



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
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The Black Boy | 1844 | William Lindsay Windus

INVISIBLE PORTUGUESE

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In the last two years in Portugal we have witnessed intense public debates about national identity. These have taken on a previously unheard tenor not only in terms of the currency they have accrued outside the academic world, but also in terms of the actors who have received media attention and influenced public opinion. In particular, a number of associations of young people of colour, both Portuguese and others living in Portugal, such as *DJASS*, *INMUNE* and *Plataforma Gueto* have forged significant new openings within a dominantly white public space to suggest that society reflects on its own whiteness. An example of this is the *DJASS* proposal to build a memorial to slavery, which won the Lisbon Participative Budget process in 2017/18. In the artistic field we could point to the prolific theatrical and performative output dealing with colonialism and its legacies in Portugal, by groups such as *Teatro Griot*, the *Hotel Europa* group and *Teatro do Vestido*. In the political sphere we can see change afoot, in events such as the announcement by the political party *Livre* of its electoral lists (on which Joacine Katar Moreira is second for the European elections, and first for the Lisbon area for legislative elections), or in the ongoing project for a legislative amendment to include the racial identities of Portuguese citizens and those living in Portugal in the next Census in 2021.

Ralph Ellison's 1951 novel *Invisible Man* helps me to interpret these positive changes in Portuguese public life with a cautious and critical frame of mind. I will summarise the book briefly. The narrator studies at a black college in the southern United States. When, at the age of 20, he commits the apparent crime of driving one of the college patrons through the narrator's black neighbourhood, he discovers his own invisibility. Although the narrator gave the tour at the patron's own request, the head of his faculty considers it unpardonable to have revealed the social exclusion of the black community. Doing so, he says, threatens the status quo and unequal power structure that paradoxically guarantees that the faculty remains open to black students. In the director's view, it is unacceptable to expose to well-meaning white power its own structural racism: "[Mr. Bledsoe, the director:] Did not you know you were endangering the school? - [narrator:] But I was only trying to please him ... - [Mr. Bledsoe:] Please him? And here you are a junior in college! The dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie! What kind of education are you getting around here?" (1). The narrator is expelled, and ends up in New York. There he is confronted with further injustice and social exclusion and has his individuality and subjectivity denied, whether thanks to being unable to find a job, or having his body used in violent medical experiments without his knowledge and consent. In a painful but transformative process of self-realization, he perceives his own social invisibility, and joins the clandestine struggle for civil rights. Symbolically, Ralph Ellison's narrator is anonymous: he never introduces himself, and he is never addressed by his proper name.

More than just a work on the conditions of life of African American communities in the 1930s and 40s, *Invisible Man* is an exploration of the mechanisms by which white supremacy reproduces itself, and by which it is resisted. It was to speak on these processes of resistance that Lewis R Gordon, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Connecticut, came to Coimbra on March 20th and 22nd. Under the auspices of Boaventura de Sousa Santos's Chair in the Faculty of Economics, Lewis R. Gordon held two workshops on social theory (critical, decolonial, global and other), and its limitations. One of his topics was precisely the invisibility produced by European modernity, which he interpreted through four discursive mechanisms: quantity, time, voice and knowledge. Seen through these four lenses, European modernity is inscribed today in ways of thinking and narrating societies, and therefore ways of managing them, which are *universalized* through education, and institutions such as the *university*. In the 1980s Lewis R. Gordon was a young professor at an American university which counted 14 black faculty out of a total of 3500. He spoke of how his own act of resistance against invisibility – merely walking across campus, the only one of the 14 black staff who did so – led to student protest against affirmative action and quotas.

Clearly, the European and Portuguese context is different from the American one, because modern European colonialism occurred in distant territories, and as such appeared, at least, to take place *at arm's length*. But the production of knowledge and the legacies of knowledge constitute one another. Now that the *Invisible Portuguese* are “walking across the campus”, it is crucial not to fall into the discursive trap of making these events out as just more examples of the old, vain argument that Portugal is colour-blind. They must not be tacked on to the kind of political irresponsibility exemplified in the recent visit by the Portuguese President to the *Bairro da Jamaica* (a disadvantaged neighbourhood on the outskirts of Lisbon), a visit that risks silencing the scandal of [police violence](#) in the neighbourhood, which is still under investigation. Continuing to insist on a colour-blind policy, ignoring the voices of *Invisible Portuguese*, will only maintain the ‘specific and extremely dangerous delusion made possible by the wilful forgetting, and negating, of Europe’s imperial past [...] to the point that Europe’s very future, at least its future as a democratic community of free states and a successful peace project, is seriously endangered’ (Paulo de Medeiros, [newsletter no.43](#)). Given that there is now a clear desire to uncover and resist the invisibilities embedded in society, the political, social and cultural interventions of *Invisible Portuguese* will be crucial in beginning to tell a more objective and responsible story of Portugal.

(1) Ralph Ellison (2014), *Invisible Man*. London: Penguin Books, p. 139.

Translated by Archie Davies

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