

# Performing Political Responsibility: Ralph and Fanny Ellison's Appeal to Visual Arts

Lena M. Hill

When Christopher McElroen sought the University of Iowa as a location for putting the finishing touches on his 2012 stage adaptation of *Invisible Man*, he was inspired by the intriguing convergence of Fanny Ellison's and Ralph Ellison's history in Iowa City. In 1936, Fanny McConnell earned her bachelor's degree from the Department of Speech and Dramatic Art of the State University of Iowa, and in 1959, Ralph Ellison, who married Fanny in 1946, was invited to become the first African American faculty member in the prestigious Iowa Writers Workshop. Examining their early training, as well as the creative work that shaped their professional paths, reveals both Ellisons' enduring interest in art and performance. Although Ellison scholarship has not pursued their Iowa connection or the significance of the couple's shared interest in visual art, McElroen recognized the rich possibilities of exploring this confluence as he fine-tuned his play. His twenty-first century interpretation of Ralph Ellison's mid-twentieth-century novel celebrates the rare ability of the stage to foreground the human truths that *Invisible Man* explores. His staging also recalls both Ellisons' investment in visual art to examine the politics of race.<sup>1</sup>

McElroen's attention to period costumes and sets evokes the historical moment that shaped Fanny Ellison's and Ralph Ellison's artistic and political sensibility. The protagonist of *Invisible Man* comes of age during the Jim Crow era and searches for his political voice during the pre-civil rights movement

years, evolving along a similar trajectory as the Ellisons. The vivid role that plastic art occupies on McElroen's stage cleverly portrays the power that visual images wield in molding intellectual, cultural, and political beliefs and subtly introduces Ralph Ellison's investment in visual art aesthetics. For instance, in an early scene that re-creates the confrontation between Invisible Man and Bledsoe, the college president who keeps the naive protagonist running, McElroen features a large portrait of Booker T. Washington. As a set piece, the image of the Tuskegee president deepens the scene by introducing Ralph Ellison's biographical history, the politics of Invisible Man's college, and Washington's appeal to photography to spread his educational and political philosophy.<sup>2</sup> More broadly, McElroen taps into the Ellisons' dual investment in exploring the ability of visual art to engage complicated political positions. Taking a cue from McElroen's stage adaptation, this article ponders Fanny Ellison's engagement with visual media and particular artists and probes Ralph Ellison's attention to specific paintings in his literary work to sharpen our understanding of their nuanced analysis of race relations in the twentieth-century United States.

### **Fanny Ellison's Early Aesthetic: Theater, Art, and Cultural Pride**

Fanny McConnell appealed to plastic art and performance to advance discussions of race long before she met Ralph Ellison in 1944.<sup>3</sup> When she transferred from Fisk University to the University of Iowa in 1934, she changed her focus from literature to drama. As one of the few black undergraduates in Iowa's cutting-edge theater arts program, she flourished, notwithstanding the many difficulties African American students encountered.<sup>4</sup> The 1934–1935 theater season at Iowa found McConnell working on production crews for plays as disparate as Sidney Howard's *Yellow Jack* and Susan Glaspell's *Allison's House*.<sup>5</sup> She valued her undergraduate instruction, and the unwritten rules that prohibited African American students from acting onstage at Iowa failed to deter her. Instead, her undergraduate experiences fueled her passion for the stage. She viewed the theater as a space to challenge racial inequality without compromising artistic excellence.<sup>6</sup>

After graduation, McConnell channeled her theatrical training directly into addressing African American community concerns. She returned to Chicago, where she briefly taught speech and drama at the YMCA before joining the Board of Education of Museum Extension Aid. As a part of the Chicago Board, she served on the WPA Project for Visual Education Material, and in this capacity, she created wide-ranging lectures on costume design.<sup>7</sup> These experiences increased McConnell's confidence, and in March 1938, she founded the Negro Peoples' Theatre (NPT) and served as its primary director. She believed that the NPT could have a genuine impact on race discussions in Chicago, and she understood the power that the stage wielded as a space for broaching difficult cultural conversations and educating audiences. She reminded NPT members,

“We are not just a group of people organized to give plays, but we are a group attempting to supply a community need.” In a draft of the letter, McConnell expounded,

Even if we had not the wealth of telling material from our current lives from which to draw as a source for theatre, we have a heritage . . . of great Negroes who stood alone in their day and cried out against the outrages toward their people. . . . We will give them due tribute. We’ll reincarnate them in the theatre. There is no more effective or enduring monument. Maybe we can do in the theatre what our history books don’t do in school.<sup>8</sup>

Like Ralph Ellison, whose essays repeatedly pronounce the necessity that American artists accept the task of drawing on their individual cultural experiences and history to produce a truer, more vital picture of the country, McConnell celebrated the opportunity to do such work in the theater. The successful 1938 production of Langston Hughes’s *Don’t You Want to Be Free?*, the first play staged by the NPT, confirmed her sharp theatrical eye [Figure 1].

McConnell was also busy collecting visual art during this period, and her penchant for socially inspired pieces provides a window to her aesthetic sensibility. In a 1941 letter to her second husband, Ligon Buford, she shares details of the art she accumulated by trading their clothes and household effects. She reports that, in exchange for “three dresses,” Margaret Goss gave her two large watercolors as well as three lithographs while she acquired a work by R. T. Cooper in exchange for two rugs. The Goss painting she seems most enamored with is called *Refugee*, and she describes it as “a Negro mother and child in a fleeing attitude.” She also anticipates receiving paintings from William Carter, African masks by Ruth Heddrick, and a sculpture by Marion Perkins. She even asks Ligon if she might trade his “old tuxedo for a couple of oils by Charles White.”<sup>9</sup> Her aggressive collecting makes the many paintings making up the decor of the New York apartment she and Ralph Ellison called home no surprise.

More significantly, the visual artists whom McConnell patronized—as well as her work on Hughes’s play—spotlight McConnell’s knowledge of Chicago’s artistic and political landscape of the early 1940s. The Black Chicago Renaissance, a period spanning from the 1930s through the 1950s, ushered in new names and innovative styles even as artists built on the fertile foundation of earlier black painters, writers, and filmmakers.<sup>10</sup> While some well-known artists like Richard Wright were members of the Communist Party, many other African American artists advocated on behalf of the black community without subscribing to a rigid political philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Bright newcomers like McConnell yearned to have a positive impact on “Bronzeville,” the popular moniker for the Chicago South Side black community, and they appealed to a range of constituencies to do so. McConnell even reached out to Audrey Wood, the agent who managed Tennessee Williams’s rise to fame. Writing to her in May 1938, she



**Figure 1:** Daisy Roane as the “Mulatto Girl” and William Nix as the “Young Man,” *Don’t You Want to Be Free* (1938). Courtesy of the Ralph and Fanny Ellison Charitable Trust. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

meaningfully describes the NPT: “We are a young progressive organization and we are anxious to bring drama before the public that is pithy, honest and vital to our people.”<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, McConnell produced Hughes’s *Don’t You Want*

*to Be Free?* In Melissa Barton's excellent research of the NPT, she describes McConnell's shrewd maneuvering between the more conservative and progressive spheres of black Chicago.<sup>13</sup> McConnell struggled to convince her young theater company to take on Hughes's radically hued drama, and she argued that the stage was the perfect space to work through knotty issues related to race and class. McConnell explained that the "realism" at the heart of Hughes's play would aid their mission to "point out what [is] wrong with the world" and "release pent-up resentment."<sup>14</sup>

Letters from patrons who espoused very different views of the politics animating *Don't You Want to Be Free?* underscore the challenge McConnell faced as she strove to transform the stage into a popular space for instilling racial pride.<sup>15</sup> Although she teamed up with Theodore Ward in founding the NPT, she made a conscious decision against embracing a more radical political aesthetic as she articulated the group's most important goals.<sup>16</sup> Considering Ward's production of *Big White Fog* in April 1938, along with his well-known involvement with the Communist Party, McConnell was well aware of the possibility of adopting a more politically strident tone onstage. But even as she resisted embracing an overtly radical political aesthetic, McConnell boldly encouraged her young peers to remain true to their convictions regardless of how others defined their project. She prepared NPT members to disregard the incendiary terms some might use to label Hughes's play. McConnell warned, "You may have heard from some people that [*Don't You Want to Be Free?*] is 'red' or 'radical.' Don't let it shake you, don't let it touch you. You're young and frank and you've every reason to be courageous and stouthearted about what you're doing. . . . For we all believe in the right of every man to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."<sup>17</sup>

McConnell's seamless transition from extolling Hughes's progressive play to quoting the Declaration of Independence showcases her pragmatic artistic sensibility. She was dedicated to producing vital, authentic drama that spoke directly to the needs of its urban audience. Her relationships with visual artists like Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs, Marion Perkins, and Charles White further signal her concept of the power that art plays in shaping political and cultural ideas in thoughtful, nuanced terms. McConnell's investment in these newly emerging visual artists captures her aesthetic independence and belief that art could positively impact the black community in discernible ways. Like Burroughs, who named Perkins and White as notable teachers who worked alongside her at the South Side Community Arts Center, McConnell understood the necessity of building a solid foundation on which to construct art appreciation in African American urban areas.<sup>18</sup> In fact, many black women of the period turned to local stages, public schools, and community centers to impact black inner cities.<sup>19</sup>

Burroughs in particular provided a potent example. As a cofounder of the South Side Community Arts Center as well as the Ebony Museum (which became the DuSable Museum), Burroughs was instrumental in educating the

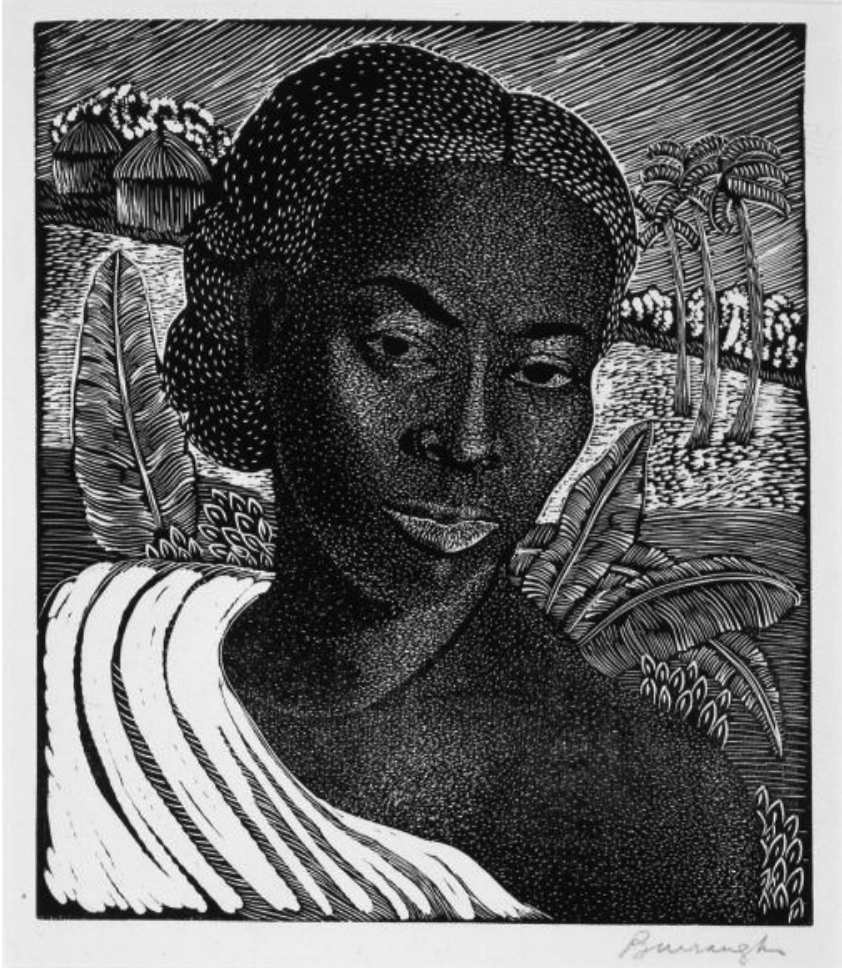
public about black history and culture while also giving artists exhibition opportunities. Even as she supported leftist political activism and found herself targeted during the McCarthy period, she insisted that she was never a member of the Communist Party, instead associating her work with Booker T. Washington's uplift philosophy.<sup>20</sup> Burroughs "regarded her efforts to promote black history as a separate project to civil rights protest in Chicago."<sup>21</sup> Above all, she remained staunchly devoted to teaching the public through institutions as well as her art. Her visual works reflect her deep, unyielding devotion to visual art as an educational and celebratory medium. Early paintings that capture the style that perhaps marked the work McConnell admired include *The Red Hat* (1936), *Untitled* (Abstract Head, 1939–1942), and the linocut *Emma Lazarus* (1945). Burroughs's investment in female portraits anticipates better-known works like her first linocut *Face of Africa* [Figure 2]. In turning to print, the medium that her reputation would come to rest on, Burroughs imbues her portrait with the strength, dignity, and beauty of Africa. Her confident deployment of light and darkness creates depth and power that increases the grace of her subject, while the print medium allowed her to produce works at more affordable costs. It is very possible that McConnell saw similar attributes in early works like *Refugee*.<sup>22</sup>

McConnell's interest in the sculptor Marion Perkins, an artist who shared Burroughs's artistic and political sensibility,<sup>23</sup> suggests that she was as invested in their creative work as she was in their sociopolitical sensibility. Perkins had already completed works like *Figure Sitting* (1939), a densely carved sculpture made from the stone of demolished buildings that became his preferred material. Charles White, who went on to become one of the most eminent visual artists of the period and married Elizabeth Catlett—a black woman who also came to Chicago after earning a degree from the University of Iowa—was already completing impressive works like *Five Great American Negroes* (1939–1940) and *There Were No Crops This Year* (1940) when McConnell contemplated trading her husband's tuxedo for some of the artist's oils. Like Burroughs and Perkins, White's art conveys the pride, force, and uniqueness of African American culture.

These artists' ability to produce serious visual art while remaining actively involved in the community aligned with McConnell's views. Interestingly, her future husband crossed paths with many of the same figures McConnell met in Chicago as he, too, slowly refined his philosophy of the relationship between art and politics. By 1945, he energetically rejected what he concluded was the limiting reality of the Communist Party. In a letter to Richard Wright, he expounds on the challenge socially conscious black writers face as they develop their craft:

We almost always feel more than we are able to express; the break with the c.p. has allowed me to come alive to many things of which I was becoming aware during my bitterly





**Figure 2:** Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs, *Face of Africa* (1956). Courtesy of the St. Louis Art Museum, Museum Minority Artists Purchase Fund.

isolated college experience. I'm reclaiming that now—with the stimulation of [*Black Boy*], I might add,—and forgotten passages of literature and repressed moods are becoming the wedges of insights. Some day I hope to do a surgical job on the repressive effect that c.p. sectarianism had upon my sensibilities along with the quickening effects of Marxism. I was never dead, but I was amorphous as hell, literally; and after my discovery of Marx too, too many questions, nebulous emotions and moods were left waiting breathlessly behind the doors of dogma.<sup>24</sup>

Ralph Ellison's emotional realization that art rather than political ideology alone enabled the personal discoveries necessary for unleashing his artistry formed the foundation of his mature literary aesthetic. Indeed, his 1946 union with McConnell represents the joining of two creative sensibilities alive to the ways in which visual media like theater and painting facilitate engaging the fraught politics surrounding racial inequality.

### **Ralph Ellison's Consequential Images: Reading Inside the Frame**

Around the same time that McConnell transitioned to Chicago from Iowa, Ralph Ellison arrived in New York, where he pursued sculpting under the tutelage of Richmond Barthé.<sup>25</sup> Even after his mentoring relationship with Barthé ended, he continued to be enamored with photography and visual art.<sup>26</sup> His study of these media complemented his budding devotion to creative writing as well as his serious contemplation of the political scene. As he turned from admiring Marxism and the Communist Party to questioning the relationship between these philosophies and artistic freedom, his assessment of contemporary artists and their work also changed. For instance, his opinion of Theodore Ward shifted dramatically. His 1940 review of Ward's *Big White Fog*—a play that realistically interrogates the appeal of communism to a young black man—extolled the drama as a “vital and entertaining play” admirable for its “sincere emotion.”<sup>27</sup> Conversely, by 1945, he described Ward as “still wriggling on the hook of Communism, full of fear and trembling which he hides behind a mask of . . . CP rhetoric.”<sup>28</sup> He had little patience for a political philosophy he felt impeded rather than promoted the flow of free ideas.

In contrast, he saw visual art as offering opportunities for intellectual and emotional growth. A 1941 letter captures his fervid response to Wright's photo documentary: “After reading [*12 Million Black Voices*] and experiencing the pictures, the concrete images, I was convinced that we people of emotion shall land the . . . destructive-creative blows in the struggle. And we shall do it with books like this!”<sup>29</sup> Although he concludes the letter by musing that reading Wright's book left him a “better man . . . and a better Marxist” (he crosses out “left winger”), he devotes most of his energy to pondering the need to move beyond restrictive labels. He passionately declares, “I hope our political leaders will realize what is here available for them. Here is their statistics given personality; here, I believe, is the essence of what they must work with; and all of Marx and Engles [*sic*], Lenin and Stalin wont [*sic*] help them unless they understand this part of the theoretical word made flesh.”<sup>30</sup> Ralph Ellison found the visual depiction of the black experience uniquely powerful.

Unsurprisingly, one of his first attempts at long fiction revolved around a painting. Arnold Rampersad describes the plot of Ellison's novella *Tillman and Tackhead* as focused around Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream* [Figure 3]. The painting of a lone black man in a boat lacking both sail and rudder while a





**Figure 3:** Winslow Homer, *The Gulf Stream* (1899). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo credit: Art Resource, New York.

stormy sea filled with sharks and blood rages around him remains one of Homer's best-known works. Unlike Homer's portraits of African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction years—works like *A Visit from the Old Mistress* (1876) and *Dressing for the Carnival* (1877) that foreground the dignity and dynamic humanity of black figures—*The Gulf Stream* adopts a more politically polemical tone. According to Peter Wood, one of the first art historians to offer a comprehensive analysis of Homer's paintings of African Americans, we cannot pretend to interpret the painting without accepting "that the canvas deals in subtle and extended ways with slavery, U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean, southern race wars, and Jim Crow segregation."<sup>31</sup> We may admire the courage that the solitary black man exhibits, but we cannot ignore the desperate nature of his predicament.

In Ralph Ellison's narrative, the painting enrages the protagonist, a young black man who hopes to become an artist. Tillman eventually attacks the painting with a knife in desperate retaliation against the white artist who strands the pictured black man in the perilous sea. Ultimately, instead of believing in the life possibilities suggested by books, Tillman concludes that "reality began with Jim Crow signs."<sup>32</sup> Thus, even before Ralph Ellison conceived of *Invisible Man*, he creatively linked visual art and the struggle for civil rights. His fondness for connecting celebrated paintings to a character's negotiation of the socially distressing reality of U.S. racism returns in *Three Days before the Shooting*. . . . In fact, tracing a line from Ralph Ellison's dependence on paintings to assess race relations to Christopher McElroen's turn to plastic art in the 2012–2013 stage adaptation of *Invisible Man* spotlights the uncanny way in which Ralph

Ellison's and Fanny Ellison's artistic interests converge. Their shared belief that visual art and performance offer rich opportunities to work through issues of political equality helps tease out the ways Ralph Ellison's fiction contemplates the pursuit of civil rights even as many critics questioned his political posture during the civil rights movement proper.

Ralph Ellison's response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling has been well documented. As he followed the events of the Montgomery bus boycott and the protests of 1956, he was euphoric. In a letter to Albert Murray, he exclaims, "I feel a lot better about our struggle though, mose is still boycotting the hell out of Montgomery and still knocking on the door of Alabama U. . . . Yes, man! But they're talking sense and acting!"<sup>33</sup> African American young people were leading the way to realizing the truth of the country's democratic ideals, and Ralph Ellison celebrated every step of their progress. As Kenneth Warren has elegantly demonstrated in his analysis of what Ralph Ellison describes as Hannah Arendt's misreading of the Little Rock Nine, the novelist deeply believed in the complex emotional reservoir of the African American youth at the forefront of the fight for civil rights.<sup>34</sup> He suggests that, instead of worrying about their mental well-being, writers like Arendt ought to shift their concern to the white young people who have not been forced to struggle with such fundamental questions related to their racial identity and citizenship.

In his wide-ranging 1965 interview with Robert Penn Warren, Ralph Ellison contemplates the danger of such psychological immaturity. He explains, "It's like this notion of the culturally deprived child—one of those phrases which I don't like. I have taught white middle-class young people who are what I would call 'culturally deprived.' They are culturally deprived because they are not oriented within the society in such a way that they are prepared to deal with its problems." Ralph Ellison argues that this lack of preparation arises

because he has everything, all of the opportunities, but he can make nothing of the society or of his obligations. And often he has no clear idea of his own goals. He can't see how to remedy his situation and he doesn't know to what extent he has given up his past. He thinks he has a history, but every time you really talk to him seriously you discover that, well, it's kind of floating out there. . . . I think there's a terrific crisis, and one of the events by which the middle class is being tested, and one of the forms in which the crisis expresses itself, is the necessity of dealing with the Negro freedom movement.<sup>35</sup>

One expression of this "crisis"—the need for white young people to deal with the Negro freedom movement—offers a useful lens through which to view Ralph Ellison's development of the character of Bliss in *Three Days*. Through Bliss, later known as Adam Sunraider, he suggests that the consequences of

white America's failing to address the thorny issue of race with their children promise not only to fracture the nation politically but also to threaten the survival of a stable American culture.

A strange moment in *Three Days* exemplifies Ralph Ellison's reliance on visual artifacts to probe such tensions. His unfinished novel abounds in examples of ekphrasis that create occasions for pondering how African Americans' presence has forced reckonings with the principles that constitute the nation's foundation.<sup>36</sup> An episode in Book 1 of *Three Days*, the section from which *Juneteenth* was taken, recalls Ralph Ellison's words to Warren. In one of the Senator's fitful dreams, he observes a shooting contest in which the celebratory mood of the event is threatened by the obstinacy of a single pigeon. Sunraider finds himself mesmerized by the absurdity of it all. As the pigeon refuses to take flight even as it suffers shots to its breast, Sunraider finds himself identifying with the bird and even rooting for its battle for independence. When the radical rock dove finally takes flight, it appears doomed, while the sudden appearance of graceful and valiant swallows hints at the continued dominance of the white men who shoot the pigeons yet miss their nimble counterparts.

Before this gloomy conclusion gains traction, Senator Sunraider feels the pain of a "sharp, stabbing blow to his right heel" and turns to behold a "small, handsome child who looked up at him out of a pair of intense, black, long-lashed eyes." Pleasantly surprised to see such a fine fellow in the midst of the chaotic crowd, the Senator gives him his full attention:

The little boy, whose hair was cut in a Buster Brown bob, was dressed incongruously in the red satin pantaloons and white satin blouse such as were worn by a child in a painting by Goya, a copy of which the Senator had seen long ago in a museum. Even his pom-pom-topped white satin slippers were from another time, and behind him, attached to a silken cord which the boy held in a chubby fist, there stood a stuffed goldfinch mounted on a small gilded platform equipped with wheels.<sup>37</sup>

The details in Ralph Ellison's description of the boy direct our attention to Goya's *Portrait of Manuel Osorio Manrique de Zuñiga* [Figure 4]. In Goya's portrait, Manuel's handsome innocence is mesmerizing. The little boy amuses himself with a pet magpie held by a string. Decked out in a beautiful red jumpsuit embellished by an ornate sash and collar that bespeak his wealth and position, the child stands between a cage holding numerous finches and three cats that stare menacingly at the magpie clenching Goya's calling card in its beak. The child's gaze invites admiration while his pets allude to his relationship to the wider world.

Ralph Ellison's turn to the portrait accentuates his desire to complicate the scene by introducing a painting that mid-twentieth-century readers would find



**Figure 4:** Francisco de Goya, *Manuel Osorio Manrique de Zuñiga* (1784–1792), possibly 1790s. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo credit: Art Resource, New York.

familiar. Reva Wolf tracks the curious life of Goya’s famous work in the United States after its arrival from Europe in 1926. By the time the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York acquired the celebrated portrait in 1949, it was fondly referred to as “Red Boy” and deemed by curator Harry Wehle to be “so popular among American art lovers as to require no comment.”<sup>38</sup> Wolf notes that the most famous discussions of the painting during its early days in the United States focus on Goya’s skillful examination of innocence versus experience. One reviewer pointed to “Red Boy” as proof that Goya was the “only artist”

who portrayed children as sympathetically as “his predecessor, Velasquez.”<sup>39</sup>

The high-profile discussions and reproductions of the painting in *Time* and *Life* in 1937, the *New York Times* in 1944, and again in *Time* in 1944 make it unsurprising that Ralph Ellison would take note of Goya’s masterpiece. By the time the portrait appeared on the cover of the *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* in 1949, it was deemed “one of the world’s most popular paintings.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Ralph Ellison’s personal photograph collection includes a Polaroid picture of a Goya art book on the coffee table in his and Fanny Ellison’s New York apartment.<sup>41</sup> The rich history surrounding “Red Boy” suggests that Ralph Ellison expects readers to know Goya’s famous painting well enough to appreciate his provocative revision of the portrait. Art historians often read the renowned painting as a foreboding portrayal of threats to childhood innocence. In early Christian art, birds frequently symbolize the soul, and in baroque art, caged birds represent innocence. Goldfinches in particular habitually represent Christ’s Passion. Manuel’s well-documented early death established this dark reading as an early favorite.<sup>42</sup>

More recently, scholars have recontextualized Goya’s famous child within the painter’s broader work for the Altamira Family and popular portrait practices of late eighteenth-century Spain. Xavier Salomon questions the prevalent tendency to interpret the painting as ominous given the common Enlightenment practice of picturing children with animals; the popularity of goldfinches, magpies, and cats as pets in Spanish households and as figures in Goya’s work; and the rare instances of posthumous commissions for children. Rather than impending death, Salomon suggests that the birds and cats likely attest to young Manuel’s control over his pets and suggest that he has already begun “learning about adult life.”<sup>43</sup> This updated reading works particularly well with Ralph Ellison’s introduction of the painting into his unfinished novel. *Three Days* provocatively contemplates the danger of early knowledge and expands the traditional reading of Goya’s exploration of innocence and experience.

In Ralph Ellison’s rendition, the goldfinch is out of the cage, a subtle suggestion that the nation’s innocence is a thing of the past. And unlike paintings depicting birds taking flight over a pictured child to denote a freed soul,<sup>44</sup> Ralph Ellison’s little boy’s goldfinch explodes. Ellison’s well-known appreciation for Mark Twain’s dependence on the figure of a child to portray sacrifice and the loss of national innocence in *Huckleberry Finn* reverberates throughout the scene. In interviews, Ralph Ellison connects Twain and Goya when contemplating the role of art in political activism: “I recognize no dichotomy between art and protest. . . . If social protest is antithetical to art, what then shall we make of Goya, Dickens and Twain?”<sup>45</sup> What is more, even before its fantastic demise, the goldfinch is “stuffed,” as if the cats in the original painting have carried out the violence reflected in their mischievous gaze. Thus, the substitution of the stuffed goldfinch for the magpie hints at the brutality that often attends the knowledge and experience of adulthood. In Ralph Ellison’s hands, the child himself is transfigured from a symbol of innocence to a young boy whose ac-



tions bespeak the result of violent acts already performed. He no longer plays naively with a bird; instead, the child interacts pugnaciously with Senator Sunraider.

As the Senator attempts to chat with the child, his friendly overtures are thwarted by the boy's ill humor. Instead of answering the Senator's friendly greeting, the child confronts him with "an expression of hostility which distorted his tiny face" before the boy sticks out "a small blue tongue" and begins making lewd gestures that transform his face "into that of a malicious adult." Ignoring Sunraider's affability, the little boy continues his obscene performance, alternately "making a horrible face as he patted his backside and made nasty sounds with his vibrating lips" and thumbing "the fly of his red satin pantaloons." His antics leave the Senator "[p]rofoundly disturbed and depressed" as he is forced to observe the child's vulgar conduct, which escalates until he causes the "stuffed bird to disintegrate in an explosion of flying head and whirling feathers."<sup>46</sup>

With Goya's "Red Boy" providing the foundation for reassessing the stakes of fostering naive ideas about U.S. race relations, Ralph Ellison stages the consequences awaiting the white American middle class if it refuses to teach its youth to prepare for the difficult work of desegregating U.S. society. His transfiguration of Goya's richly clad child dramatizes the ugly inheritance in store for white children whose parents fail to introduce them to the unvarnished ideals undergirding U.S. democracy. Sunraider's sexually aware little boy, with his exploding bird, gives the lie to the marksmen and carnivalesque crowd who pretend that their power over the rock doves ensures a future without political and moral complication. Like the middle-class white Americans who imagine themselves rising above the ugly images of violence against young African Americans unfolding on televisions and newspapers across the nation, the marksmen and crowd of observers are passing on a legacy that will surely rear its ugly head in the next generation. This is a crucial facet of the "crisis" over which Ralph Ellison ruminates in his interview with Warren, and this is one crisis at the center of his unfinished second novel.

### **Off the Page and Onto the Stage: Performing *Invisible Man***

Surprisingly, one of the first places that Goya's "Red Boy" garnered widespread attention was as a prop in French playwright Henry Bernstein's play *Hall of Mirrors* (1924). Ralph Ellison's attention to the portrait and its famous past recalls the notable fact that both he and Fanny Ellison cut their teeth in the worlds of visual art and performance. When we keep their shared history in mind, Christopher McElroen's stage adaptation of *Invisible Man* provides an intriguing space of convergence to consider how dynamic visual spaces invite new insight into Ralph Ellison's aesthetic contemplation of race relations in the novel responsible for thrusting the Ellisons into the national limelight.

Although McElroen's set choices changed from venue to venue, his work compellingly highlights the translation of Ralph Ellison's commitment to integrating different arts into his fiction and acknowledges the power of visual art on the contemporary stage. McElroen's play brings us full circle to the Ellisons' mutual investment in visual media for interrogating the difficult task of striving toward racial equality in the United States.

In key scenes, McElroen carefully introduces visual portraiture. Although many memorable moments integrate portraits through rich screens, scrims, and projections, McElroen also paid homage to the role of traditional framed images in Ralph Ellison's fiction. Onstage, these visual pieces remind us of the numerous ways such images perform within defined spaces to revise, dilute, and even suppress the complicated histories that portraits of power embody. When *Invisible Man* arrives in New York, McElroen plays meaningfully with framed images. In this scene, he emphasizes Invisible Man's desire to achieve success in the surface terms he sees pictured around him in the material form of power portraits. Just as the novel's protagonist confronts a kind of gallery in Mr. Bates's office, the play's Invisible Man struggles to make sense of the impassable barrier that seems to divide him from the American success stories he yearns to replicate. McElroen's staging device features actors holding frames before their faces, vividly fracturing Invisible Man's notion of a success that fixes identity in unalterable terms [Figure 5]. The complex work of self-definition might be arrested in a portrait, but the consequences of individual realities continue to run free.



**Figure 5:** *Invisible Man* (2011–2012). Photo credit: T. Charles Erickson.

McElroen's brilliant staging devices harken back to Ralph Ellison's comments about the need for America's youth to understand the complicated reality of race relations, and his actors simultaneously engage the novelist's later interrogation of race in *Three Days*. The staged moments of racial tension, confusion, and discovery in Fanny Ellison's early theatrical work and Ralph Ellison's enduring fiction underscore the Ellisons' commitment to reimagining the arduous effort of charging art to inspire American citizens to live up to ideals rarely actuated. For both Fanny Ellison and Ralph Ellison, giving audiences something to see—either on the stage or in the mind's eye—brought the pursuit of equality that much closer to being realized.

## Notes

1. References to McElroen's play refer to The Court Theatre 2012 production in Chicago and The Huntington Theatre 2013 production in Boston.

2. For a broader consideration of Booker T. Washington's dependence on photography to support his educational philosophy, see Lena Hill's chapter "Picturing Education and Labor in Washington and Du Bois" in *Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 55–80. Michael Bieze's *Booker T. Washington and the Art of Self-Representation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008) provides a wide-ranging discussion of Washington's appeal to photography.

3. Arnold Rampersad describes their initial meeting in New York. See *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 176.

4. An article in the 1936 *Nashville World* celebrated Fanny Ellison's graduation from Iowa by announcing, "Chicago is proud to greet Miss Fanny McConnell who has returned from Iowa City where she was just graduated from the State University of Iowa. Miss McConnell majored in dramatic art" and "is now one of the few trained Negroes in that field." The article goes on to proudly proclaim, "She was the only Negro student to graduate from that department and did some very fine things while there. She directed several plays; was given the leading role in radio productions, and did interpretive reading at which she earned a commendable reputation." See Box 12, Folder 4, Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress; further references to this collection will be cited as REP.

5. In addition to serving on the costume crew of *Yellow Jack* and the building crew for *Alison's House*, Fanny worked on the costume crew of Maibaum's *Birthright*, the property crew of Virgil Geddes's *Mud on the Hoofs*, the lighting crew for Marcus Bach's *The Happy Merger*, and the stage crew for Dan Totheroh's *Distant Drums*. Department of Theatre Arts, Series I, Box 6, University of Iowa Special Collections and University Archives, Iowa City, IA.

6. In 1959, Fanny Ellison wrote to a friend and reflected on policies that kept Jim Crow alive in practice if not in name during her time at the University of Iowa. She recalled, "The school was full of prejudice and things were awkward for all Negro students. Now, I understand, all that's changed. One just has to live long enough." See Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 176.

7. Box 2, Folder 9, and Box 3 Folder 1, REP.

8. Box 6, Folder 10, REP.

9. Box 1, Folder 8, REP.

10. Murry N. DePillars's "Chicago's African American Visual Arts Renaissance" provides a useful overview and detailed discussion of the major visual artists across numerous genres who contributed to the Chicago Renaissance. See Darlene Clark Hine and John McCluskey Jr., eds., *The Black Chicago Renaissance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 165–96.

11. Lawrence Jackson provides a meticulous analysis of the varied political positions of black Chicago artists in *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934–1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 93–122.

12. Box 6, Folder 9, REP.

13. Melissa Barton, "'Speaking a Mutual Language': The Negro People's Theatre in Chicago," *TDR: The Drama Review* 54, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 54.

14. *Ibid.*, 55.

15. *Ibid.*, 58.

16. Ward had produced *Big White Fog* in April 1938. The subject of this play made clear Ward's views and shows that McConnell's decision was an informed one.

17. Barton, "'Speaking a Mutual Language,'" 67.

18. See John E. Fleming's interview of Burroughs for a wider discussion in "Dr. Margaret T. Burroughs: Artist, Teacher, Administrator, Writer, Political Activist, Museum Founder," *The Public Historian* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 37.
19. See Anne Meis Knupfer, *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).
20. Artists often appealed to Booker T. Washington to position their politics. Ian Rocksborough-Smith explains the careful positioning of her politics by noting that she "recalled Booker T. Washington's uplift 'bucket' metaphor to explain her decision to situate her cultural work locally in Chicago." See "Margaret T. G. Burroughs and Black Public History in Cold War Chicago," *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* XX, no. XX (April 2015): 29. Theodore Ward distinguished his leftist sympathies from his father's Booker T. Washington-esque politics. See Rachel M. Peterson, "Adapting Left Culture to the Cold War: Theodore Ward, Ann Petry and *Correspondence*" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008), 74. Of course, *Invisible Man* follows this trend in its portrayal of the Founder.
21. Rocksborough-Smith, "Margaret T. G. Burroughs and Black Public History in Cold War Chicago," 31.
22. McConnell was also in touch with Burroughs with regard to drama. In a 1939 letter, Theodore Ward tells McConnell about his play *Skin Deep* and notes that she may have already heard about it from "Margaret Goss." Box 6, Folder 13, REP.
23. Rocksborough-Smith, "Margaret T. G. Burroughs and Black Public History in Cold War Chicago," 27.
24. Box 97, Folder 1314, Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Library.
25. Margaret Vendryes discusses Ellison's work with Barthé in "The Lives of Richmond Barthé" in *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, ed. Delroy Cosntantine-Simms (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2001), 274–87.
26. For a wide-ranging discussion of Ralph Ellison's investment in visual art, see Hill, *Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition*, 180–221. See Sara Blair's excellent work specifically on Ralph Ellison's photography in *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 112–59.
27. In Ralph Ellison's review of Ward's play, his insistence that "the creation of a Negro theater was indispensable for the solution of the problem of Negroes and the stage" sounds as if he was already discussing this issue with his future wife. "Big White Fog" *New Masses* (November 1940), 22.
28. Peterson, "Adapting Left Culture to the Cold War," 83.
29. Box 97, Folder 1314, Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Library.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Peter E. Wood, *Weathering the Storm: Inside Winslow Homer's Gulf Stream* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 91.
32. Quoted in Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 106.
33. Albert Murray and John F. Callahan, eds., *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray* (New York: Vintage Books, 200), 116.
34. Kenneth Warren, "Ralph Ellison and the Problem of Cultural Authority: The Lessons of Little Rock," in *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope: A Political Companion to Invisible Man* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 142–57.
35. Cited in Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965).
36. See Hill, *Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition*, 205–21.
37. Ralph Ellison, *Three Days before the Shooting . . .*, ed. Adam F. Bradley and John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2010), 406.
38. Reva Wolf, "Goya's 'Red Boy': The Making of a Celebrity," in *Art in Spain and the Hispanic World: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Brown* (London: Paul Holberton, 2010), 145. Most of the information related to the history of "Red Boy" in the United States comes from Wolf's excellent essay.
39. *Ibid.*, 152.
40. *Ibid.*, 167.
41. PR 13 CN, 1998:061, Container 4, Folder 3, Photographs and Prints Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
42. Xavier F. Salomon provides an excellent overview of these readings in "Goya and the Altamira Family," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 71, no. 4 (Spring 2014): 36.
43. *Ibid.*, 41.
44. Salomon points to *Boy with a Linnæus*, a portrait of Juan María Osorio Alvarez de Toledo by Agustín Esteve y Marques, as a good example of a portrait in which the bird is freed from the

cage in a likely nod toward the boy's free soul after his early death. Although the painting was long attributed to Goya, it was more likely a model for Goya's portrait of Manuel Salomon, "Goya and the Altamira Family," 43.

45. See Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," 212, and "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," 88–89, in *Ralph Ellison: The Collected Essays* (New York: Modern Library, 2003).

46. Bradley and Callahan, *Three Days before the Shooting . . .*, 406–7.