

## OPENING COMMENTS

*from a video address to those attending Ralph Ellison at 100:  
A Centennial Symposium, March 8, 2014, Oklahoma City, OK*

### John F. Callahan

*Okla humma*: Choctaw for red people.

Sooner State, named in honor of those non-Native settlers, many from states of the former Confederacy, who staked their claims to the choicest parcels of land *before* the date stipulated by law *yet* kept the land in violation of the U.S. Congress's Appropriations Act of 1889.

November 16, 1907: Oklahoma became the 46<sup>th</sup> state in the Union. Its residents were nicknamed Okies, their lives subject to the severe weather of the Interior Highlands—from savage blizzards to raging floods to parching drought.

April 1910: Lewis Ellison and Ida Milsap Ellison, newly married, moved from Abbeville, South Carolina, where the Alfred Ellison clan had been slaves, to Oklahoma City.

March 1, 1913: The Ellisons' first-born entered the world named Ralph Waldo Ellison by his proud father . . .

My name is John Callahan. I am Ralph Ellison's literary executor, recording these remarks in October, several months before this MELUS conference, with its important sessions on Ralph Ellison and his work, will have been called to

order here at Oklahoma City University. Even in absentia and before the fact it is an honor to welcome you and wish you Godspeed, particularly during your time in Oklahoma.

As Ralph's friend for the last seventeen years of his life, I learned—over the dinner table with him and Fanny at 730 Riverside Drive, on the edge of Harlem—of the fierce pride he took in being an Oklahoman. Close behind his inviolable identity as an American and an African American was his allegiance to his experience as a boy and a young man in this complex place. He called Oklahoma a dream world, and he wasn't kidding. As a boy in the 1920s, Ellison and his young black pals dreamed of becoming Renaissance men. Their models, he was quick to point out, were not "judges and ministers, legislators and governors" in Jim Crow Oklahoma; they were jazzmen. "Like Huck," he recounts, "we observed, we judged, we imitated and evaded as we could the dullness, corruption and blindness of 'civilization.'" And "it was no more incongruous," he wrote later, "in this land of incongruities, for young Negro Oklahomans to project themselves as Renaissance men than for white Mississippians to see themselves as ancient Greeks or noblemen out of Sir Walter Scott."<sup>1</sup>

Ellison's fluid, contingent ideal resembles his developing idea of the Territory as "an ideal place, ever to be sought, ever to be missed but always there" (from Ellison's inscription in my copy of *Going to the Territory*). After the success of *Invisible Man*, he returned to Oklahoma City in 1953 for the first time since the summer of '35, and from there wrote Albert Murray that the old territory's "still a town where the eyes have space in which to travel, and those freights still making up in the yard sound as good to me as ever they did when I lay on a pallet in the moon-drenched kitchen door and listened and dreamed of the time when I would leave and see the world."<sup>2</sup> On that pallet in the long gone neighborhood of Deep Deuce four blocks from Slaughter's dance hall, young Ralph Ellison heard Jimmy Rushing sing the blues and Oran "Hot Lips" Page, Lester Young, and Count Basie "upset the entire Negro section of the town" as they played and blew their horns into the night.<sup>3</sup>

Deep Deuce is long gone—"redeveloped" is the word city fathers use—but if you wander through it tonight at twilight, you may hear Ralph's ghost communing with the sighing horns of jazzmen and the rusty wheels of an old freight shrieking to a stop in the yards.

Being in Oklahoma earlier in this year of the Ellison centennial and imagining you there now, I want to say a few words about the way that Ralph Ellison's life and achievement have become more and more important in the twenty years that have intervened since his passing in 1994. Ellison published three books in his lifetime. Since then, I have edited five posthumous volumes of the work he wrote and did not publish in book form or at all, as is the case with many indispensable essays and stories. A sixth volume, *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, edited by Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh was published by the University of Mississippi Press in 1995. At the moment, I am preparing with Marc

Connor a *Selected Letters* edition of Ellison's letters scheduled for publication by Random House in 2016.

His life spanned most of the twentieth century but was not contained by it, for, as you know, he had one eye cocked back toward the Civil War and Reconstruction in the nineteenth century, the other forward on the accelerating change in personality and society in the digital age of the twenty-first century. Ellison's reach—a life lived through most of the twentieth century, and his writer's ability to retell and foretell things that have come to pass in the twenty-first—gives additional importance to his signature novel, *Invisible Man*, and its surpassing metaphor of invisibility.

Anticipating your presentations today, I want to say a few words about why I think his claim upon not just American readers but also a growing worldwide audience (A Penguin Classics edition in Chinese will appear early in 2015) does not simply rest but flows on from his eloquent and frightening metaphor of invisibility. It is important to remember that following that magical first sentence, "I am an invisible man," Ellison, through his protagonist and narrator, speaks explicitly about the nature of invisibility and why it exists so stubbornly as a phenomenon. Invisibility, he insists, exists as an actual contingent condition due to "a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact, a matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look with their physical eyes upon reality."

Invisibility, although a condition that infected *Invisible Man's* outer and inner life and personality, was a condition first and foremost imposed from outside, not in any random or accidental way. Rather, those who rendered him (or anyone else) invisible did so because of the construction of their inner eyes. Just as Abraham Lincoln said, "After forty a man is responsible for his own face," Ralph Ellison asserts that persons are responsible for their own eyes. If they regard other human beings as invisible, they are making a choice for which they are responsible.

As a catalyst for your discussions this afternoon, let me say that on the first Tuesday of November in 2008, I made the mistake of thinking that perhaps invisibility had run its course as a defining metaphor and that another would come into being more fitting for the twenty-first century.

I was wrong.

Perhaps Ralph would have been amused that such vehement persistence of invisibility would be directed at a person at the top of the American social hierarchy, the President of the United States, Barack Obama. Yet that's what happened. Many of his countrymen and countrywomen saw him as someone who was not and could not be a full-fledged American, and, therefore someone less than a whole human being. The former governor and senator from New Hampshire, John Sununu, expressed this very clearly when he cried: "Why can't he *ever* act like an American?" (my italics).

One of the reasons this centennial is so important is the recognition by its multifaceted and various sessions, talks, and papers that the themes Ralph El-

lison explored so specifically, concretely, and deeply as an artist remain urgent unfinished business in action or in thought at the heart of the American condition and the human condition.

On that note, I wish you good luck in your pursuit of Ellison's life, his art, his connection to Oklahoma, and his continuing vital relevance in our time and in years to come.

Godspeed.

John F. Callahan

Morgan S. Odell Professor of Humanities, Lewis and Clark College

Ralph Ellison Literary Executor

### Notes

1. Ralph Ellison, *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 52, 55.

2. Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray, *Trading Twelves*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 51.

3. *Collected Essays*, 269.