness a trope of presence" rather than absence, so he can then delineate the dangerous proximity of cultural assertion to racial essentialism. Yet in the Henry Louis Gates, Jr. quote Douglas chooses, Gates actually continues with, "...blackness is produced in the text only through a complex process of signification. [...] Figuration is indeed the 'n-----'s occupation".<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, Morrison's critique of Geraldine, Pauline and others internalising the colour bias to the detriment of their own subjecthood is not a suggestion that an "essential" blackness, if recovered, can be the new site of the wholeness misplaced upon Whiteness. *The Bluest Eye* instead exposes the impossibility of that act of signification, disbelieving the extra-symbolic status both discourses assign racial difference. "The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye"<sup>57</sup> rings like a subtle warning on the final page, linking the state of subjecthood to whoever possesses the agency to signify the other. The lover's gift of love creates a "loved", an object "frozen in the glare" of, rather than *seen*, by the inward eye. Gifting the promise of totality/ideal body ego desubjectifies the recipient, for the "loved" accepts that something was forever lost *and* never had. The ontological (in)visibility remains, to be negotiated always, in relation to an absent signifier. Morrison implies this should be waylaid and uncovered in its workings in relation to race, rather than allowed regeneration in various forms of affirmative or disavowing identificatory pressures.

*The Bluest Eye* never severs the complex connection between its portrayals of the internal self-racialisation of the individual characters and the socio-political pressures that generate and regenerate the hierarchic system of signifying difference which makes such self-

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<sup>55</sup> Christopher Douglas, "Culture, Race and Identity in *The Bluest Eye*," *American Literature* 78 (2006): 144.

<sup>56</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), 237.

<sup>57</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 204.

disidentification possible. In his speech before the First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Paris, 1956, Fanon sustains throughout his argument the inefficacy of reading racism and racist society through exclusively either unconscious fears or cultural-historic observations. Rather, "these virtualities, these latencies [of prejudice] circulate, carried by the life-stream of *psycho-affective, economic relations...*"<sup>58</sup> (italics mine) This is precisely the nuance of Morrison's novel in its investigation and denouncement of a regime of looking that internalises such incapacitating racial thinking in Pecola and her wider community.

Morrison's novel occupies socio-historically different ground to Fanon, but is arguably concerned with the same psycho-affect, particularly as it manifests in a *visual* economy shaped by a system of differentiation groundlessly signifying back to Whiteness. This affect is one of a constant fear of identifying the Self through the "black Other", who was seen mirrored and then rejected as incomplete. This fearfulness of a constant excess, high-visibility or "over-signification", is a dialectic with guilt and inferiority as their consequences.<sup>59</sup> *The Bluest Eye* lays bare this double bind that races the black subject: the demand to signify Whiteness and the simultaneous demand to remain object to the signifier. As race exists in the symbolic, not the Real, the impossibility of this (the false promise to wholeness of Whiteness) traps the signified "less-than-Whiteness" forever to object (seen). It offers various modes of invisibility (various significations, all in some way, "lack") for self-identificatory purposes instead; all result in numerous manifestations of the same psycho-affect, from Pecola's will-to-blue-eyes, to the internal hierarchies and self-censure amongst the collectively racialised of Lorain.

A human desire to recognise and receive worth, to make no one object just as you want to remain subject, ultimately resonates throughout *The Bluest Eye* as the exchange that

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<sup>58</sup> Frantz Fanon, "Racism and Culture" in *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 41.

<sup>59</sup> Fanon, 38-9.

can mean psychic healing in the face of racial objectification. *The Bluest Eye* identifies the cruxes, and demands a "making visible" of these potential points of intervention into the false signalectic authority of Whiteness. Identity and self-worth can then be nurtured without all having to start from a default place of negation: hierarchically pre-determined, pre-*seen*, in all they can and will be. For racial visibility is located precisely at this point of interrogation: it is "the level at which race, or more properly its master signifier "Whiteness" aspires to being".<sup>60</sup> It is able to signify "being" or subjecthood by attempting to signify out of the symbolic and to a "wholeness" which must remain a lack located in the Real. Simultaneously it configures all within its system of signification as fragmented, incomplete, desubjectified in hierarchical relation to its own groundless attempts to self-locate in the extra-symbolic. It can do so through the visibility of the mark on the body, the unsignifying biological phenotype which it can imbue with the sign of "coloured" or "raced", from which it can extricate itself as that which has "no colour"; the originary *and* the exempt. Whiteness denies the subject its sovereignty in its symbolic overdetermination, and visibility is its key vassal of signification. If race supplies its own guarantee by thus equating Whiteness with being, then despite the initial signifying act being groundless, once signified, "man isn't master in his own house",<sup>61</sup> and the chain of relations sees race "establishing and preserving difference for the ultimate goal of sameness, in order to reproduce the desire for Whiteness".<sup>62</sup> Being raced is being seen, being object, being signified: it is a loss of subjecthood, brought about under the regime of visibility implemented by a signifier in itself seemingly "absent" from the symbolic order, but is in fact very much constructed *through* it. Linguistically, culturally, historically produced, it however *functions* through a system of signification which utilises visibility to subject those it renders "raced" to this promise. The psychic effects of this are, as Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* explore, very much latent at both an

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<sup>60</sup> Sheshadri-Crooks, 29.

<sup>61</sup> Lacan, *Seminar II*, 307.

<sup>62</sup> Sheshadri-Crooks, 56.

individual and a collective level. Yet due to its dependence on (in)visibility, this system of desubjectification reveals itself to some of the characters in these novels - sometimes it is glimpsed, but sometimes it is "much, much, much too late".<sup>63</sup> These two texts suggest how the functionings of Whiteness invests everyone into this regime with promises of a little "false" visibility. Exploring the psychic and social costs of such an investment, they then lay bare the groundless and tyrannical hierarchy made possible by the master signifier of Whiteness. Problematizing the tools it works with - the seeing and unseeing of the raced subject - Ellison and Morrison attempt to draw attention to its limits of signification. They clear a space for, but do not singularly define, a future political and cultural intervention that is forewarned of the complex, and exploited, interdependency of race, (in)visibility and subjecthood.

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<sup>63</sup> Morrison, 204.

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