The Blank Badge and the Batsymbol:

Modes of Reading in the Comics of Grant Morrison

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King Mob
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Introduction

“Sometimes I feel like I’m writing pornography in the notebooks of the gods”.

(Grant Morrison, The Invisibles, 1147)

This is the third time I’ve written a paper on Grant Morrison’s work in The Invisibles during my time at Bard. Every time, I’ve felt like I’m doing something wrong, or that I’m defiling something sacred. The text itself is wonderfully bizarre, containing things such as the spinning head of John the Baptist singing “You Spin me Round”, and a time machine created by origami. There is an artistry in the way Morrison presents the bizarre as very matter-of-fact. Not as something trying too hard to be weird, but just as how they view the world. There is an artistry to how unrelenting the book is in the way it unsettles any assumptions the reader was able to hold onto about what is happening. My papers on it have always lost this. I try to point to signs, to tell people what The Invisibles is, and it always falls flat. My analysis is too explicit in the way it tries to read the text bare. Too pornographic. What I love about the book is how much I don’t know about it. How much I can’t know. And due to the general impetus of academic essays, I always felt the need to give something pornographically digestible about the text. This is my attempt to get away from that legacy of failures.

“And so we return and begin again”

(The Invisibles, 13)

But I’m getting ahead of myself. Now that I’ve raved about their work, introductions are in order. Grant Morrison is probably the second author I truly fell in love with (after Neil Gaiman). They’re a nonbinary scottish chaos magician (all things which might turn some readers off of them. Also all things which only make me love their work even more). They primarily
work in the field of comics (outside of oddities such as an annoyingly hard to get ahold of collection of plays), and while they have an unabashed love for superheroes, they often deal in deconstructions of the oddities of the genre. Whether it is *Doom Patrol*’s superheroes-as-crippled-accident-survivors, or *Animal Man*’s analysis of the way continuity treats forgotten characters, their work has primarily focused on pushing the boundaries of the way superhero comics deal things such as canon or changing political climates.

“Now do you get it?”

*(Joker, *Batman by Grant Morrison vol. 1*, 773)*

With this pushing of boundaries, I still remember the first time I read a Grant Morrison comic in full. I was at a soccer game my brother was playing in. Instead of supporting him, I sat in the car with a stack of comic books I had gotten through interlibrary loan, with Morrison’s *Batman R.I.P* at the top of the stack. I wish I could say I was hooked then and there. But I had no idea what was happening. Why did Batman have a backup personality in case he lost his mind that was triggered by graffiti? Why was there an imp from the fifth dimension (the dimension of imagination) dressed like Batman, talking to him about how Gotham is a grid that can speak to him if he reads it right? The book offered very little stability to middle school me, very little to grasp onto and easily digest. I put it down, not in favor of the soccer game, and rather in favor of the next comic on the stack.

“You, too, will be made to crawl…lick children’s blood from jackboots [...] You will serve us forever in the machine.”

*(Mr. Quimper, *The Invisibles* 1149).*
It was not until much later that I would really get into Grant Morrison’s work. Later in my time at high school, I had learned just enough about philosophy and religion to be terrified of the world. Of the existential certainties I could not rationalize my way out of. I spent car rides back from school doing anything to distract myself from the thought that one day I would die. When I toured Bennington college, I spent most of my time enamored by the comic book library they had. There, among the familiar covers, was a book with a pink grenade on the cover and *The Invisibles* written above it. I can’t say what exactly grabbed me about it. But I picked the grenade up off the shelf, and rather than touring the college, I began to read. To some degree, I felt like I was in middle school reading *Batman R.I.P* again. I had no idea what was happening. I just knew that this time, unlike that time in middle school, I was thrilled. I borrowed the book from the Bennington library, committing myself to the drive back to spend just a little more time with that hand grenade.

“This is what it feels like”

(King Mob, *The Invisibles* 1202)

In the beginning of the final quarter of *The Invisibles*, the billionaire Mason Lang mourns how he feels tied to his family home and the responsibilities of his money. He wonders what it feels like to be as free to change as the fluid anarchist protagonists of the text who he has been working with. In response, one of those anarchists, King Mob, triggers a detonator, and Mason’s mansion goes up in flames as he tells Mason that “[t]his is what it feels like” (1202) (Figure 1).
No panel encapsulated my reading experience quite as well as this did. While my parent’s house has so far survived my obsession with this text, the sentiment resonated with me. I was so destabilized by the strangeness of the narrative that I felt the sort of psychological freedom King Mob was talking about. At that time in my life I was spending so much time agonizing over things I viewed as existential certainties, and now along came a text so destabilizing to me that if I was to stick with it I could no longer hold onto anything that I considered to be certain. I needed new modes of thinking, and if I tried to force the text into the certainties I was so fond of dwelling on, I would just end up frustrated like my middle school self in the car with *Batman R.I.P.* There was something so cathartic in the way the text unsettled my thinking. I didn’t have to hold onto the certainty. I could let go and fall into the unknown *The Invisibles* represented.
“I have been a boy, a girl, a whore, a sorcerer…”

(Lord Fanny, *The Invisibles* 1149)

A few years and one essay on *The Invisibles* later, I’m a sophomore in college. I have my own copy of the hand grenade now, a birthday present from my then-boyfriend. And recently I haven’t been able to take my mind off of the crimson pair of heels I saw at the thrift shop in Red Hook. I keep thinking about the ease with which Lord Fanny (one of the titular Invisibles) accepts the fluidity of her identity, shifting between being a man, a woman, and something in between with ease. I keep looking at the photo my friend took of me posing in the red heels, and I want something I can’t quite articulate. I have a history assignment due, and rather than working on that I type “Grant Morrison” into google, hoping to find some article about a new book they’re working on. Instead I find a slew of articles about them outside of their writing. They’ve come out as nonbinary, talking about how they’ve always felt this way, but in the past they’ve never quite had the words to articulate it.

“Learn to become invisible”

(*The Invisibles* 126)

Once again, Grant Morrison was there ahead of me, showing that ideas and identities were less solid and certain than I assumed them to be. As much as I repeatedly reprimanded myself that I had lived and viewed myself in a specific gendered way for around twenty years at that point. As much as I told myself that there was too much continuity there for me to change and contradict my own history. They were there ahead of me, reminding me that sometimes you need to accept contradictions and throw away the logic you held as solid for so long. Sometimes you need to blow up the mansion. Sometimes you need to get drunk enough for plausible
denyability and tell one of your oldest friends that you want to try something new for how you present to the world and for how they refer to you. This is the magic of *The Invisibles*. It is a book that tears the usual signifiers of a text out from underneath you and shows you what it feels like to be free from the assumptions you usually carry with you. That is what I hope to at least make a gesture at capturing that I never captured before. I hope at least one reader of this picks up the hand grenade and pulls the pin in a mansion, whether that mansion is metaphorical or not.

These two modes of reading I have detailed, firstly the way I read *Batman R.I.P.* for the first time, and secondly the way *The Invisibles* made me read lead fairly naturally to the theory I use in my analysis of Morrison’s work here. While there are other theorists at play, the primary text is Eve Sedgwick’s *Paranoid and Reparative Reading*. The theory will of course be discussed in more detail in the body of this work, but to discuss it here in brief, the mode with which I first read Morrison’s *Batman* is akin to Sedgwick’s paranoid reading. Even if there was less of a political impetus to it, I still read in a way resistant to surprise, and insistent on being certain of everything even as I went on in a text based around a mystery which cannot be solved. As for *The Invisibles*, the text left me so disoriented that I had no choice but to accept surprise and think outside of the certainty I relied upon in my ultimately failed reading of *Batman*.

This essay will be split into two chapters. The first, looking at Morrison’s *Batman* and how the character of Batman functions as an example of paranoid reading, mirroring my own first reading of the text. This sort of reading manifests in Batman working as a detective as well as him unifying the world around him under the sign of Batman (represented in the Batsymbol) in order to create certainty for himself and erase the surprise feared by the paranoid reader. After establishing this, the chapter moves on to attempt to illustrate the problems created by this mode
of viewing the world (or a text) with certainty and knowing as an absolute end goal. The second chapter, then, turns to *The Invisibles* and how the characters in that text find themselves up against an organization using the same sort of dominant reading Batman used in order to limit what can be conceived of through an insistence on knowing and on the oppression of the sort of fluidity, contradiction, and unknown status represented by the text’s protagonists. Then, as those protagonists attempt to break free of that control, they illustrate the effectiveness of embracing uncertainty and the unknown in order to break hegemonic structures.
Chapter One

Everyone knows Batman, in large part because Batman makes it easy for people to know him. Even if you have never meaningfully engaged with the character, you probably know the origin (after his parents are killed by a random crime, a billionaire uses resources for revenge). You probably know that he has a batcave, batarangs, a batmobile, and maybe even that he has a bat credit card (never leave the cave without it). And, not to belabor my point, but even if you don’t know the relatively extensive cast that frequents Batman comics and movies, you know he works with Alfred and Robin, and he fights the Joker. One other thing which is important to discuss in relation to these signifiers of Batman, is the way in which mainstream comic book continuity works. It is, of course, different from a novel, where one writer has the freedom to construct the continuity how they wish, as each character in Batman’s cast is passed between a number of creative teams throughout the years, with each of those stories conceivably being canon for the character, and with those stories staying identifiable as Batman stories through the previously discussed signifiers of “Batman”. Or at least that’s how it works for DC’s main competitors at Marvel. DC Comics (publishers of everything Batman) operate in a way which allows them to make older events non canon, either by stating that they occurred on a different earth (as with much of the golden age (think Adam West and Shark Repellent Bat Spray)) or through “Crisis” events which change the world of all the characters and rewrite large amounts of continuity. What this effectively means, is that generally a large number of Batman stories are not actual events that happened to the Batman you would be reading about if you picked up a Batman comic from your local comic store today.

Grant Morrison then uses these two aspects (Batman having a number of easily legible aspects that make him Batman, and Batman having an extensive history, much of which is
removed from canon) to explore the character in their multi-year run on the book. The central conceit of the run is that contrary to the general attitude DC holds, everything is canon. From the edgy, noir-inspired cat and mouse chases with serial killers, to the story where Batman dressed up in rainbow costumes so that people would focus on that instead of noticing that Robin was injured all happened to the same person. What allows for all of these seemingly tonally incoherent stories to coexist is the strength of those previously discussed signifiers of what makes Batman Batman. The gadgets, the Batsymbol, and the butler among other things are all legible enough to force everything into something that happened to the Bruce Wayne you’re reading about when you pick up a Grant Morrison Batman comic, something which is conveyed more directly later on in the text itself.

This ability to force the incoherent aspect of Batman’s history together additionally ties into a broader discussion of the fact that Batman, in addition to everything else listed above, is a detective, and thus a figure whose base premise is that he is meant to provide concrete solutions and understandings. Morrison uses this detective aspect of Batman to draw attention to the ways in which the nature of the character’s need to find certainty and erase contradiction conflict with his contradictory history of tonally disparate stories. This need to know then becomes a drive to erase any people or things that might present a contradiction to the patriarchal structures of power which Batman represents. Teresa Ebert, in the journal *Rethinking Marxism* discusses explicitly the way in which this sort of detective fiction relates to gender and power. Ebert introduces this with the claim that “detective narratives-are agents of patriarchy who act on behalf of the ‘Law-of-the-Father’ to restore the patriarchal order threatened by the crime” (Ebert, 6). This in particular is salient as Ebert further clarifies this by saying that detectives specifically face off against “false or failed fathers;[…]violations of patriarchal authorities or legacies” (6).
This feels rather directly targeted (in a very literal way) at the detective work Morrison has
Batman engage in in their run. The main villain for the majority of the first two thirds of
Morrison’s run, the mysterious Doctor Hurt, makes the claim that he is in fact Batman’s father,
and that he faked his death in crime alley so that he could freely live a life as a debauched crime
lord. As Bruce has to disprove this, he is quite literally fighting a violation of the legacy of his
father, positioning him as akin to Ebert’s version of the detective.

Beyond the narrative relations to how Morrison’s Batman is directly concerned with
fatherly legacy, Ebert’s writing is additionally helpful to understand several other aspects of how
Batman functions both as a detective and as a force which renders everything bare and
comprehensible. When introducing the detective through a discussion of the criminals they
combat in detective texts, Ebert writes that the criminals “threaten the legitimacy and equilibrium
of patriarchal law by enacting its contradictions and embodying its destructive extremes” (7).
Not only does this reaffirm the adherence of detective work to patriarchal law, but more
importantly it affirms that the enemy of the detective is contradictions. The patriarchal
worldview which the detective inhabits is one which cannot exist with its own contradictions,
and as such any contradictions must be wiped out. As this work gets further into the project of
Morrison’s Batman, one can see how both the character of Batman and DC Comics’ insistence
on attempting to hold almost three quarters of a decade of character to one contradictionless
continuity is a similarly fruitless endeavor to totally wiping out contradiction, which, like the
patriarchal logic, necessitates the oppressing of any contradiction.

Turning now from the criminal to how Ebert describes the detective doing flattening out
contradiction, Ebert describes detecting as a “political ordering of reality: it is the
imposition-through force if need be-of those specific ways of making sense, of organizing and
constituting significations, social practices, and subjectivities necessary to maintain the
"obviousness" and "inevitability" of the existing relations of production of
patriarchal-capitalism" (17). This reading lays out the way in which detecting, through the
organizing of the world which it conducts in order to remove contradiction leads to a situation in
which there is only one way of operating in the world which is taken as the obvious truth which
the detective is capable of taking the reader to in order to remove the threat which any criminal
contradiction may have posed to the order which might be found in absolute truth. This also
further sets the stage for the way in which Batman, as a detective, assumes that there will
inevitably be an answer to any problem which provides an obvious and non-contradictory
solution.

Turning to the detective’s tools as a hegemonic force, Ebert introduces the reader to
something present from the very beginning of Morrison’s Batman: the detective’s gaze. Ebert
writes of it that "[t]he primacy of observation and surveillance in detecting foregrounds the gaze
as a means of power constituting reality and constraining subjectivities: the gaze makes
visible-and thus renders intelligible and controllable-acts of unauthorized power and
noncompliance" (18). From the early moments of Morrison’s run where Batman attempts to
force abstract art to make sense through looking at it, this trend of the gaze being the tool of the
detective is centered in Morrison’s run (something done even further through the fact that it is a
detective story in a visual medium where the reader joins Batman in rendering subjects visible
with their gaze). Additionally on this point of Ebert’s, it is again emphasized that to the detective,
things must be “intelligible” and, additionally, when something becomes intelligible, it then
becomes “controllable”.
Finally, there is one last area in which Ebert’s writing primes one for my discussion of Morrison’s work on *Batman*, that being how the detective relates to knowledge. Ebert writes that [t]he detective's need to "know what's what," to quote Sam Spade (Hammett 1930, 154), is thus not a quest to uncover a secret "Truth" but the deliberate collecting of "a body of knowledge" (Foucault 1979, 220) about noncomplying individuals (criminals) in order to compel them back in place or eliminate them altogether and restore the disruptions of patriarchal law they have caused (19).

While Ebert’s essay is critical of the detective archetype as a whole, this adds a whole new angle onto things as it discusses a negative side to knowledge as a whole. This idea of knowledge being something which is not inherently a noble pursuit, but rather a bludgeon to use against those who do not comply with the dominant forces of patriarchy starts to contradict the goals of those dominant forces. This not only sets the stage for an analysis of detective fiction, but for an investigation of alternatives to knowing and to certainty, as those are both here criticized as perhaps being less noble than one would usually consider them to be. This first chapter, focusing on Morrison’s Batman, will concern itself more with these problems inherent in systems holding the acquisition of knowledge as something inherently positive, as well as the way in which this pursuit of contradiction-less knowledge can be damaging to both individuals and those around them. The second chapter then, focusing on Morrison’s Invisibles, will investigate alternatives to knowledge and certainty.

In addition to the discussion of the detective, another theoretical lens which can be used to understand the way Batman reads the world is that of Sedgwick’s *Paranoid Reading*. To give a brief summary of what exactly constitutes this method of reading on a basic level before applying it to Batman, Sedgwick describes paranoid reading as a practice based on the premise
that there must be no bad surprises, so one must therefore read into anything as a potential threat so that they are not surprised when it inevitably turns into one. Additionally, it is also important to note that paranoid reading is classified as a “strong theory”, essentially a theory which can only envision and perpetuate itself rather than being able to imagine any change from the world in which it operates.

Turning now to Batman, even before one gets into too many specifics of Morrison’s work on the character, it is quickly apparent how the theory ties into the character. With much of the pop cultural associations around Batman centering around his obsessive need to be prepared for anything, it is easy to see how one might apply the basic premise of "[t]here must be no bad surprises” to Batman (Sedgwick, 9). Working out from this basic premise, there are a number of other ways in which the previously laid out discussion of Batman maps onto other elements of Sedgwick’s theory. Firstly, with the concept of Batman being understood as a response to the perceived danger in an uncertain world, this can be seen to align with Sedgwick’s claim that “the paranoid position-understandably marked by hatred, envy, and anxiety - is a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into, carves out of, and ingests from the world around one” (8). This reflects in how, even when distanced temporally from the circumstances of Batman (as will occur when Bruce is sent back in time), Bruce still insists on projecting the Batman narrative onto whatever circumstances he finds himself in.

Continuing along this path of looking at how the temporality Batman relates to paranoid reading, Sedgwick writes that “the temporal progress and regress of paranoia are, in principle, infinite”, when referring to the idea that there will always be some new potential bad surprise which one must be vigilant for, and that paranoia provides no exit for its way of thinking (10).
This is one of the most directly parallel aspects of Sedgwick’s theory to the way in which Batman reads the world, as through the entire third volume of Morrison’s Batman the main refrain of the run becomes the cry of “Batman and Robin will never die!” (Morrison vol. 2, 702). This is at once a triumphant statement in the face of evil and also, increasingly as the run goes on, an existentially horrifying statement about how Batman, like paranoia, is incapable of creating a world in which it will stop seeing more threats to justify its own existence.

It is additionally important to note, however, that there is a negative element to Batman’s paranoid reading outside of how it affects him individually. When Sedgwick writes on paranoid reading, it is primarily in the context of how minority groups with little societal power will use this method of reading in order to understand a hostile world. This situation is of course not the same for Batman, as rather than him being any kind of minority, he is a billionaire, and unlike with some superheroes (such as the X-Men), there is no inclination to attempt to portray his superhero identity as a metaphor for the oppressed. I personally find a number of the criticisms of Batman for his privilege to be generally fruitless pop-criticism at best, yet if you will indulge me I nonetheless believe that there is value in it here. As discussed earlier in Ebert’s writing, through Batman’s role as the masculine (or sometimes hypermasculine) detective, there is an expectation that he will function as an agent “of patriarchy who act[s] on behalf of the ‘Law-of-the-Father’ to restore the patriarchal order threatened by the crime” (Ebert, 6). Thus when the reader is watching Bruce’s thinking as a detective, we are watching for the reification of the dominant gendered societal structures.

It is when this idea of the detective affirming dominant structures is combined with the strong theory nature of paranoid reading that the problems inherent in a paranoid reading from those in power starts to emerge. When describing the nature of paranoid reading as a strong
theory, Sedgwick writes that it “would seem to grow like a crystal in a hypersaturated solution, blotting out any sense of the possibility of alternative ways of understanding or things to understand” (Sedgwick, 10). When someone like a victim of the governmentally unchecked aids epidemic conducts a reading of this sort, it might trap them internally with the exclusion of all non-paranoid thoughts, yet that is all that it does. When Batman conducts this type of reading, however, one which not only seeks certain knowledge but additionally to push aside all alternate modes of knowing or of understanding, his status as detective implies to the reader that this mode of thinking is the “correct” mode. The mode which the character who is smart enough to piece everything together even as he flattens all contradiction, is capable of using. Thus he suggests that to understand the world one must think like Batman, and to think like Batman one must register anything as a threat to Batman, and thus Batman must be given more power in order to answer it.

To begin to look directly at the text of *Batman*, Morrison opens by showcasing the sort of gaze which Ebert discussed the detective using. As soon as the first story arc of their run begins, Morrison introduces us to their version of Bruce Wayne by having him staring at a piece of abstract art in a gallery, talking to himself and insisting that “…there’s a message here somewhere. I know if I just stare hard enough…” (Morrison vol. 1, 58) (Figure 2).
Bruce, in looking at the art this way, makes a number of fairly telling assumptions pointing to the ways in which he views the world. First, his choice of “message” rather than something more general such as “meaning” suggests a belief that, as the detective whose job it is to make things understandable, this art not only has to have some sort of meaning, but it has to specifically be telling something to him, as the finder and arbiter of meaning. The art necessarily has to be able to progress his story in some manner. Then, looking at the more central assumption beyond the specific way in which the meaning manifests, Bruce is, on a basic level, making the assumption that there has to be some knowable meaning in the art in general, and additionally that close analysis will inevitably reveal it to him. He positions himself here as an analytical observer, with the assumption that his gaze, like that of Ebert’s detective, will inevitably reveal the nature of whatever he turns it upon.

The idea of Bruce believing that he can force anything into an understandable form is carried as a motif throughout the text. The concept of Batman itself is used as a frame through which events can be forced to make sense, in a sort of paranoid response to the possibility of
something which could serve as a surprise outside of the standard Bat-narrative. Before looking at how this happens, however, there are several things about the origin of Batman that must be established. Batman’s origin has, of course, been done to death in pop culture at this point. Yet outside of the ill-advised changes in Tim Burton’s otherwise excellent Batman movies, it has stayed mostly the same. Bruce Wayne and his family go to see a movie. They walk out of the movie, and make their way through Crime Alley (subtlety was never the greatest strong suit of comics), where, in a random act of violence, Thomas and Martha Wayne are shot and killed. It is this meaningless violence which necessitates, in Bruce’s paranoid ideology, the creation of the identity of Batman. Batman as a concept necessitates an ideological conflict, whether that conflict is one between order and chaos, good and evil, or however else any given writer chooses to frame it. Batman, as a concept, is a crusading detective, imposing itself against a rival ideology which cannot be allowed to exist in a state of contradiction against his. Batman, in this way, stands in opposition to the fact that Bruce’s parents were killed by random chance entirely divorced from any sort of ideology. He cannot bear the contradiction that despite his ordered idea of the world based on easily understandable ideological conflict, the possibility of random violence still exists. Thus, Bruce, ever the paranoid reader, creates the concept of Batman out of the random violence which killed his parents in order to prevent future harm from the same random violence. Batman being born out of that, then is a way to attempt to force a concrete element of meaning bearing over the randomness.

This ideological conflict Batman is created to enter is very directly brought into the narrative when Bruce finds himself up against Darkseid, the literal god of evil. In order to fight something representing an abstract concept like that, however, Bruce ends up needing to find a weapon beyond what he is usually afforded. To describe this, I do need you to bear with me, as
we venture into what is perhaps the most comic book-y scenario I have ever had the pleasure of reading. Bruce, after escaping imprisonment by Darkseid, steals a gun which Darkseid had earlier fired through time and space to kill the god of war. This, of course, is no ordinary gun, as Bruce explains that the gun is not loaded with a normal bullet, rather “[i]t’s a magic bullet, literally. An all-purpose God-killing projectile that can be loaded and fired over and over again from any gun ever invented. Essence of bullet” (476). Essentially, he is now armed with the Platonic ideal of a bullet, something driven home as he elaborates that “[i]t was the original of the bullet that killed JFK, Martin Luther King, John Lennon. Gandhi…Archduke Ferdinand…Thomas and Martha Wayne” (Morrison vol. 2, 477). Thus in firing this archetypal bullet in order to defeat Darkseid, Bruce is firing the same bullet that kills his own parents. This firing of the bullet gives a somehow both simple and absurd example of how the quest for certainty undertaken through Batman in the face of random violence is harmful to Bruce. In order to be Batman and insist upon meaning stemming from the violence that happened to him, he must partake in the ideological conflict that is fighting Darkseid, the god of evil. And then in order to defeat Darkseid and resolve the threat of evil, he must fire the gun and enable the deaths of his parents. Thus through forcing meaning into the situation, he perpetually forces the violence that necessitates that meaning being made in the first place, trapping him in an endless loop where the violence is never resolved, so he must maintain his paranoid vigilance as Batman.

Additionally, as Bruce moves into this conflict with Darkseid, he deliberately discusses a move towards this being an ideological conflict rather than anything physical, saying “so I stepped through the door into a bigger, simpler world. A world where the stakes were ultimate stakes, where each moment was heavy with the massive weight of unfolding myth…and everything had a thousand extra layers of meaning” (483). This is the ultimate end goal of
Bruce’s ideology as it is reflected in his earlier insistence on there being a message in the art he was studying. In making the move to fight Darkseid, Bruce fully insists on the entire world being understood not in shades of gray, but as a Batman narrative of good versus evil. A conflict where everything can be understood simply based on how it occupies either side of the mythic conflict. And, additionally, just as Bruce desires a meaning to reveal itself to him in the art, now everything is saturated in that same sort of inherent, understandable meaning. Bruce has, at this point, essentially gotten his wish for a simplified, meaningful world which can be fit into easily definable concepts. All he had to do was attempt to give meaning to meaningless violence by contextualizing it in the frame of Batman, and then perpetuating the loop of that violence after having justified it through his framework of meaning.

This, of course, is not the end of the conflict with Darkseid. A Grant Morrison comic would never let anything end quite so simply. Morrison uses the aftermath of Batman firing the bullet to initiate a more metatextual look at how the concept of Batman is a framework vainly trying to force incongruent ideas to make sense. After Batman defeats Darkseid with the bullet, Darkseid places the Omega Sanction upon him, causing Batman to be cast back through time. Before looking at the practical side of what this does to Bruce, it is important to understand what is happening to him on a meta level. Morrison has spoken openly about how a part of their desire with their work on Batman was to try to create a story where the entire history of the character could be canon. To give background on this, Batman has been written by countless authors over the years, and those stories vary dramatically in tone, going from Batman inexplicably being a caveman, to Batman meeting a superpowered space version of himself with a colorful costume, to the Joker beating Robin to death with a crowbar. Because of the difficulty of fitting those older, campier stories in the same canon as the more grimdark modern ones, a large number of
those older stories have, for the most part, been relegated to being “what if?” stories, or things that took place on other worlds. The omega sanction then, is a way for Morrison to send a darker, modern Batman through those old stories of pirates, cavemen, and cowboys, in order to give them a place in the canon. The conflict that arises, then, is how a Batman who needs everything to make sense in his oh so serious worldview can respond to having a caveman Robin or fighting the pirate Blackbeard.

Bruce attempts to reconcile the disparate story beats through the use of the Batsymbol to make the core of his edgier 90s/2000s identity legible, even in the face of adventures verging on the camp Batman was written with back in the sixties. After Batman is sent back through time, several members of the justice league attempt to time travel back as well in order to find him, guided first by a cave painting of a bat symbol, brought up by Superman as he says “we saw the paintings in the cave. We know he was here” (vol, 2, 324) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Bruce leaving the Batsymbol up in a cave during caveman times. Grant Morrison, Tony Daniel, et al *Batman by Grant Morrison Vol. 2*
DC Comics 2018 [493]

Thus through the use of the batsymbol, even when fully removed from his usual setting, the other characters are able to use this symbol to read things such the aftermath of a conflict with
cavemen as stories belonging to the Batman they know, as the symbols leave a text of sorts behind for those trying to find him.

To further drive home the point that reconciling these different stories into one fully understandable and contradiction-less canon is as impossible a task as finding the concrete meaning that Bruce was searching for while looking at the art discussed earlier, Morrison employs a different artist for every different issue focusing on Batman traveling through different time periods, with pirate Batman and witch-hunter Batman being presented for reference (vol. 2, 412, 352) (Figure 4).

![Figure 4. The covers done by the artists for the pirate and witch hunter Batman issues. Grant Morrison, Yanick Paquette, Frazier Irving et al Batman by Grant Morrison vol. 2 DC Comics 2018 [412], [352]](image)

Bruce, as one can see through the upcoming repeated use of the Bat symbol, is unwilling to accept that there can be contradictions both in the things which he experiences and in the way in which that world is presented to him (represented physically by the different art styles) and is instead insistent on the idea that if they are all going to coexist. The different styles of art and
genres are all unified by one symbol, as Bruce essentially tries to create a sense of continuity for himself through the act of creating batsymbols to mark his passage. The contradictions of the art are ignored through the creation of a single legible sign which remains consistent across all of time. In addition to unifying the art styles, the Bat-Narrative inevitably dominates the genres Batman finds himself in. It is only a cowboy or pirate story until Bruce finds the Batsymbol and returns it to a Batman narrative. Even when it is not the bat, when Bruce next awakes after his time in the stone age to find himself in a pilgrim settlement in America, the first thing he notices (after a brief fight) is a pendant depicting the symbols of Superman and Wonder Woman (vol. 2, 355). He uses this symbol to ground himself as they (and the bat painting in the cave nearby) serve for Bruce to keep the story grounded in the dark “realistic” reality of modern comics. As much as the circumstances may change from pirate campiness to modern edge, there can be no bad surprises arising from the contradictions in these things, as they are all condensed into a knowable oneness by the Batsymbol.

In addition to the way in which Bruce uses the sign of the batsymbol to trap the world in the narrative it generates, so too is that sign used to trap Bruce within itself. This concept is first introduced in the narrative of Batman R.I.P. In a sort of screw the audience joke, Morrison later reveals the real meaning of the title. Rather than a death which might end the story of Batman, Doctor Hurt mocks him by saying “Batman R.I.P. Rot in purgatory” (vol. 2, 691). Hurt’s sentence to Batman is not that he must die, but rather that he must remain as the Batman, in an unchanging narrative, stuck in a purgatory of his own creation. While Bruce does defeat Hurt in the end, there is no refutation of this sentence to purgatory, as after the battle is over and Damian asks where they go next, Bruce responds with the refrain that “Batman and Robin will never die”
Thus Bruce cements Hurt’s prognosis: Batman will continue to exist in a purgatory which he cannot escape from, as the concept keeping him there, the concept of Batman, cannot die.

In addition to this purgatorial affirmation of how Batman traps Bruce, the idea is additionally put forward that Bruce’s insistence on stamping out any contradictions in his history is another element of what traps him in his current state. This is introduced most directly in Bruce’s conflict with Darkseid, as when Darkseid himself introduces the Omega Sanction which he will use to send Bruce through time, he says “Omega “tailor makes” an unbeatable “life trap” just for you! It uses “history” to do it!” (vol. 2, 497). When Batman narrates what then happens to him after he has the sanction placed upon him, he says that “I was locked into a spinning cage of events” as he is sent back to things which are contradictory to his current idea of self such as pirate and caveman Batman (vol. 2, 498). Essentially, Bruce views contradictions in his own history as a trap which he has to get out of. Then to do so, he tries to reconcile the contradictions through the Batsymbol, as discussed earlier. This is where the trap really occurs however, as this does not make the contradictions fully go away, it only resolves them while they are under his gaze and thus controllable through this logic. He must repeatedly repaint the Batsymbol, and continually maintain his vigilance, trapping himself in a static state in order to stall any contradictions.

Finally, outside of any narrative reasons why Bruce is never allowed to change, there is a grounded, real world meaning which Morrison gave voice to in an interview conducted after the conclusion of their run. When speaking of DC comics editorial, Morrison stated that “ultimately they’ll always go back to Bruce Wayne as Batman, and he walks out of Wayne Manor, and Alfred is his butler. Because those are ultimately the elements of the mythology that have proven the most popular through many, many decades”. Essentially, Batman is not allowed to change
because there are certain elements of Batman which are popular enough to make him into one of, if not the, best selling superhero of all time. I can speak as much as I want about the ways in which Bruce’s struggles force him to be unchanging and constantly legible, but at the end of the day, that legibility is for the service of sales. Readers have to be able to look at a cover or flip through a few pages of a comic and recognize these elements of Batman so that the branding of Batman can make sales for DC comics. Bruce is essentially trapped not only by his own narrative actions, but additionally by the capitalist structure of DC Comics which demands that his books sell.

Morrison reinforces this on a textual level with the conclusion of the story arc in which Bruce travels through time. After his triumphant return and defeat of Dr. Hurt, Bruce decides that it is in fact time for a change. He announces to the public that he has been funding Batman, and then, with the reader positioned looking up at him and Bruce in a pose of triumph at a podium, he announces a “new era in the fight against crime” in the form of the logo emblazoned onto the podium: Batman Incorporated (vol. 2, 2704). Bat signals (or, as discussed previously, just the Batman logo) clutter the sky behind him in a view disconcertingly relevant today with talk of corporations buying airspace over cities in order to display their ads on the night sky, and a glowing light illuminates him from below (vol. 2, 704) (Figure 5).
Bruce has finally decided to change, and all the change entails is a corporate angle for the product that is Batman. This finale depicts the limits of the capitalist imagination where the character must be a product, as the most radical reinvention which can be conducted for Bruce here is the act of making explicit the corporate influence on the character, both narratively and off the page. The furthest Morrison is allowed to go in terms of criticizing the way in which Batman’s paranoid reading of the world creates stagnation is to use Batman as a cautionary tale. Not to actually change anything. Warning readers of the limits of such characters, and of such strict resistance to change from a force which uses its sign to resolve any contradictions which
might demand that it change. If one wants Morrison’s vision of change, they have no choice but to look elsewhere.

Before looking at Morrison's depiction of characters more capable of breaking free of certainty and being able to change, it is important to take a moment to look at how Batman’s mode of reading can reflect on reading done in the real world. Bruce, as a reader, is unwilling to take situations (or texts, in the metaphor of Bruce-as-detective, reading the scenarios around him) as they are. Everything, whether it be random violence or the nonsensical timeline which he finds himself in, is pulled into the knowable and concrete narrative of Batman. While I do of course believe that people inherently put elements of themselves into the readings they do, and that there is nothing inherently wrong with this, it is a very different action to read something through one’s own perspective versus to take all narratives, whether they be a tonally varied tapestry created by various artists or a senseless act of violence and subsume them all under the banner of one narrative: the narrative of Batman.

To walk through how this flattening of other narratives occurs on the level of reading: First, the nature of Batman as a concept born of and for paranoid reading leads to the strong theory paranoia that anything could be a threat, and thus must be prepared for. Then, Batman seeks to address these threats through Ebert’s mode of the detective, using the framing device of Batman to render any stories he encounters “intelligible and controllable” (Ebert, 18). Finally, with Batman being an agent of domination and patriarchy through his position as detective, this mode of reading means that he is unable to conceive of anything outside of the power structures of Batman. And this, combined with the necessity of forcing things to make sense which Batman operates under means that everything, even the intentionally nonsensical, contradictory, and absurd cannot be left that way, and instead must be forced into making sense under the
domineering logic of Batman. And thus, since contradiction cannot be allowed in such a domineering ideology, it is impossible for Batman to begin to think outside of it, as for Batman to function, anything not Batman must be consumed under the signifier of Batman.

This story of a domineering signifier of meaning illustrates the danger in reading with the goal of knowing anything concrete. As it will be further discussed in the next chapter with a closer reading of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, Bruce’s reading process illustrates a hegemonic sort of reading. As the reader insists on a consistent meaning which will be legible to them, they preclude the possibility of engaging with texts that might manage to break them out of the hegemonic state which they exist in through the acceptance of not knowing and the freedom which comes with it. They can only engage with things covered in their worldview, and anything outside of that, they warp until it can become contradiction-less and fit in. To leave you with one final example of this in Batman, near the end of the conflict with Doctor Hurt, the Joker is seen running away from Wayne Manor, musing to himself (in the mistaken belief that Batman is dead) about how “starting today, I’m taking the act in a whole new direction. The Joker fights crime! When there’s no Batman…the gravediggin’ clown gets to be the good guy” (Morrison vol. 2, 701). Digetically, these words are heard by no one but the Joker, and the very next panel finds him rounding a corner only to be knocked out by Batman in a notably dialogue-less panel. This idea of the Joker being something different is not one which can function within the ideology of Batman, and so it cannot even be heard out. Rather, it is resolved by the violence pattern of violence which Batman believes any interactions between the two must follow before it can create any text of its own.
Chapter Two

Ten years before starting work on Batman, Grant Morrison began writing the passion project that is The Invisibles. Originally conceived of as their version of Neil Gaiman’s Sandman in that it would serve as a sandbox for them to explore whatever stories they wanted to tell as a creator, the book would later go on to (allegedly) inspire more well known stories such as the Matrix movies. On its face, The Invisibles is a story about a group of anarchists fighting against the tyrannical Outer Church which, unknown to the average person, has complete control over the world. Moving beyond that premise, however, it is a story concerned primarily with how, philosophically speaking, characters are able to oppose such an all consuming force which already rules the world. Sure, they fight it with Matrix-esque action sequences, but at a certain point the characters recognize that there is little value in shooting (mostly) faceless, numberless, drones of a looming existential threat. The other responses the characters take are by far the more interesting ones. In the face of an all-seeing enemy, they become invisible, weaponizing the human inconsistencies in their own identities to become something an enemy thriving on the certainty of its domination cannot understand. They fight against the very language their enemy uses, rejecting the ways in which it limits the possibilities they can access. And, finally, they even cast off their very knowledge of the reality of the world controlled by the outer church so that they might imagine a world without it.

This, of course, marks a dramatically different angle on Morrison’s part from their work on Batman, even if both texts address similar questions in one way or another. A number of these differences stem from one fundamental difference between the two texts. Where Batman found Morrison working with a character who had sixty seven years of continuity behind him at that
point, years which brought with them a number of expectations for how Batman necessarily has to act, *The Invisibles* has none of that. Fully Morrison’s creation, the text affords them a freedom which flies directly against the constraints of continuity which they explored in *Batman*.

Additionally where *Batman* follows an individual who, through a perpetuated cycle of tragedy places himself as an affirmer of hegemonic culture, *The Invisibles* criticizes hegemony from the other side as it follows a group of anarchists. Finally, the texts have dramatically different ways of interacting with gender, as Batman’s detective work places him at the forefront of patriarchal masculinity, while gender identity, (along with most other forms of identity) is more fluid with the Invisibles, with the team even including an openly trans character.

Outside of the theory of the text, it is worth taking a moment as well to go over what exactly the general plot is, especially since this is a text that has a lot less cultural context which can be taken for granted than something like *Batman*. The book opens with a British street punk named Dane (later codenamed Jack Frost, the name I will be using when referring to him) who gets taken to a re-education facility for his part in committing arson. From there Jack is broken out by King Mob, a leather clad assassin and at that point leader of the cell of Invisibles which the text will follow. He gradually meets the rest of the group, including Boy (an ex-cop turned martial artist), Ragged Robin (a psychic time traveler) and, Lord Fanny (a genderqueer shaman). While the plot gets progressively stranger and stranger, the general gist that one needs to know going in is that the group begins training Jack to become the new Buddha while evading the forces of the Outer Church (often led by the British aristocrat Sir Miles) who try to crush the dissent against the status quo which they represent. All while both groups prepare for the end of the world so that they might have a say in the world which emerges in the aftermath.

[Insert paragraph signposting the structure of the chapter & state the overarching claim]
Due both to the fact that it is a somewhat denser text, and since it is here being read in response to *Batman*, this chapter focusing on *The Invisibles* will necessarily take a somewhat different structure. It will be split into two sections: the first, focusing primarily on individual characters, is concerned with analyzing the characters in *The Invisibles* as reparative readers, specifically emphasizing how the characters accept contradiction within themselves rather than trying to resolve any contradiction as soon as it arises. Essentially, this section will argue against Batman’s desperate and destructive need to fully unite his concepts of self, of history, and of the world around him under one knowable symbol, and show how a character might be able to exist with a less paranoid manner of interacting with the world. Finally, it aims to demonstrate how this mode of reading oneself and the world allows for change while a paranoid reading leads to stagnation.

Then in the second part I aim to address the political environment which this text situates itself in. By positioning the protagonists of *The Invisibles* in opposition to figures using paranoid reading, this allows Morrison to further explore how the contradiction-crushing worldview of paranoid reading can dominate those outside of this. Seen as Sedgwick is concerned primarily with how oppressed people function as paranoid readers, to understand how in privileged hands this mode of reading can become dominant not only to an individual but to a society as a whole, I turn to Antonio Gramsci’s understanding of hegemonic control and how it dominates through limiting what people are capable of conceiving of. From there, I will analyze how characters who have already broke out of paranoid modes of reading themselves may be able to break free from the control which hegemonic structures place on them as a whole by being able to weaponize not knowing and embracing contradiction against the known certainties which hegemonic structures hold over them.
1: Reparative reading

If Sedgwick’s theory of paranoid reading is a lens through which to read Morrison’s Batman, it only follows that Morrison’s counterpoint to Batman that is *The Invisibles* could be approached through Sedgwick’s practice of reparative reading. While reparative reading is present at least in some degree throughout the entirety of the essay, it is not until midway through that more of a definition for it is provided. Sedgwick writes first on how the reparative and the paranoid clash with each other, saying that “Reparative motives, once they become explicit, are inadmissible within paranoid theory both because they are about pleasure ("merely aesthetic") and because they are frankly ameliorative ("merely reformist")” (Sedgwick, 22). After this, Sedgwick questions how exactly the goals of pleasure and addressing past wounds can be dismissed as “mere”, coming to the conclusion that it is “the exclusiveness of paranoia's faith in demystifying exposure” (22). Essentially, paranoid reading assumes that if it manages to theorize something, and thus hold it to be visible, somehow that exposure into an understandable state will cure all ills. Reparative reading, on the other hand, does not insist on this same need to know and expose everything.

Turning more towards the practice of reparative reading, Sedgwick writes that “to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new: to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise” (22). Here Sedgwick centers the possibility of surprise as being essential to reparative reading. Surprise, as a concept flies in the face of everything which the paranoid detective fought against in the previous chapter. Surprise necessitates not knowing, it necessitates encountering something
which cannot immediately be explained by one’s immediate situation and worldview. It is, in essence, a moment where one is disrupted from the previous signifiers they thought they could rely on to understand the world.

Sedgwick next turns to the way in which this surprise can be beneficial to the reader, writing that “[b]ecause there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones” (24). Essentially, the possibility of surprise opens up the possibility of change, whether it be positive or negative. With the sort of paranoid reading done by Batman, any new information is filtered through the known to become more of what one has already experienced rather than change in either a positive or a negative direction. Reparative reading gives the “room to realize that the future may be different from the present” (24). Reparative reading is in essence the recognition and acceptance of the potential of the unknown, and in that unknown future for which one did not prepare. And in that acceptance of an unknown future in place of an unchanging present (Batman’s purgatory), there is the possibility of change.

In no character in *The Invisibles* is this direct answer to the paranoid reading of Batman more apparent than in the character of Lord Fanny. Fanny, one of the main members of the Invisible cell which the text follows, is a sorceress capable of manipulating the living information which the world of the Invisibles is based in. In addition to that, while it is never directly specified how her identity is defined, Fanny is some form of genderqueer. Assigned male at birth, she carries on the legacy of female sorceresses in her family line. The exact nature of her gender could be the subject of its own essay, as other characters alternate between various pronouns for her, and she refers to herself in a similarly fluid way. Regardless, for the sake of simplicity, I will use she/her unless the text specifically suggests otherwise for a scene. That brief diversion aside, when Fanny’s past is revealed, the reader is taken along for her initiation into
being a sorceress, in an origin story defined in opposition to Batman’s through its resistance to concrete meaning-making and its embrace of contradiction.

From the very nature of the initiation, there is an emphasis put on the value of the ability to experience things normally held to be contradictory. It is not only a narrative of someone becoming a sorcerer, but as Fanny herself puts it, it is about a shift of gender, as she narrates that “I was no longer a boy. I was no longer even a girl. I had become a woman” (Morrison, 406). Even before Fanny herself draws attention to the change which appears to patriarchal logic to be a contradiction, the gods she is seeking power from do so as well, with the god of death referring to her as “boygirl” throughout the story (387). While I (and I presume the majority of my readers) are at a place where this contradiction is an accepted option of identity, there is still a very present patriarchal logic which disagrees. And regardless of my or my reader’s view on whether “boygirl” represents a contradiction, this is only the beginning of how Morrison primes the reader to recognize that Fanny is a character who will have to exist alongside apparent contradiction.

The prime example of Fanny facing contradiction comes in the form of how she addresses time and history, something which provides an even clearer parallel between her experience and Bruce’s entanglement in history, even if they end differently. Fanny’s interaction with contradictory history is introduced as she confronts the god of death, a figure who stands as the final barrier before becoming a sorceress at the end of her initiation. While the timeline does get strange here, Fanny, in the moment of her initiation, is still a child. Yet the god of death shows her the demon Orlando\(^1\), eager for revenge on her. This requires a bit of backstory to

\(^1\) I would be remiss to not acknowledge the presence of a shapeshifting figure named Orlando and the potential connections to Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* that this might evoke. As far as I can tell, there is little connection to that Orlando as he bears more resemblance to Xipe Totec, an Aztec god associated, (like Orlando), with flaying whose form Fanny says he has stolen (Morrison, 222). The other name he is given, by Fanny, Tzitzimime, is another Aztec figure, this time something which are generally understood as skeletal deities or demons, associated with the stars
cover. The scenes of the initiation take place as Fanny is a young girl, but one of the features of it is how it jumps around in time, with the deities she encounters emphasizing how their standard perception of time is the nonlinear view the narrative gives the reader. As for Orlando, he appeared earlier in the text, attacking an adult Fanny along with the rest of the Invisibles before she called upon the god of the dead and banished him. Speaking of Orlando, the god of death tells Fanny that “you called upon me to save you when he threatened your friends. This I did. Did you think there would be no price to pay for my intervention?”, implying in the end that she must now give herself to the dead as an offering (388). Fanny protests this at first, saying of Orlando “I don’t know him. I’m not dead. You can’t keep me here” (388). In these brief lines Fanny asserts her own understanding of time above the seemingly contradictory information she is faced with. To the younger Fanny currently undergoing the initiation, she has not yet met Orlando, and she is not yet dead. In this moment, she functions like Batman, forcing everything that is happening into her own worldview, something which stalls the possibility of any negotiations, thereby trapping her, if not in a loop like Batman then physically in the realm of the dead, unable to complete her initiation.²

After Fanny holds onto her own view and resists contradiction, the god of death lays out the alternate version of time, not experienced by average people. He tells her that “one day you will know [Orlando], just as one day you will die. Now—what is there you can offer me in place of yourself? You have nothing else” (388). After seeing that simply claiming otherwise cannot remove any problems she had with the contradiction, Fanny reacts not as she did before by trying to make it understandable, rather she elects to join the god outside of the realm of paranoid

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² Notably, this is by Fanny’s own definition taking place before she has become a woman, and so in this moment of incomplete initiation she still occupies a patriarchal position as a boy, something reflected in her clinging to patriarchal need for certainty.
detective work and turns things towards a surprise of her own, putting forth her offering of “would you like me to give you a joke?” (388). By making her offering a joke, Fanny is making the scenario resistant to the certainty she herself had just insisted upon. A joke, if both parties are committed to it, flies directly in the face of paranoid reading. One must let themself be surprised by the punchline if they are to engage with a joke on its own terms. This importance of surprise is further emphasized as Fanny begins to tell the joke, saying “what are purple, wrinkled and stiff and make women squeal” (398). The god of death has a moment of almost dismissing the joke as too predictable, as he says “surely…” before reentering in the contract of accepting surprise which the joke demands and answering “I don’t know. Tell me” (398). Fanny responds to this faith by avoiding the assumed answer and answering “cot death babies” (398). This dual willingness to engage with the unknown, first on the part of Fanny in choosing to stop imposing her logic on the way that time works here, and secondly on the part of both characters to choose to engage with the world of surprises which jokes are born from is what allows Fanny to pass the initiation, and become unstuck. She is able to move forward in a way Bruce cannot by accepting that the timeline/history of herself which she is presented with is contradictory, and then by moving into that world of the unknown herself.

In addition to how Lord Fanny was earlier discussed to be able to fight against stable definitions of gender in how she leans into contradiction, a similar fluidity is implied in how mantles associated with gender are passed between other characters. While he's not fully traditionally masculine per se, when we first meet King Mob at the start of the text, he does have a sort of 90s action hero masculinity to him, stemming from the leather coats, the guns, and his position as the leader of the team (128) (Figure 6).
Midway through the text, however, before a mission, the characters all draw strips of colored paper from a vase, a practice explained by King Mob as he says “we each take on a different role within the group. And every so often we like to change it around and scramble it up a bit. That way everybody gets a chance to assume each of the elemental roles and all the tasks and responsibilities that go with it” (695). Essentially, the different roles of the team (and the gender signifiers which sometimes accompany them) are not based on any sort of patriarchal continuity or standard gender signifiers, but rather on random chance.

This give and take of signifiers is shown even more explicitly, as after Ragged Robin draws the slip which places her as leader, King Mob quips “bad luck, love. You get to wear the leather”, thus tying a specific signifier of his action hero masculinity to that chance as he passes it over to a femme presenting character and disrupting how signifiers of masculinity relate to gender (700). Morrison’s *Batman* too contains a passing of an action hero mantle with which they contrast the way roles change in *The Invisibles*. When Batman is sent back through time by
Darkseid, he is believed dead, leading the other heroes in Gotham scrambling to find someone to fill his place. Who they end up landing on is not random, rather it is passed down to his first son, Dick Grayson. These two separate passings of the cowl and of the leather serve as a direct illustration of the differences in how the two texts view gender and its signifiers. In The Invisibles, signifiers of gender can be passed between people at random, as each character chooses to engage in this change. In Batman, the signifier is something passed down strictly from fathers to sons, with a whole event comic (*Battle for the Cowl*) being written to show the violent defeat of anyone other than Bruce’s first son who might try to take the title. Through this contrast, *The Invisibles* emphasizes the ability of the characters in it to embody contradictions (and thus break out of modes of paranoid reading) in a way which *Batman* is simply incapable of accomplishing due to the strict assumptions surrounding Batman-as-signifier.

In another act of contrast to their *Batman* work concerning how characters are allowed to embody contradiction, Morrison directly refuses to present the villains of *The Invisibles* as faceless embodiments of concepts as they did with Darkseid in Batman. While they do allow the reader to see most of the soldiers of the Cuter Church simply as faceless goons who exist to be shot by King Mob throughout the first eleven issues, this serves primarily as a trend to be subverted in issue twelve, titled *Best Man Fall*. This issue opens seemingly detached from the rest of the story of *The Invisibles* with a young British boy named Bobby playing at being a soldier with his friends. Most of the issue is spent in this sort of manner, showing other events throughout that boy’s life, whether it is him being bullied by his older brother, him growing up and going to war in the Falklands, or a fight with his wife. Regardless of the exact nature of what

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3 It’s interesting to note here that Dick is not his biological first son and rather is adopted. It does not change much for my reading, but the way adoption fits into traditional patriarchal family lines could be a fruitful line of inquiry for another essay on *Batman*.
happens, Morrison forefronts seemingly random life events of the character without connecting him to any specific ideology or part in the main struggle taking place in the text.

Near the end of the issue, however, the connection Bobby has with the rest of the story is made clear as Bobby (now older and a security guard at an as of yet unnamed facility) walks out of a breakroom to respond to an intruder, all while wearing the uniform of one of the previously faceless guards of the re-education facility which King Mob broke Jack Frost out of at the very beginning of the series. Readers of the whole series will know at this point where things are going, of course, and it does not take long for them to arrive at that point as King Mob guns down Bobby’s fellow guards, before finally shooting Bobby in the face. The reader is given one last look at Bobby’s face through the opaque visor of his helmet to make sure the reader cannot forget that this is a person, before he is consummately made faceless by King Mob shooting him\(^4\) (332). This issue serves to caution the reader that they should be careful not to think that any individual character in the text is something which can be fully described in a concise signifier as Darkseid or Batman can be, whether that signifier be a batsymbol or the visor of a helmet.

Additionally, King Mob is here depicted to be doing the same thing that Bruce was doing in reducing things to symbols as he literally turns Bobby into a faceless goon, and with Morrison having been quite explicit about the negative consequences of doing such a thing with Bruce.

Additionally, another essential aspect of this issue is that it forces the reader to confront simple contradictions present in people who live vaguely more average lives than genderqueer sorceresses. In one panel, Bobby cannot be the faceless symbol of an evil organization he was originally made out to be as he is depicted as a punk kid asking out a girl working at an ice cream truck (327). In the very panel before it, however, Morrison shows the reader a very

\(^4\) While not directly relevant to the argument at hand here, there are two paired acts of forcing Bobby into facelessness here, both King Mob shooting him, and the Outer Church putting him in the helmet in the first place.
different time, as years after the previously mentioned panel he is beating that very same girl from the ice cream shop, who is now his wife (327). The whole issue is an exercise in forcing the reader to avoid using any logic like that of the detective, who would seek to view everything through one contradiction-less lens. It does not matter whether one is more or less sympathetic to Bobby, only that they are forced to reckon with a character who cannot possibly be fully known and pinned down.

Lord Fanny, along with the structure of The Invisibles cell and how they pass signifiers between them illustrate how the characters accept surprise and uncertainty and thus the reparative mode of reading which comes with that. *Best Man Fall*, however, follows the mode of analysis taken so far in this section in that it provides a character-based example of contradiction being embodied and then flattened out of a character by some greater force. Of course here it is the Invisible flattening out contradiction, and as such it provides a helpful segue into the next section: while the Invisibles are able to function within uncertainty (and even use it as one of their greatest weapons) they still come up against the rationalizing force of the Outer Church. And when they find themselves up against it, they often end up forced into the same modes of reading the world as the Church (as evidenced by King Mob’s defacing of Bobby), even if they purport to use that reading for different ends.

2: Hegemony and escaping it

If one is going to look at how the Invisibles are influenced by and attempt to escape the power structures around them, it is important to look at how those structures actually come to be in the first place. The discussion of the construction of power structures arises in a scene in which Sir Miles (an agent of the Outer Church) tortures a captive King Mob. Midway through
the torture, Sir Miles lectures King Mob on domination. Miles lists out all the letters of the alphabet before saying of it “[t]hat name [the alphabet] and all the names it generates, were designed to set limits upon humanity’s ability to express abstract thought. What you see depends entirely upon the words you have to describe what you see. Nothing exists unless we say it does” (491). This sets language itself up as this text’s equivalent to the Batsymbol as a signifier which sets limits on how everything it comes into contact with might be expressed. After this description from Sir Miles, he then describes how King Mob previously responded to these restrictions in his youth, detailing how King Mob “spent hours writing with [his] left hand […] trying unconsciously to break the alphabet spell the teachers placed upon [him]” (491). This begins to introduce the possibility of the rejection of knowing through forgetting, something hypothetically gestured at here through King Mob’s attempt to unlearn knowledge which has been forced upon him. Through rejecting what he was taught as rational to do and writing with his left hand, King Mob sought to unlearn things so that he might create something different out of the alphabet spell set in place to control him. This, of course, does not work, and in the final panel of the flashback, all that has been written is a string of nonsense, which, despite its nonsense, is still constructed out of the same letters of the alphabet which were used to control him (492). Even if it delved into a nonsensical use of the language used to create the hegemonic structures, King Mob’s previous attempt to escape them still used that language just the same, dooming it to failure, and therein lies the problem which *The Invisibles* faces: it is a text, constructed of near omnipresent language, trying to escape the signifier that is language.

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5 In the early phases of working on this paper, an angle which intrigued me was looking at *The Invisibles* through the lens of unlearning, and how the idea of leaning into contradiction and leaning into not knowing could influence an educational model. While this did not end up making sense to add to this work in its current form, it is something which I believe merits exploration in the future.
To better understand how the type of omnipresent, thought-limiting control being exercised by the Outer Church in *The Invisibles* is constructed, it can be helpful to turn briefly to Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony as a form of cultural control. Gramsci writes that

The maximum of legislative capacity can be inferred when a perfect formulation of directives is matched by a perfect arrangement of the organisms of execution and verification, and by a perfect preparation of the “spontaneous” consent of the masses who must “live” those directives, modifying their own habits, their own will, their own convictions to conform with these directives (Gramsci, 266).

Gramsci’s theory of hegemony here is essentially a form of political control which does not rely entirely on force in order to maintain said control. Rather the governing occurs through every facet of everyday life being spent following those directives of the hegemonic government. This being the primary method of control ties in nicely with one of the main methods of political control in *The Invisibles*: Language. Language is something used throughout the text by the outer church to limit the abstract thought which is possible, and language fits particularly well as a method of control, as especially in a world constructed of text it is nearly impossible to escape it. Everyone is stuck continually using their language and thus reaffirming the hegemonic control.

To deepen the connection present here between hegemony and language, Chantal Mouffe writes of Gramsci that “hegemony is defined as the ability of one class to articulate the interest of other social groups to its own” (Mouffe, 183). To follow this up, she additionally writes that there are two ways of doing this: either “the interests of these groups can either be articulated so as to neutralise them and hence to prevent the development of their own specific demands, or they can be articulated in such a way as to promote their full development leading to the final resolution of the contradictions which they express” (Mouffe, 183). The second option presented
there is somewhat less important to the work being done here at the moment, as it concerns the forming of a more proletarian hegemony, rather than reflecting the sort of hegemony created by figures such as Batman and the Outer Church. The first part, however, presents the idea that the articulation of the ideas which might normally not be fully in line with the dominant ideas can result in them being consumed by hegemony. When the ideas are brought forth on the terms of the dominant group, they are made no longer contradictory, and they are made to fit whatever that group’s vision of the world is. This is the work of the detective in Batman, and now, in *The Invisibles*, it is the work of language. As will be further explored, anything which one does in the world of the Invisibles is filtered through language, (the tool of the dominant forces) and as such is at risk of being rendered less politically powerful, as it exists in the terms of the oppressor. Additionally, a large part of this defusing of any other ideology comes from the way in which articulation on the terms of the dominant ideology not only allow that ideology to digest it, but it allows them to make it non-contradictory, and, like everything else in a hegemonically controlled society, it allows them to make it into something which stays legible through the fact that it only exists within the hegemonic limits of what one is allowed to conceive of.

Morrison even seems directly aware of the way in which revolution can be co-opted facing hegemonic structures if that revolution is articulated in structural acceptable ways. Just as with a number of the other challenges faced by the Invisibles, they illustrate this issue in the text through King Mob. While breaking into a facility to rescue a member of the cell, someone occupies the language processing centers of the extraction team's brains, and forces them to “generate auto-critique” (Morrison, 967). While there is something to look into with all of the characters here,⁶ King Mob’s auto critique is the most relevant here, as he monologues that “[t]he

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⁶ Some personal favorites of mine include Robin’s critique of aesthetics obscuring a message with the line “my tits sell anarchy”, and Jack’s ever elegant “Fuck fuck fuck” (967).
most pernicious image of all is the anarchist-hero figure. A creation of commodity culture, he allows us to buy into an inauthentic simulation of revolutionary praxis [...] The hero encourages passive spectating and revolt becomes another product to be consumed” (967). Essentially, in the act of putting the anarchist hero into the form of a text to be marketed and sold, it articulates the character in a way which makes them digestible and able to exist within the hegemonic state they are fighting against without being a contradiction. They are a product, not a rebel. The reader is able to project a fantasy of political action as this “inauthentic” version of actual rebellion plays out in front of them. The revolution itself cannot be articulated on the terms of the power structure, as it hegemonically disallows all thought outside of its own understanding of the world, and the revolution represents a contradiction which that order cannot allow. Thus the way in which King Mob has operated up until this point in the text (and generally the way in which many of these revolutionary stories operate) cannot actually break out of hegemony. They still use the language and the signifiers of those power structures which they fight against. This, then, is the challenge of the Invisibles. To find some way to break out of this hegemonic control.

The first method of beginning to conduct this escape from hegemony is that of an acceptance of the dominant logic while altering oneself to become a living contradiction to it. In one of the first explicit encounters with the whole main cast of the Invisibles cell, Jack finds them in a classroom with a blackboard in it which reads “Big Brother is watching you. Learn to become invisible” (126). This allusion to Orwell’s 1984 reaffirms the ideas of hegemonic control: there exists an ever watchful fascist government which seeks to render everything knowable and controllable to it. The odds are even made more impossible in the use of 1984 specifically, a text where the government’s control remains unbroken. And the writing here makes no attempt to hide the degree to which avoiding that controlling gaze is impossible.
Wherever and whoever you are, Big Brother is watching. In the confines of the first statement written on the board, avoiding the hegemonic and controlling gaze of those in power is impossible. But, as lord Fanny later says “they don’t have a clue just how good at doing the impossible we actually are” (721). And so the second half of the blackboard dodges the impossibility completely by existing in contradiction to it. It doesn’t matter if Big Brother is watching if one is invisible, and there is nothing legible there to see. This begins to undermine any ideas which appear to be certain in *The Invisibles*. If one accepts certainties such as the claim that “big brother is watching”, that seemingly settled knowledge will only be upturned by moves such as the response of becoming invisible, invalidating any power the certainty might have once held.

This is reaffirmed in a later scene as well in which Lord Fanny confronts the mind-controlling villain Mr Quimper. To provide a bit of context, in an earlier confrontation with the Invisibles, Quimper managed to insert a splinter of his consciousness into the team leader, Robin, and over time he has been using this to slowly take control of her. Quimper at this point believes he has Robin in his clutches, but Lord Fanny arrives in front of Quimper disguised as Robin instead, obeying Quimper until she removes her mask to reveal her true identity (1135). Before even looking at any dialogue, it’s important to note that this scene subverts the unfortunately classic transphobic trope of a man being “tricked” into an encounter with someone he believes to be a cis woman before it is revealed, much to the characters usual disgust in such scenes, that the woman is trans. Here, however, the breaking of the expectations of the one occupying the man’s place in the scene (in this case Quimper) is something which is played with a triumphant effect rather than a disgusting one. The masculine figure realizing that the body in front of him is not what he thought it to be is a moment of victory rather than a punchline.
Quimper cannot process this mutability in the bodies in front of him, something made explicit by Fanny as she tells him that in opposition to the static roles Quimper expects people to occupy under hegemonic control “I have been a boy, a girl, a whore, a sorcerer” (1149). Fanny’s ability to change is contrasted by Quimper resorting to repeating the same phrases over and over again, until he’s eventually defeated by Fanny. The mutability of identity here provides a resistance to direct control. Both the transfemme taking the place of the expected cis woman and Fanny’s affirmation of the contradictions which she embodies are things which the hegemonic gaze cannot properly latch onto. It can understand any of Fanny’s identities individually, yet when they are put together, impassable contradictions emerge. Impassable contradictions which Fanny might weaponize.

With this first step of making oneself immune to the direct flattening gaze of hegemonic powers accomplished, next the text turns to investigate how one might seek to actually accomplish what King Mob sought to do as he tried to unlearn the alphabet spell: try to experience thoughts outside of what hegemony allows for. This struggle comes to a head just before the aforementioned confrontation between Lord Fanny and Mr. Quimper. The scene opens before Fanny’s entrance with multiple members of her team captured and being taken deeper into Quimper’s masters’ base while he monologues at them, telling them “you forgot that you were parts of a machine. Because of your forgetfulness, the machine is inefficient” (1116). To pick out two particular points to focus on here, first of course is the idea of efficiency as part of a machine being the ultimate purpose of humans. Beyond this just being an unsubtle anti-capitalist dig, a machine of that sort in the context of this essay represents the hegemonic structures that the Invisibles are attempting to unlearn. The machine requires everyone to affirm their place within it, just as people affirm hegemony by enacting its dictates in their everyday lives. This of course
also ties into the other point I wanted to pay attention to, that being that the way in which the Invisibles fight back against being a part of the machine. Quimper refers to their fighting as them having forgotten that they are a part of the machine. Forgetting, in a very literal sense, is an act of unknowing. To forget (especially to forget intentionally) is to reject certain knowledge, and here this choice to not know is directly stated by Quimper to be what allows them to fight back. If no thoughts can exist outside of hegemony, then forgetting those hegemonic structures so that one might be able to think of something new is a revolutionary act. Certainty and knowing is knowing that one is a part of a machine. Not knowing is revolutionary.

Finally now that the hegemonic gaze has been resisted, and a path has been painted to think outside of it, the text itself still faces the question of how to convey this escape from the hegemony of language in a medium based in large part on language. This hegemonic power of language naturally brings one to the places where Morrison uses the form of comics to escape from the way in which one might normally read a text. In a fully written piece, such as this one I am writing now, it would be entirely unremarkable to note the white, textless segments on the sides of each page and in between paragraphs. In a graphic novel, however, there is an expectation for the world of the page to be physically full, whether with words or with images. Morrison, in a number of places throughout the Invisibles, exploits this expectation to draw the reader’s attention to places where areas of the page expected to be occupied are left blank.

Conversely to Batman’s domineering Batsignal, the Invisibles have a sort of sign of their group as well, one which serves as one of the aforementioned escapes from language. The closest thing they have to a symbol, “the invisible badge” is quite literally that: a blank white badge. This refutes the possibility of the symbol being a stable identifier as the Batsymbol is for Batman. There is no sign here to be identified with. Nothing to overtake the rest of the text as the
Batsymbol does. Secondly, it even explicitly rejects the marketability which Morrison discussed coming from the Batsymbol as well as from the anarchist hero during the auto critique scene. In some of their notes on *The Invisibles*, Morrison jokes about the absurdity of DC Comics marketing the symbol of the Invisibles to people, saying “[t]he blank badge would make a great merchandising item. Just buy in a job lot of white badges and sell ‘em back at outrageous prices. With me on a smart royalty, of course” (1496). Morrison here points out the blatant absurdity one would have to go through in order for this to be marketable. DC Comics would literally have to sell a product you can get for basically nothing, without any alterations. Because what alterations could they make? There is nothing that they can add to the blankness. Morrison has essentially created the ultimate in punk marketing symbols. It would be absurd for any company to sell it, and any fan of the book can get it or make it themself for a dollar or so. This allows the blank space to escape from the way in which marketability has been connected with the hegemonic control which symbols have been able to exert elsewhere in Morrison’s work.

In addition to this resistance to marketability, however, there is another meta level upon which the button operates. Due to the comic form of the text, the button is not only described, but it is additionally visualized, allowing it to exist as essentially a piece of page untouched by any of the signifiers one would normally associate with a page of a text. Morrison even draws direct attention to this blankness the first time Jack really looks at the badge. Jack’s mentor, Mad Tom, places the badge in front of him and tells him to “[l]ook in the mirror! What do you see” to which Jack responds “[t]here’s nothing” (98, 98) (Figure 7).
In addition to the focus on the absence of anything on the badge, this additionally puts forth the idea of this blankness as a mirror. This scene represents Jack becoming Invisible for the first time, as he gazes upon something which should show him his reflection and sees nothing in return. He has gained the ability to see how he himself could become an anti-sign through attaching himself to this signifier which signifies nothing, something done through looking at a place of absence on the page and connecting himself to it.

Additionally, there is another element to the badge which invites another return to Bruce Wayne looking at a painting in an art gallery and insisting that it give some sort of meaning to him. The blank badge defies this through giving observers such as Bruce Wayne or the Outer Church nothing to ground their interpretation on. The icon is free-form and devoid of concrete signifiers of meaning, making it nigh impossible to fully have a stable claim as to what it “means”. Regardless of how long the detective turns his rationalizing gaze on it, there is nothing to be seen there. Unlike the abstract art Bruce was looking at, there are not even gestures at meaning presented here for the detective to try to grasp onto and begin an interpretation under
which it might convey their desired meaning. And in this rejection of meaning, it rejects the gaze of those who would try to pin it down into one place and diminish its ability to transport the viewer outside of the structure in which they usually exist, as demonstrated by the blank page.

To move away from the effect on Jack here, the next page of the comic after Jack looks at the button is an entirely blank page, letting the reader sit there, at once in the process of reading a text while also having no text to engage with. While they can of course skip right past the page, it also provides a moment to reflect on a blank canvas and on a place where one, for a moment, be removed from the world of the text. Essentially, the reader is still in the midst of the text, yet they find themself with no text to engage with. They, like Jack, are given a brief moment in which to sit outside of language, forced to improvise the experience which is happening here without any of the usual signifiers to base their reading on. If the reader is to buy into the experience and engage with this blank page, they must accept that there is no absolute knowledge. They, as readers, must exist outside of the stability of text.

In contrast to the way in which pages absent of any signifiers are used for the Invisibles, the outer church has moments entirely absent of text or images as well, although these are intentionally created to be in direct contrast to those which relate to the Invisibles. While Mr. Quimper has King Mob and Jolly Roger (a leader of another cell of Invisibles) captive, he takes them down into his base through an elevator, and in the page depicting the descent, every two panels of them in the elevator are broken up by a panel that is colored entirely black (1117) (Figure 8).
While the white panels are an absence of any of the signifiers of meaning one could usually expect to find on a page, these panels are the reverse: an overabundance of the ink that can be used to create those usual signifiers.

While not in reference to these panels directly, Lord Fanny addresses the idea of a fully black page as a mirror shortly afterwards, saying “[w]hen you shut your eyes, afraid to see yourself as you truly are…that is when you see only darkness” (1149). This comes directly on the heels of the previously discussed speech from Fanny about the mutability of identity, and as
such Quimper’s version of the self that she is refuting is an unchanging one. When the self is assumed to be a static, fully understandable thing, it results in a visual image so overdetermined by the ink used to create text that there is no space left for any possibility of something new in the panel. Everything is made consistent, and non-contradictory, and unchanging as it is filled with the stuff of signifiers. Nothing can be created within these panels as everything that they could be is already known.

To return to the blankness and the possibility of escape it offers in opposition to those fully blacked out panels, in addition to the earlier discussion of Jack and the blank badge, the image of the blank page resurfaces as King Mob later takes Ragged Robin on a psychic tour of the Invisible college (a training ground of sorts for the Invisibles). While there, the orientation of the page begins to warp as King Mob explains that “[t]his is where our reality disintegrates into the large-scale structure of…whatever’s out there. Beyond this, things are going on that we can’t even conceptualize” (807). Then in the panel after establishing this, King Mob reaches up and peels the panel he is in off the page, exposing blank white space beneath while saying “[t]ime and space start to get weird here on the perimeter. They start turning into something else” (808). This marks the first time in the text that blank space has been used not only as a symbol, but also explicitly as a space where the characters can exist outside of the text. This place of unknown absence is a place where the text is something other than the hegemonically controlled thing it was before. Morrison thus positions this sanctum of knowledge for the Invisibles as close as they can to being outside of the controllable, textual world which the rest of the text operates in. They even make it explicit here that the intention of the blank space is to be resistant to interpretation as they describe how it is impossible for the characters to even conceptualize (807). In existing
that way, the blank space is something fully outside of whatever hegemonic control the language of the text holds over them.

In the fact that this space outside of the text cannot be conceptualized, it functions as a successful resistance to the alphabet programming which Sir Miles was telling King Mob about during the interrogation. It is a space fully free of language, and additionally it is a space specifically outside of the conception of the characters of the text (at this point at least), a fact which responds to the Outer Church’s use of the alphabet to place limits “upon humanity’s ability to express abstract thought” (491). Thus language forces purely rational thought under its own parameters, whereas an exit from language forces irrational abstract thought if one is willing to engage with it. If this blank space is outside of what humans can conceive, then it is outside of the alphabet spell which is used to confine and limit what they can conceive of. This firmly establishes the earlier discussed idea that the text of *The Invisibles* is, by its very nature, flawed. As much as the text wants to point towards a revolutionary idea outside of hegemony, it is still something made primarily of language. That language then pins things down to concrete, unchanging ideas, limited within the context of the alphabet spell. The text is in essence trying to escape itself, and find a space outside of the control and certainty which language creates.
Conclusion

It is fitting then, with that attempt to escape from language in mind, that the Invisibles ends by again drawing attention to the blank space outside of text. By the end, the Invisibles have succeeded in their fight against the outer church, and the world of the text is starting to disintegrate, with blank white space spreading across every panel and covering up text and image alike. Jack Frost stands alone on the page, speaking to the reader and saying “[w]e made gods and jailers because we felt small and ashamed and alone [...] We let them try us and judge us and, like sheep to slaughter, we allowed ourselves to be sentenced” (1482). Here, in the use of “sentenced” he calls back to how these jailers people have placed themselves under are represented in language and the standard signifiers of text. Then as he continues to speak, less and less of the art dominates the page, with only his lips being present as he directs the reader with “[s]ee! Now!” and then even his lips disappearing as he finishes with “our sentence is up” (1482) (Figure 9).

7 It’s a bit more complicated than that, but for the sake of argument here, that’s what’s important.
Figure 9. The world of the text disintegrating around Jack. Grant Morrison, Frank Quitely, et al, *The Invisibles* DC Comics, 2012 [1482]

The final panel then zooms in to place a period at the end of the sentence, before the text ends on blank white space not even contained within the boundaries of a panel.

There are several tricks which Morrison uses here to attempt to have this ending fully function as an escape from the hegemony of language. Firstly, these last few words of Jack’s lay out a metaphor in miniature for the project of the text as a whole. In opening by drawing attention to how the jailers are self-created and perpetuated, Jack reminds the reader that this text, even if it has gestured at freedom, it is still created using the tools of control. Jack then invites the reader to join in using the tools of the oppressor one last time as he commands the reader to “[s]ee!” an act which up to this point in Morrison’s work has been associated with the watchful
eyes of Big Brother, and with Batman’s gaze in his detective work (1482). This proves a trap of sorts however, as the thing which is seen is that “[o]ur sentence is up”, words literally coupled with the dissolution of the signifiers on the page into nothing (1482). This final page draws attention not only to Morrison’s use of language, but additionally the reader’s ability to use their gaze to comprehend this language. Yet this whole text is an exercise in what happens here: giving the reader just enough meaning, just enough legible signifiers so that eventually they might follow that trail and be faced with Jack’s command to turn their gaze onto the space outside of control and language.

This ending may not be immediately satisfying for everyone. I know it was not for me when I first read it. To illustrate why, at least for me at first, before the blankness consumes the page, one of Jack’s old friends asks him what it will be like, to which he responds “[i]t’ll be different for everybody” (585). It is of course not uncommon for a text to end ambiguously, but by ending with a moment to pause on total absence takes that up to another level in order to truly bring Jack’s claim of the end being different for everybody to reality. The ending forces the reader to take a leap of faith into the unknowable space outside of signifiers, so of course it ends up being different for whoever reads it. There is not enough stability to With an ending like this, Morrison anticipates the event as readers such as my younger self, who, even if they were along for most of the ride, might not be fully prepared to engage with blank space instead of an ending.

To give the hesitant reader something in place of the blank page, *The Invisibles*, like Morrison’s *Batman*, presents the reader with a loop of signs which they can become stuck in should they choose to read the text and desire some certainty in what it is saying. The very first page of the text opens with a conversation between King Mob and another Invisible, with the
reader entering midway through the conversation on the line “and so we return and begin again” (12). *The Invisibles* invites the reader to make a return to the signifiers of language which the text carries for almost the whole time until that last page. It even does it again closer to the end. As one is reintroduced to the characters after a timeskip that takes the reader to shortly before the text starts to dissolve into blank pages, it is revealed that King Mob has been making a new form of initiation into the Invisibles: A hallucinatory alternate reality game of sorts, bearing the same art on its canister as the cover of the very first issue of *The Invisibles*. When describing it to Jack, King Mob tells him that “[c]ouple of the kids who tested it could cure themselves of “The Invisibles” in five minutes by the end. If you don’t get it the first time, you have to keep running it” (1468). This again reaffirms that the “text” of *The Invisibles* is something to be escaped, whether it is the language of the book itself or King Mob’s hallucination version which he is marketing. Either way, the text is something marketed, and something steeped in signifiers, and thus the goal in either case is to escape it. Yet in both places, the reader is invited to return to the world of signifiers, either by King Mob’s invitation to replay the hallucination, or by the previously discussed opening line of the text.

If they want, the reader may enter into a cycle with the text. Like Batman does with the Batsymbol, they can rely on the signifiers of language so that they might properly know what happens in the text. Yet in every single one of those readings, the reader is inevitably led to Jack’s command to “[s]ee!” (1482). And every single time that command will lead the reader to that blank space at the end of the text. Each time they will be presented with the option of returning to the text to begin again, or to take this reading as the time they face that blank space with all its lack of signifiers and total absence of concrete meaning. They can take a moment, and consider that blank space which cannot be faced with any certainty, and which thus holds the
potential to unsettle the reader from hegemonic patterns of thought. They can consider the freedom from hegemony and the reparative potential of that unknowable page. Now, at the end, to steal a phrase from Jack before leaving you as Morrison does, “I’ve said my bit and it’s your go now… so while you’re thinking about it, think about this” (1482) (Figure 10).
Figure 10. The blank page. Grant Morrison et al. *The Invisibles* [99].
Works Cited


