

“I Believe in Nothing If Not in Action:”

African American Humanism and (Embodied) Agency

Alexandra Hartmann

ABSTRACT: This article explores African American humanism and reflects on its relationship with Enlightenment humanism, anti-, and posthumanism. It regards African American humanism as an alternative to these philosophies based on an analysis of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and explores how the novel conceptualizes agency. It does so in focusing on three elements: (1) the rejection of authorities, (2) (dis)embodiment, and (3) relationality and concrete action.

KEYWORDS: African American humanism, Black humanism, Posthumanism, Agency, Body, Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Introduction

What is the human? When approaching this question, humanist, antihumanist, and posthumanist theories come to different and in many respects mutually exclusive answers. Anti- and posthumanism have supposedly rendered humanism, which stresses the extraordinary value and agency of humans, obsolete. Yet, political and social crises time and again rekindle reflections on human dignity, justice, responsibility, and agency. Who has to help whom? On what basis? Answers to these questions tend to rely on a humanistic understanding of the human because they frequently point to the dignity of all human beings and the need for humanitarian help. The specific characteristics of humanism differ across the various humanisms that exist but they all center on the idea that humans are central and marked by a dignity that sets them apart from other beings. Paul Kurtz asserts that humanisms locate humans at the center of existence and of being in the world and ultimately render them responsible for both good and evil. Humanists thus attribute humans with great meaning and grant them primacy over institutions and metaphysical ideas (2).

In this paper, I focus on African American humanism,¹ a frequently overlooked version of humanism that I take to constitute an alternative to Enlightenment humanism and posthumanism. It is a humbler version of humanism that, while acknowledging the value and

1 I will be using the terms African American humanism and black humanism interchangeably. This is for matters of style and space only as they denote the same worldview.

dignity of non-human beings much like posthumanists do, maintains a privileged view of the human status and equips humans with contingent agency. It is thus situated between humanism and anti-/posthumanism. Against this backdrop, I argue that Ralph Ellison's 1952 *Invisible Man* can be seen as a perfect example of this philosophy. I propose that looking at notions of agency in *Invisible Man* reveals the ways in which human subjectivity is framed in black humanism in all its contingencies. These contingencies involve specific sociohistorical circumstances—being black in Jim Crow America in the case of *Invisible Man*. They also involve reflections on what it means to be human in general, being shaped by society and shaping it in turn. Subjectivity in both black humanism and in *Invisible Man* involves acknowledging the situatedness of being in the world and does not involve a turn to a transcendental human self. Moreover, my analysis sheds light on the chances that arise when black humanism is acknowledged and taken seriously by the humanities. Black humanism holds great potential for contemporary discussions of the human and the human condition and, as I will show, actually prefigures much of posthumanism. Posthumanism is in parts only reiterating concepts of black humanism.

In order to show this, I will briefly comment on the relationship of humanism, anti-, and posthumanism and present contemporary revivals of humanism. I will then go on to define black humanism as a worldview and point to its central elements. This provides the theoretical framework of my analysis of agency in *Invisible Man* which I focus on a rejection of authorities, (dis)embodiment, and relationality as well as the need for concrete action.

On the Relationship between Humanism, Anti-, and Posthumanism

Criticizing Humanism: Anti- and Posthumanism

Antihumanism has dominated Western discourses for more than half a century represented by leading figures such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Francois Lyotard. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, (critical) posthumanism has been a central framework in theoretical discourses. Both anti- and posthumanism consider humanism outdated and obsolete because it clings to an idea of the human as the measure of all things that postmodernity deems overcome. Antihumanists—their respective differences notwithstanding—have announced the “death of Man” (Foucault 342), deconstructed the

subject (Derrida), and revealed humanism to be just another “grand narrative [that] has lost its credibility” (Lyotard 37). Humanism’s central category, the enlightened, rational, and free-willed subject, does not exist in its privileged position any longer. The human is revealed as a concept and/or category that heavily relies on the construction of its ‘Others.’

The work of postmodernism and antihumanism is taken up and continued by most posthumanists, even though posthumanism is in itself very diverse and it remains difficult to identify a unified movement. Rosi Braidotti describes the posthuman project as follows: “The posthumanist perspective rests on the assumption of the historical decline of Humanism [as already inherent in antihumanism] but goes further in exploring alternatives, without sinking into the rhetoric of the crisis of Man. It works instead towards elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject” (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 37). Braidotti sees antihumanists as hamstrung by their findings. Posthumanism, on the other hand, Braidotti argues, is able to present affirmative alternatives to the human and to put antihumanism to productive use.² Posthumanists are generally open to and optimistic about technological and scientific developments. Integrating technological advances and new findings of animal studies, posthumanists picture a world entirely post-dualistic, without any hierarchies, with fluid identities, and with an equality of all things, both animated and not. There is no such qualitative entity as *the human*. The human is nothing but one of many species of the same dignity and importance (Ferrando 32). In that sense, I consider posthumanism an extension of antihumanism.

Postcolonial scholars and feminists such as Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler, and Susan Bordo have readily embraced and contributed to postmodern and antihumanist findings and included them as the basis for analyses in their works. In that sense, “postcolonialism [and feminism] counter [...] the exclusions of humanist thought through an

2 While posthumanism tries to put antihumanism to productive use, I argue that posthumanism has deficits of its own. One major concern is that it is rather insensitive to the experiences of marginalized groups in declaring dualisms irrelevant and/or non-existent. Braidotti’s nomadic theory, for instance, that reveals many posthumanist elements, is thus a very white and privileged approach to identity when it assumes that identities are never permanent and can be changed according to one’s liking (*Nomadic Subjects* 64). As Linda Martín Alcoff rightly insists, “The model she [Braidotti] supplies [...] seems best suited to maintain the volitional freedom for middle-class activists who can pick and choose their battles” (277). African Americans, however, all too often do not get to “pick and choose their battles.”

attempt to make the field of knowledge more representative” (Gandhi 52). Derrida’s deconstruction, in particular, has proven very fruitful. As the human was previously often exclusively defined and/or understood as white, male, heterosexual—in other words as meeting the Western norm and standard of what was considered human—it was pitted against all its ‘Others’ in binary structures, excluding them from the privileged position. As Braidotti rightly points out, some of the greatest crimes in human history were committed in the name of humanism (*The Posthuman* 18). The deconstruction of the human performed in antihumanism has opened up space for feminist and postcolonial critiques of Enlightenment humanism.³ Thus enabled, scholars critique the limited and limiting definitions of the human, ultimately broadening and sensitizing discussions of the human and human ‘nature.’ They have found ways to both uncover humanism’s crimes against humanity and to remodel the definition of the human in order to assign value to those who were previously excluded from the category ‘human’ (cf., for instance, Edward Said’s *Orientalism*).

Contemporary Revivals of Humanism and Black Humanism

Despite these recent theoretical developments of anti- and posthumanism, several scholars of the twenty-first century continue to pursue a humanistic approach. They promote a mature, fairer humanism, one that shares postmodernism’s critiques of Enlightenment humanism but still supports the idea of a privileged position of the human. For them, the human is still the measure of all things, but this entails great responsibility. Among these intellectuals are Edward Said, who supports humanism as “democratic criticism” (*Humanism*) and Sylvia Wynter, who in an interview with David Scott locates a “re-enchantment of humanism” at the intersection of Frantz Fanon’s call for a new humanism and antihumanist critiques of classical humanism (Scott 120). Cornel West aims for a “radical democracy” based on revised humanistic principles (“Black Strivings” 118). Further, Paul Gilroy imagines a “planetary humanism” (*Against Race*), while Martha Nussbaum promotes a “capabilities approach” in which she identifies central human capabilities that establish human dignity, setting humans apart from animals (76-78). Finally, the theologian and

3 I am consciously only referencing these two disciplines as they were the ones to first integrate postmodern thought into their theories. By now other disciplines such as Disability and Queer Studies have, of course, long followed suit.

Cultural Studies scholar Anthony Pinn advocates black humanism, an African American version of humanism and an alternative to its liberal equivalent.

Coming from different disciplines, these scholars claim that humanism, in a modified and revised form, is worth holding on to. What they attack is not so much humanism per se but liberal/Enlightenment humanism that has all too often served as a basis for the discrimination and mistreatment of people not considered normative in a Western, patriarchic society, such as people of color. These scholars are well aware of “the connection between [liberal] humanism and dehumanization” (Scott 119); however they do not feel the need to give up on the idea of humanism altogether. As Said puts it, “it is the abuse of humanism that discredits some of humanism’s practitioners without discrediting humanism itself” (*Humanism* 13). He is further convinced that “[i]t is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism and that, schooled in its abuses of Eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism” (10-11). According to Said, “true humanism” (18) is nothing but a critique of the status quo and constantly aims at human amelioration. It is not satisfied with injustices and does not stop struggling until these have been removed (21f). I thus agree with Said that the self-satisfactory strands of humanism criticized by anti- and posthumanists do exist, but it is a hasty mistake to overlook humanism’s (self-)critical elements.⁴

With this in mind, I argue that African American humanism is a prominent example of this modified and self-critical humanism and an alternative to posthumanist approaches. Black humanism is of such interest and importance because it has not made the mistakes that European, Enlightenment humanism has. It is not Eurocentric and it is sensitive towards minorities and the marginalized as it is based on the racialized experiences of African Americans in the U.S. context (Pinn, “Introduction” 9f). It is thus not centered on the experiences of the white, male, and heterosexual subject. Instead, it asserts, as Cornel West

4 Braidotti draws on Said and Gilroy as two main sources of her posthumanist approach and considers both to be anticipating posthumanism, displaying “a situated cosmopolitan posthumanism” (*The Posthuman* 46). Interestingly, both Said and Gilroy have called for a revival of humanism and do not consider themselves post- or antihumanist. What they do reject is the Enlightenment humanism, that is one version of humanism, but not the idea altogether. Quite to the contrary, they both do not stop and despair at the death of Man but rework it productively while holding on to an elevated vision of the human.

puts it, African American humanity neither above nor below but among the human race (*Prophecy* 71). Black humanism is a version of humanism that might actually be able to live up to its promise with its inclusive approach that puts humans at the center of the world but in responsibility for themselves, others, and nature, including animals and the environment. It humbles humans without completely unseating them as it continues to see qualities and abilities in humans that non-human, particularly non-animated entities, do not share. As Pinn contends: “African American humanism understands an unchecked anthropology of progress as intimately connected to the dynamics of white supremacy, sexism, homophobia, environmental destruction, and so on. In an effort to fight these types of oppression African American humanism [...] promotes the integrity of life in more general” (*Humanism* 25). African American humanism’s sensitivity for and awareness of injustices and differences makes it a philosophy with greater potential for humanity as a whole than Enlightenment humanism as well as posthumanism.

Black humanism has long contained elements that posthumanists currently promote, but, unlike in posthumanism, the human remains the primary focus of the discourse. Unfortunately, black humanism has been widely overlooked and disregarded as a philosophy of its own by Western discourses. This makes posthumanism a rather limited school of thought, as it fails to acknowledge the diversity of the humanist tradition. In its dismissal of Enlightenment humanism, it rejects humanism in general too hastily, failing to take notice of the potential of black humanism, for instance.⁵ In doing that, it repeats some of the shortcomings it has criticized humanism for.

As Pinn shows, black humanism is a worldview that has always been present in African American intellectual thought and culture but has often been drowned by the dominant Black Church (*Why Lord?* 11). Similarly, literary scholars have also frequently overlooked it in African American literature and tended to focus their analyses on black theism and religion. This reflects the common (mis)conception that most African Americans are very religious: Sikivu Hutchinson points to this fact when she states that African Americans still face doubt

⁵ A focus on black humanism of course leaves those minority humanisms out of sight that find their roots in other cultures. No claim is made that African American humanism is the only one of its kind. Confucianism, for instance, is an Eastern humanism that developed independently from Enlightenment humanism. In focusing on African American humanism, I aim to broaden the humanist spectrum.

and suspicion when they declare themselves atheists. Consequently, “atheism remains a largely taboo belief system in black communities” (4). The notion of atheist blacks challenges the concept of stereotypical blackness that is associated with religiosity, spirituality, Church, and gospel. Black humanism has also been ignored—and this should not come as a surprise—by white discourses as a recognition of it is lacking in posthumanist theories.

Black humanism is, like other secular humanisms, a primarily non-theistic worldview.⁶ It represents the conviction that *humans* are responsible for and in charge of their lives since there is no metaphysical entity to turn to. It thus also moves away from the dominant black Christian and theistic tradition. Black humanists advocate a highly earthly worldview that stresses the importance of the everyday, of the here and now. Humans are considered responsible for both the good and the bad. Consequently, discriminating circumstances can be overcome with human, oftentimes physical and embodied struggle. Even though black humanism shares these features with humanism in general, it is all the more important for the historically marginalized African Americans; this perspective opens up room for black agency. Yet, it is not a blindly optimistic outlook as black humanists acknowledge that success—neither in the sense of major societal changes, nor individual improvement—is guaranteed.⁷ Rather, the ability and capability to struggle constitutes the human status and this is where measured hope lies (Pinn, *Why Lord?* 141).

Therefore, a central category of black humanism is human and especially African American agency.⁸ An admittedly broad definition of agency refers to an individual’s capacity to make

6 Throughout this paper, I will follow Pinn’s terminology and use theism and non-theism instead of religion and atheism for the most part. As Pinn makes clear, religion does not necessarily involve faith in God or any other metaphysical being but denotes the individual’s engagement in “the quest for complex subjectivity” (Pinn, *End of God-Talk* 6). Thus, non-theism does not equal a rejection of religion per se.

7 When compared to Afro-Pessimism, black humanism is a guardedly optimistic view of the world. Whereas many Afro-Pessimists lack confidence and hope in a better future and altered race relations—blackness to them still equals a “social and civic death” (Weier 421) because African Americans even in the 21st century are “always already positioned as slave[s]” (Wilderson 7)—, black humanists embrace the possibility of equality of all humans. They, however, do not fall into naïve notions all too often encountered in post-blackness. They are well aware of the fact that being black results in oftentimes unjust experiences. This does not lead them to despair though.

8 Popular with many posthumanists are Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory and Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory. Cary Wolfe, for instance, uses Luhmann’s theory, deconstruction, and animal studies to develop his own posthumanist framework in *What is Posthumanism?* (2010). Traditionally, systems theory leaves little room for agency, at least in any way that resembles familiar definitions. Recently,

a decision about him-/herself and act accordingly under given circumstances and structures, in a given historical and social context (Bast 27). It also includes conscious decisions not to act and to remain still. Following Harvey Young's argument, resistance can take the form of "stillness," for instance when it disobeys orders (Young 6). The Enlightenment subject framed as governed by free will and completely autonomous does not exist in black humanism. But a subject that is capable of making a difference and acting on the world exists nonetheless. These actions though do not always generate positive outcomes or bring about consequences at all. Sometimes, meaning lies in an action itself and it is not so much the good or evil that might follow from it that makes it important. Trying to implement a change matters already (Pinn, *Humanism* 125).

This concept of agency is interconnected with the body and its corporeality. Scholars from different academic fields argue that, as Damasio puts it, for instance, "[a]gency, of course, requires a body acting in time and space and is meaningless without it" (145). Based on this, Pinn regards bodies as places of both suffering and resistance to inequalities (*Embodiment* 9-10). The workings of power structures can be resisted by embodied subjects, though only within the context of power. In order to do so, the mind-body dualism often found in Western thought and in African American theology is discarded by black humanists. Pinn asserts the centrality of the body to identity when he states that "identity works on the body (discursive and material), and the body informs identity" (51). Catriona Mackenzie understands subjectivity as embodied. Drawing on the work of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, she argues that "we experience our bodies not as objects in the world, but as the perspective from which we perceive the world and as our mode of engagement with it" (115). Since African Americans, as a group of people, have been overwhelmingly engaged with the quest for agency, which they have very often been denied in history, the body figures large in both black humanism in general and African American (humanist) literature in particular.

there have been attempts to find more satisfactory definitions of agency in posthumanism. Posthumanists have increasingly returned to the issue of agency (cf., for instance, Andrew Kipnis "Agency between Humanism and Posthumanism: Latour and His Opponents").

The example of embodiment and corporeality aptly illustrates the relationship between black humanism and posthumanist thought: through feminist discourses since the 1990s and the New Materialisms, the importance of the (physical) body has been introduced to posthumanism (cf. Dolphijn and van der Tuin). It is a rejection of both the Cartesian mind/body dualism and the poststructuralist/antihumanist take that tends to reduce the body to language only. While this turn (or return) to the body is new to much of contemporary Western philosophical thought, it has long been present in black humanism. The body has often garnered great attention in black humanist writing.

Moreover, the idea of self-reliance⁹ is of great importance for black humanism, which ties in with the idea of agency: the individual is responsible for him-/herself and, most importantly, has the competence to put this responsibility to productive use despite the structures that influence and possibly inhibit them. However, agency is never independent from social and historical contexts, and the individual can only generate agency within these very contexts. Depending on the context, the degree of agency will therefore differ. This responsibility for the self, when taken seriously, will also result in responsibility for the greater good and for others. There is a close link between the individual and community; being is frequently framed as relational. Hence, nobody acts in isolation. Pinn thus notes that “African American humanism seeks to promote a sense of the individual within the context of ‘community’ writ large” (*Humanism* 25). Human freedom is “a freedom in responsibility as opposed to a freedom from responsibility” (63).

Many black humanist authors have a humorous and tragic take on the world, often presented in the form of signifying, riffing, and masking, which sometimes take the form of humor. This often involves a realistic but nonetheless optimistic attitude because humor, in pointing to injustices, aims at political and social change. Especially scholars such as Henry Louis Gates and Glenda Carpio have contributed to discussions about these forms of humor

⁹ Black humanism shares this feature with American culture more generally. Notions of self-reliance in black humanist fiction resonate Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ideas in his 1841 essay “Self-Reliance,” for instance. In black humanism, these notions, however, are grounded in a greater awareness of the sociohistorical circumstances of the respective times that have been more inhibiting for African Americans than whites.

in African American culture as responses to racism. Carpio has pointed to the “Janus-face identity” of black humor:

on the one hand, it was a fairly nonthreatening form that catered to whites’ belief in the inferiority of blacks but that usually masked aggression; on the other, it was a more assertive and acerbic humor that often targeted racial injustice but that was generally reserved for in-group interactions. For black Americans, humor has often functioned as a way of affirming their humanity in the face of its violent denial. (5)

The use of humor in the various forms of parody, pastiche, and slightly altered repetitions of known white patterns and narratives are examples of what Gates terms “Signifyin(g).” The humoristic elements open up room for resistance to white supremacy (238–41).

One final element of black humanism relevant here is the rejection of a naïve and thoroughly optimistic belief in the good and objectivity of science. It does not share the blind optimism about science so often encountered in Enlightenment humanism but also in certain strands of posthumanism, particularly because African Americans have experienced how science has been put to discriminating use. Norm Allen asserts: “There are numerous instances of the use of science for evil purposes. Black humanists are likely to be aware of this fact, and are less likely to rush blindly to the defense of science whenever controversial problems arise” (159). Black humanists are aware of the abusive potential of science. The long history of medical racism, most famously displayed in the Tuskegee Syphilis experiment, accounts for this.

Black Humanism in *Invisible Man*: Narrations and Negotiations of Agency

I argue that Ellison must be considered a black humanist, and that his novel *Invisible Man* is thoroughly informed by black humanist thought. *Invisible Man* traces the nameless narrator’s quest for self-definition, identity, and his place in the world. The narrator shares both his successful and unsuccessful attempts of generating agency in a world hostile to African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. As stated in the prologue, writing from “underground,” the narrator recapitulates his life, starting when he was college-aged and ending with the events that caused him to go underground. I will focus on three major humanistic elements in the novel and the ways in which they relate to agency, namely (1)

the rejection of authorities, (2) (dis)embodiment, and (3) relationality and concrete action. All of these elements, though to differing degrees, represent attempts to generate agency and contribute to the narrator's ability to act self-efficiently. Moments of minor, but nonetheless relevant, agency function as resistance to oppression within *Invisible Man*.

Rejecting Authorities

Invisible Man frequently riffs and signifies on the Black Church and Christian beliefs (Valkeakari). Humoristic representations of Church services represent the narrator's unwillingness to accept the rhetoric of the Black Church. The novel criticizes the Black Church's approaches to questions of race and racial identity. It openly deals with the Church's inability to properly address problems of black life and present satisfactory solutions. This inability can be observed in Reverend Homer A. Barbee's literal and figurative blindness (Ellison 133). This criticism of and skepticism towards dominant institutions and thoughts in African American culture has a liberating effect on the narrator but also on the African American community more generally: because of its embrace of otherworldly salvation, a lot of the Black Church's discourse has—its political elements notwithstanding—historically stressed the importance of faith and favored patience rather than concrete action and resistance regarding discriminating circumstances. Thus, Pinn notes, “redemptive suffering,” the belief that “suffering is intrinsically ‘bad,’ but has a secondary benefit ordained by God” has been the dominant trope of the black theological stance and its engagement with problems of moral evil. In seeking action against the oppression he encounters, the narrator challenges this traditional approach while embracing a form of black humanism.

On a different but related level, the novel criticizes authorities and ideologies in general. As an initially enthusiastic member and spokesman of the Brotherhood, an organization that resembles the Communist Party, the narrator experiences how he is instrumentalized for the organization's goals. These goals do not serve the poor and marginalized of U.S. society, as the Brotherhood tries to make believe both its members and non-members. Rather, the organization becomes an end in itself. What matters is the survival of the Brotherhood at all costs, not the individual. The leader, Brother Jack, heavily criticizes and attacks the narrator after a sweeping speech that caused the discriminated to rise: “We do not shape our policies

to the mistaken and infantile notions of the man in the street. Our job is not to *ask* them what they think but to *tell* them” (Ellison 473). This attitude ultimately causes him to break with the organization. In rejecting both theism and the ideology of the Brotherhood, the narrator achieves a degree of independence and agency that he would not have gained otherwise. This sets him free to make his own decisions. Acting and behaving the way he considers right makes him feel as if he has “become *more human*” (346). In rejecting authorities, the narrator relies on himself and his own judgment, putting himself, i.e. the human, at the center. This self-reliance and critical attitude is typical of black humanism.

(Dis)Embodiment

The novel problematizes the body, its disembodiment and embodiment. It stresses instances of agency, (dis)embodiment, and embodied agency and explores how the narrator experiences his body as both disempowering and empowering, as both supplying him with agency and being used against him, i.e. as others asserting power over him. The power of others competes with his agency. This does not imply “an all-or-nothing conception of agency” (Melley 10) but rather an in-between of agency and determinism: nobody is ever entirely in charge of one’s actions and neither are these independent from historical and social circumstances. But nobody is ever entirely determined by either culture or biology (cf. Bast 31). Thus, the narrator has to negotiate, defend, and perform his agency in the context of Jim-Crow segregation. This conception of agency that heavily relies on the ability to be in charge of one’s body under specific historical circumstances is at the heart of black humanism and *Invisible Man*.

The battle royal in the opening chapter poignantly illustrates the interconnectedness of the body and agency in the novel. The narrator is stripped down at a club and forced into a fight with several other black youths. This is staged and observed by all the important and influential white men of his town (Ellison 17). The battle royal aims at the destruction of the black body, both as a biological fact—it focuses on the flesh—and as a social and cultural construction of the black brute. Not in control of his body and what is being done to him, the narrator is also unable to perform any real and self-determined agency. Sylvia Burrow assigns great value to the ability to physically resist violent attacks against oneself as this restores confidence in one’s abilities (140-41). Since the narrator, *Invisible Man*, cannot

resist the violence he is confronted with, he conceives that he “ha[s] no dignity” (Ellison 22). His body is used against his own will. The white men exert power over his body and thus also over the narrator as an agent, a person, and a subject since his physical body is a fundamental part of who he is. The protagonist experiences a complete lack of agency as the inability to control his body also leads to an inability to mentally resist dehumanization. There is no distinction between body and mind but the events of the battle royal affect him in his entirety. He can only react, not act. Here, agency is not framed as an abstract concept or as only defined by free will as in liberal humanism but builds on specific social contexts that either enable or inhibit agency. Having lost control over his physical body as an embodied being, the entire subject is rendered disempowered and without agency.

Interestingly, this experience of a lack of agency simultaneously generates agency on both a textual and an extra-textual level. Detailed descriptions of the white men observing the fight and their primitive behavior reverse the white gaze. The white audience is taken from its position of racial invisibility—whiteness is traditionally not thought of as a racial marker—and can thus be scrutinized and explored. As Toni Morrison makes clear: “A good deal of time and intelligence has been invested in the exposure of racism and the horrific results on its objects. [...] But that well-established study should be joined with another, equally important one: the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it” (11-12). This also helps to reveal that the privileged position of whiteness is not naturally given but merely a social construct. In the novel, the narrator and Ellison himself, on an extra-textual level, are in charge of representation and this makes it an act of resistance especially since representation has so often been used against African Americans and for their oppression. With this “agential act” (Bast 27), the *author* Ralph Ellison realizes and expresses his agency: it is via the act of performing and implementing the decision to write about and against the experiences of racism that agency becomes real.

The prologue and epilogue frame the narrative that recapitulates the narrator’s life up to the present. His invisibility is synonymous with disembodiment; his only way of generating agency has been that of narrating his story. Agency through narration has been part and parcel of the tradition of African American literature beginning with slave narratives. In these first-person accounts, enslaved women and men “wrote themselves into existence”

(Travis 71). In the same vein, the narrator, having shared his story, states: “Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do?” (Ellison 581). In this instance, his disembodiment only leaves him with the ability to tell his story.

Having understood his invisibility and disembodiment though, he, in the present, makes use of his corporeality to have an impact on the world. Using his body that constitutes him as an “embodied human *as a whole*” (Shilling 6) reassures him of his existence, despite his metaphorical invisibility. After he is bumped into, he explains: “[O]ut of resentment, you begin to bump back. [...] You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you’re a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it’s seldom successful” (Ellison 4). It is a constant struggle that he takes up nonetheless. Invisible Man attacks a “tall blond man” (4), provoking a physical struggle that is bound up with his mental effort to assure himself of his own importance. It is a struggle against the power of white supremacy, symbolically performed in the fight against this one white individual, and becomes a way of knowing that he can make a difference, that he has agency; that he can act in specific contexts.

Relationality and the Need for Action

Most of the narrator’s attempts to perform agency serve personal and individual interests as agency is self-referential in the first place: one can only have agency with regard to oneself, never with regard to someone else. This sets agency apart from power as agency is rather the ability to resist and/or make us of the workings of power. In an almost existentialist way, the narrator first of all has to learn to rely on himself, to reach and implement decisions that make a difference for him personally.

However, Invisible Man does integrate his agency into a larger framework. Having realized and taken up the constant struggle for ways of expressing agency, he uses his voice in sharing his story to also bring about change for others. In the epilogue, he prophesies in the American tradition of *e pluribus unum*: “Our fate is to become one and yet many” (Ellison 577). His humanist worldview thus does not promote radical individualism but speaks for the interconnectedness and relationality of individuals and community. This makes it possible to

appreciate diversity without embracing radical individualism. In narrating his story, he gains attention from those who would have otherwise looked through him because “even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (581). Because of this social responsibility, personal attempts to generate agency can and should also be beneficial for the community; personal success can and should result in the advancement of others, too. It is in this context that a central symbol of the novel emerges: Invisible Man receives a chain link from Brother Tarp, another member of the Brotherhood. Brother Tarp, after nineteen years of imprisonment for a minor crime, managed to break the chain and escape (387). The chain link, a painful reminder of both his suffering but also of his success to break free, turns into a lifesaver for the narrator when he uses it in self-defense to escape a riotous mob (560). It connects the past and the present; it connects Brother Tarp and the narrator. And so ultimately, the narrator profits from the agential act Tarp performed in running away from prison.

Simply sharing his story, however, does not suffice. The narrator is aware that he also has to take concrete action because “[w]ithout the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled ‘file and forget’” (579). Agency, here, also lies in knowledge and a historical awareness that connects future generations with both past and present ones. If this knowledge is never performed and remains abstract knowledge though, it becomes meaningless. The narrator implies that thought will be less remembered than the action resulting from it. And thus, he is underground, anticipating the right moment to reappear and take concrete action. Referring to this waiting as hibernating, he states that a “hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action” and that he “believe[s] in nothing if not in action” (13). Others will remember one’s actions, and this might in turn inspire them to take action themselves.

Despite the fact that no concrete action follows, the novel ends on this promise of future action. As “the world is possibility if only you’ll discover it” (156), it is ultimately up to everyone to grasp the “infinite possibilities” (576) and, I would add, create those possibilities in the first place. This is the underlying understanding of agency: despite concrete and historical circumstances, moments of agency can be generated through real effort and struggle. Patricia Hill Collins asserts for black feminist thought that thinking and action are

fundamentally interdependent (Collins 30). This holds true just as much for agency in *Invisible Man* and black humanism in general. Agency must be performed and enacted in order to become agency, to become reality and not stay a mere abstract and theoretical possibility of subjectivity. It involves a constant negotiation of disembodiment and embodiment, and a continuous re-actualization.

Conclusion

As I have shown, *Invisible Man* is informed by a black humanistic worldview that frames different forms of agency. Black humanists have long conceptualized and theorized ideas about the human, subjectivity, and agency in ways that contemporary theoretical discussions do now. Enlightenment humanism's focus on the subject as a disembodied, free, rational, and entirely self-determining entity rightly criticized by anti- and posthumanists has never been part of black humanism. The human and his/her abilities have always been regarded as dependent and contingent on social circumstances. Similarly, the ignorance towards others and other beings in the form of radical individualism does not find expression here. And thus, traditionally marginalized discourses—black humanism has actually suffered a two-fold marginalization by both African American intellectuals and Western humanities—are rich and valuable sources that must be treated as such and taken seriously.

Postcolonial and race scholars, in particular, find it difficult to embrace posthumanism's complete deconstruction of the human. For a group of people that has for so long fought to be granted the status of full humanity, it is not easy, and most likely of no interest, to advocate the equality of both animated and unanimated matter and to give up on the notion of the human. Though spoken from an ecological point of view, I find Stefan Herbrechter's comment troubling because he is very well aware of that fact. Herbrechter argues that "the humanist subject position, which from the perspective of the oppressed looks quite attractive, *structurally* depends on violence against nonhumans, i.e. that it ethically and ecologically may be far less desirable than it seems. [...] [T]he posthumanist critique of the humanist subject and the idea of a universalist 'humanity' cannot afford to be delayed" (200). Someone whose humanness has never been called into question might easily demand this from a privileged position.

There is another problem with posthumanism: regardless of whether an entirely post-dualistic world is desirable or not, the world is far from being one. To this day, lived experiences of racialized encounters make it very obvious that dualisms have not been overcome. Being black still entails entirely different experiences (of discrimination) than being white. So, as a group that strives for social and political change that will finally result in the end of marginalization, African Americans cannot give up on the notion that subjects, both as individuals and groups, can make a difference with their actions and struggles.

Black humanism is a humbler version of Enlightenment humanism that deserves further investigation with regard to contemporary discussions of humanism, anti-, and posthumanism. Particularly, notions of embodiment, agency, and subjectivity in black humanism are promising and represent areas that posthumanism can actually learn from. As Pinn asserts, black humanism obtains its uniqueness from dealing with issues of social justice and racism: “It’s an opportunity to appreciate what has been considered marginal to U.S. life and to understand its actual centrality” (“Confronting Racism”). With this in mind, black humanism opens up a perspective that speaks from the position of the oppressed to and for a larger audience. Hence, the narrator’s closing remark: “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (Ellison 581).

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