

The (In)Visibility of Embodied Blackness

What is the black body? Ever since the forced arrival of African Americans in the New World, this question has yielded a range of answers, to a large extent accounting for the enslavement of blacks, their liberation, but also their continued marginalization in the twenty-first century. Both blacks and whites alike have pointed to the supposedly ontological characteristics of blackness. Whites have referenced the black body in order to justify inequalities and to show the rightfulness of white supremacy. Advocating black exceptionalism and the superiority of African Americans and their culture, influential black intellectuals ranging from W.E.B. Du Bois to Martin Luther King have similarly drawn from notions of ontological blackness. Thoughts like these continue to shape contemporary discussions of social justice for blacks. However, African Americans have always also stressed the phenomenal character of the black body, revealing a long tradition of engaging ideas of embodiment. Frederick Douglass' 1845 *Narrative* already explores how the bodily experience of resistance influences cognition and leads to a positive self-perception. The body has an impact on the world while it is impacted by it at the same time. This is a rejection of the sharp mind/body dualism typical of Western literature and philosophy.

Considering Ralph Ellison's 1952 *Invisible Man* and John A. Williams' 1961 *Night Song* side by side, both of which I read as black humanist works, I will highlight African American conceptualizations of embodiment in mid-twentieth century America. I propose that the novels well illustrate the tensions around competing notions of the body, the embodied mind, and embodiment in relation to race. Bodies in *Invisible Man* and *Night Song* are contested sites of struggles as they are always already situated in time and space, but point to a historical dimension beyond the here and now; as they work self-efficiently and are yet indispensably interconnected with other bodies. I thus conduct a reading based on Linda Martín Alcoff's *Visible Identities* and Anthony Pinn's *Embodiment* that take these tensions seriously. The novels explore the ways in which the black body often accounts for simultaneous visibility and invisibility. The hypervisibility of the black body frequently coincides with a social and cultural invisibility and/or marginality. In line with Linda Martín Alcoff, I work from the assumption that "race is real" and shapes us in our individualized and nonetheless intercorporeal entreties. The interplay of and tension between the black body as flesh and material, as socially and culturally informed, and as a specific experience with and perception of the world that Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes as *sedimented* and Pierre Bourdieu as *habitual* is at the heart of the novels. Both reveal the difficulties that arise from racialized encounters but also point to chances that present themselves to alter those sediments and habitus. Analyzing the ways in which *Invisible Man* and *Night Song* frame the black body proves fruitful for a theoretical approach to a phenomenology of racial embodiment.

Bio:

Alexandra Hartmann studied English, Theology, and Sport Science at Paderborn University and Illinois State University. She is currently a research assistant, lecturer, and PhD candidate at Paderborn University. Her dissertation is located in the field of Black Studies and explores the impact of a black humanist worldview on African American literature and culture. She has published articles on evil in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, forthcoming in *Das Böse erzählen. Perspektiven aus Literatur, Film und Philosophie* (editors Eike Brock and Ana Honnacker) and on black humanism in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Her research interests further include twentieth century American literature, American intellectual history, and film.