Guest Editors' Introduction

Matthew Calihman, Tracy Floreani, and A. Yęmisi Jimoh

Although Ralph Ellison said that he was born on March 1, 1914, biographers now place his date of birth exactly one year earlier.[1] In 2013 and 2014, the national media gave Ellison's centenary only a modest amount of coverage, but academic and cultural institutions marked the occasion with conference sessions, symposia, special exhibits, and scholars began to plan commemorative publications. The year-long series of centenary events in Ellison's hometown of Oklahoma City culminated in the Ralph Ellison Centennial Symposium, which was held in conjunction with the 2014 conference of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS). This special issue of *American Studies* grew out of these joint meetings.

We are very happy to reflect on "Ralph Ellison at 100" in this venue, for, in some important ways, Ellison's life as a public intellectual was a life in American studies. He devoted much of his energy to the production, conservation, and interpretation of African American culture—"that fragment," as he put it, "of the huge diverse American experience which I know best."[2] In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Ellison contributed to the massive Federal Writers' Project (FWP) fieldwork program that is one of the institutional origins of American studies and that yielded one of its largest and most important archives. As a writer identified with the Popular Front of the 1930s and 1940s, Ellison took part in a movement from which emerged American studies' idea of American culture as a dynamic nexus of ethnic, regional, and class cultures shaped by an

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ongoing struggle for social justice.[3] In 1954, Ellison served on the faculty of the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies, introducing his European students to the interdisciplinary study of US culture, especially African American culture. And, as a member of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television (1965-67), he helped to create the institutional infrastructure for what we now recognize as public television, which has long been a major popular showcase for American studies research.

Ellison's fictions and essays are likewise intimately bound up with American studies. To be sure, *Invisible Man* (1952) refuses to be mere "social science," but the novel is nevertheless an analysis of folk culture (e.g., hot yams and Brer Rabbit), material culture (e.g., leg irons and sambo dolls), literature (e.g., "Self-Reliance" and *12 Million Black Voices*), music (e.g., Louis Armstrong and the spirituals), place (e.g., the rural South and the streets of Harlem), social movements (e.g., Communism and Garveyism), social institutions (e.g., the black college and the factory), and social orders (e.g., white supremacy and patriarchy). Much the same could be said for Ellison's collections of essays, *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986); such posthumous publications as *Flying Home and Other Stories* (1996) and the novel-in-progress *Juneteenth* (1999) / *Three Days Before the Shooting...* (2010); as well as other writing that remained unpublished or uncollected at the time of Ellison's death in 1994.

Thus, as the contents of this special issue suggest, Ellison studies is also American studies. We bring together in this forum a wide variety of new Ellison scholarship, a selection of artists' responses to his work, and some personal reflections on the author himself. Several of the scholarly essays collected here focus on Ellison's own crossing of disciplinary boundaries. Lena M. Hill discusses Ralph and Fanny Ellison's shared investment in visual art and shows how it informs his fictional representations of the nation's democratic aspirations. Paul Devlin inscribes Ellison's contemporary, Ann Petry, in the history of jazz writing by arguing that her short story "Solo on the Drums" (1947) may have figured in the development of Ellison's "phenomenology of listening." Kasia Boddy considers Ellison's reckoning with sport, identifying Len Zinberg's Popular Front novel *Walk Hard–Talk Loud* (1940) as one of *Invisible Man*'s many intertexts, Boddy examines the narratives' portrayal of the boxing ring as a site of political education. And two of our contributors find critiques of twentieth-century urban planning in Ellison's fiction and essays. According to J.J. Butts, Ellison drew upon his FWP research on Harlem's history and vernacular culture to challenge the ideas of modern citizenship embedded in the New Deal's planning discourse. Looking at another moment in Ellison's engagement with city planning, Myka Tucker Abramson contends that post-World War II urban renewal initiatives are reflected in the narrative designs of *Invisible Man*, in which the protagonist and other black characters are repeatedly swept up, and away, in plans for the modern American city.

Also included in this special issue are essays that speak directly to Ellison's work as a black public intellectual and to the understandings of black subjectiv-

ity that he brought to this work. Sterling L. Bland, Jr. explores how, during the 1960s and 1970s, Ellison defined the role of the black intellectual in response to not only white supremacy but also younger African American writers' doubts about his own blackness. John S. Wright focuses on Ellison's efforts as a member of the Haverford Group, an informal association of senior black intellectuals, to formulate a cultural pluralist politics for the Black Power/Black Liberation era. Explicitly considering Ellison's relevance to our historical moment, in which some scholars are contemplating the "end" of African American literature, Casey Hayman finds in *Invisible Man* a middle way between radical individualism and totalizing ideas of black authenticity and solidarity. Keith Byerman makes the case that, although Ellison did not go far in representing black women's inner lives, the black female characters in his short stories function crucially to picture racial and gender ideology for his black male protagonists.

The personal essays published here, along with John F. Callahan's "Opening Comments" and Terrance Hayes's poem "How to Draw an Invisible Man," reflect Ellison's insistence that he had seen more of the world than he was supposed to see. Phyllis E. Bernard writes about her and Ellison's identification with both Harlem and Oklahoma City's Deep Deuce neighborhood, which was a major settlement in the "Black West" until the 1960s. Hugh Hawkins recalls how Ellison moved within the community surrounding his vacation home in rural Plainfield, Massachusetts, where he and Hawkins were neighbors. Todd Weeks, who played a key role in establishing an archive for Ellison's record collection at the National Jazz Museum in Harlem, reflects on the diversity of his musical tastes and on the notions about entertainment that seem to have connected the music archivist and Ellison the musician-writer. Horace Porter, who knew Ellison for many years, hypothesizes that he never finished a second novel because he was intent on writing, as Porter puts it, "a big, original book, a tragicomic and imaginary encyclopedia of American types and dreams." Upon Ellison's death, the speaker of Hayes's poem discovers within the corpse not a lifeless void left by wasted genius but a wild plenitude of language, a Surrealist group-composition made by Ellison's America. Callahan, Ellison's literary executor, assesses the author's contemporary significance and suggests that "invisibility" remains a powerful metaphor—it seems to describe, for example, the rhetoric concerning President Barack Obama's origins and loyalty to the nation.

The images of paintings and sculptures that appear in these pages capture five artists' attempts to endow the Ellisonian subject with sight and to make him visible. Part of a series of paintings titled "Visible Man," Jordan Casteel's *Cornelius* (2014) discloses a seated, naked black man, surrounded by his clothes and other belongings, who is already returning the viewer's gaze. Elizabeth Catlett's *Invisible Man: A Memorial to Ralph Ellison* (2003), located steps away from the Ellisons' longtime residence on Manhattan's Riverside Drive, reveals not only absence, a figure constituted by negative space, but also presence, a figure whose stance and gesture propose a world and his place in it. Mike Hoffman's painting *Ralph Ellison, Literary Lion* (2013), a re-imagining

of a well-known photograph of Ellison, manifests the writer by thrusting him into the closest possible proximity with his symbols and the apparatus of symbol-making and by rendering even Ellison's body as symbolic action. In David Phelps's *The Invisible Royalty* (2012), a sculpture installed prominently at Oklahoma City's Ralph Ellison Library, the author is visibly immanent in *Invisible Man*'s first page, which issues from a typewriter perched atop a stack of his books. And, in Jack Whitten's *Black Monolith II (For Ralph Ellison)* (1994), the irreducible multiplicity of African American identity appears in a form that could certainly be called Ellisonian: a mosaic whose tiles are syncretized from molasses, copper, salt, coal, ash, chocolate, onion, herbs, rust, eggshell, razor blade, and acrylic paint.

Like these visual artists, we are interested in keeping Ellison's life, works, and abiding concerns before the eyes of scholars and other publics. It is sometimes tempting to dismiss literary anniversaries as empty ritual or simple opportunism, but the recent centennial events in Oklahoma City made these kinds of responses seem cynical. Community members, students, and scholars came together at these events to discuss the life and work of a writer whose cosmopolitanism and experimentalism were grounded in the city and surrounding region. The events yielded personal reflections and scholarly projects that make clearer than ever Ellison's broad relevance to the study of American culture and society. These reflections and projects in turn formed the foundation for this special issue.

Notes

1. Lawrence P. Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2002), 1. Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 5.
2. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 183.
3. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 445-54. See these pages for Denning's account of the Popular Front's role in the development of American studies.

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