

*Visualizing Black Identity in Ellison's Fiction**Lena Hill*

From his earliest experiments with novels to his posthumously published *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, Ralph Ellison appeals to visual art and visuality – practices of seeing the world – to depict the complexity of African American identity. The consistency with which he emphasizes characters' visual perception of the world to establish their racial consciousness underscores the foundational role visuality plays in his literary aesthetic. In his autobiographical essay "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," Ellison ruminates over the process of becoming a writer and recalls that during his first days in New York, he "had begun reading the work of André Malraux, not only the fiction but chapters published from his *Psychology of Art*" (CE, 204). As Ellison wrestled with the literary form he would embrace, he worked "to grasp [Malraux's] blending of art history, philosophy, and politics" (CwRE, 364). Although scholars have most frequently focused on his appeal to music when considering his reliance on other art forms, Ellison's fiction, essays, and letters demonstrate his persistent investment in deploying visual aesthetics. His writing reinforces his belief that racial conflict often stems from the inability of both white and black Americans to view the world in sophisticated terms. Consequently, Ellison tasks the novel with shaping national identity, and his engagement with visual art reveals one more vehicle he employs to achieve his lofty goals.

When he arrived in New York during the summer of 1936, Ellison focused on two passions: music and sculpting. He hoped to supplement his studies in music at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute and pursue his interest in visual art. As chance would have it, the day after his arrival, Ellison became acquainted with Langston Hughes, who introduced him to the world of Harlem artists. With the help of Robert Savion Pious, Ellison met sculptor Richmond Barthé with whom he had corresponded briefly after viewing Barthé's masks (Rampersad, 83). The respected artist accepted Ellison as his first apprentice, and in

August 1936, Ellison wrote to Hughes describing his progress as well as assessing his instructor:

I've done two heads and have started my first torso. After seeing the work of several of our so called sculptors, I quite agree with you about Barthé. Not only does his work excel theirs in anatomical truthfulness, but in artistic feeling as well; I think I have been objective in this matter because I waited to study with the person who could give me the most regardless of the opinion of the Negro press.<sup>1</sup>

Ellison admired Barthé's style of integrating African themes with classical forms in his bronze sculptures.<sup>2</sup> With his Oklahoma musical training that embraced such artistic integration, Ellison identified with Barthé's aesthetic notions.<sup>3</sup> The sculptor's declaration that he did not approach his work as commentary on race relations, although he did believe African Americans could "better portray inner feelings of Negro people," resonated deeply with Ellison's budding creative sensibility (Jackson, 140). In fact, the artistic inclination that led him to Barthé points to a fundamental aspect of his creative perspective that spawned *Invisible Man*, the Hickman Novel, and his fiction more generally. Examining Ellison's interest in visual art recovers a critical tool for analyzing his dedication to and advocacy for producing a modernist literary aesthetic capable of portraying the complex interpretive abilities of black folk characters, a central theme in his broader corpus.

Although Ellison's hands-on work with the sculptor was brief,<sup>4</sup> he remained involved in the visual arts scene for the remainder of his life, and he continued to be enamored with photography and visual art.<sup>5</sup> His study of these media complemented his budding devotion to creative writing as well as his serious contemplation of the political scene. 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!" (SL, 144).

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 on Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream* (1899). The painting of a lone black man in a boat lacking both sail and rudder while a stormy sea filled with sharks and blood rages around him remains one of Homer's best-known works. According to Peter

Wood, one of the first art historians to offer a comprehensive analysis of Homer's paintings of African Americans, the "canvas deals in subtle and extended ways with slavery, U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean, southern race wars, and Jim Crow segregation."<sup>6</sup> In Ellison's narrative, the painting enrages Tillman, 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. Instead of believing in the life possibilities suggested by books, Tillman concludes that "reality began with Jim Crow signs" (qtd. in Rampersad, 106). Thus, even before Ellison conceived of *Invisible Man*, he creatively linked visual art and the struggle for civil rights.

*Invisible Man* in manuscript shows Ellison developing a creative sensibility for how his fiction might make use of visual art. As he secluded himself on a Vermont farm to cultivate his novel, he observed in a letter to Wright, "The cubists, or at least the great cubists such as Picasso, worked through the phase of abstraction only to return to natural objects and events – although they learned through their explorations to present an essence of the real world, the plastic essences of people, of human figures" (SL, 196). By "plastic essences" he indicates the malleability he sought to capture in his presentation of African American experience. He found himself both working through and discovering the value of "abstraction" in his own work, and his manuscript charts his journey. Studied in conjunction with his collection of newspaper clippings, art exhibit programs, and various articles, Ellison's manuscripts unveil his composition process. The teeming mass of materials and drafts related to *Three Days* uncovers over forty years of writing that further fleshes out Ellison's evolving artistry as well as his engagement with visual art.

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison enlists traditional portraiture to trace the Invisible Man's quest for power. Invisible's admiration of portraits of the Founder, Wall Street businessmen in Emerson's office, and even Frederick Douglass shows his naive esteem for men whose portraits attest to their achieved power. By highlighting Invisible's misunderstanding of the pictured men and the spaces they represent, Ellison suggests that such portrayals fail to account for the complexity of humanity. By extension, the protagonist's obsession with emulating such figures displays his shallow understanding of modern existence. As Ellison revised his text, he had to decide how heavily to wield this critique of visual art's representational reliability. He admired authors like Henry James, who connects a character's ability to interpret objects of art to a maturing consciousness, but he doubted that James's aesthetic would be effective for depicting

African American interiority.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, he clearly shared the sense that traditional portraits, trading on the Grand Manner with their commitment to conveying a sitter's authority, attractiveness, and historical importance, offer rich opportunities for spotlighting the US fascination with crafting powerful appearances. The attendant refusal of such images to reveal the difficulties of formulating an American identity heightens their danger for individuals like Invisible who impulsively imitate such likenesses.

Robert Stepto first discusses the importance of visuality to Ellison's literary aesthetic when he labels spaces in the novel as portrait galleries and museums. Stepto contextualizes Ellison's portraits within a larger historical trajectory and imagines him spectacularly building on earlier literary portraiture strategies.<sup>8</sup> Other scholars have helpfully extended Stepto's reading to good effect. Sara Blair's crucial research on Ellison's photographic work establishes an additional aspect of his appeal to the visual and provides a foundation for scholars like Shelly Eversley, who analyzes the role of women in the text by considering Ellison's interest in photography.<sup>9</sup> Turning to focus on masculinity, Kimberly Lamm explores the relationship between Ellison's fiction and Romare Bearden's photomontages, arguing that Ellison produces art that challenges the "image repertoires" black males "have been historically constituted within."<sup>10</sup> My own scholarship considers the role of visual art as well as visuality more broadly as a foundational concept for Ellison's work, a truth impressively born out in the manuscripts of both *Invisible Man* and *Three Days*.<sup>11</sup>

Early manuscript drafts show Ellison depending heavily and clumsily upon modern art theory for portraying his protagonist's consciousness.<sup>12</sup> A character named Leroy, a former boarder at Mary's house who is drowned at sea, becomes a potential intellectual guide for the protagonist. When Invisible arrives at Mary's, the boarders have just learned of Leroy's death. Mary allows Invisible to live in Leroy's room where he peruses the dead sailor's journal. As he grapples with the young man's politically radical ideas, he tries to "visualize Leroy" who, despite the journal passages, remains "vague, formless." His desire to see a picture of Leroy promises to be fulfilled when a fellow sailor delivers a portrait of Leroy to Mary. As Treadwell, Leroy's white friend, unwraps the portrait, Mary exclaims, "Lawd, I never had no painted picture of nobody before."

When the portrait is revealed, Invisible responds intensely: "I was filled with a sense of repulsion as the baroque geometrical forms of the painting met my eyes, and outraged, for it was more like the plan of a man than a portrait, a plan for a blown assembly chart or disintegration." Treadwell

explains that the painter was a “cubist painter” who “felt that by breaking up the details of Leroy’s figure and rearranging them . . . he would give a stronger impression of Leroy’s personality.” Invisible, confused by the portrayal, admits, “I was annoyed with my own ignorance of painting. I felt that although I disliked the portrait I should have understood it.” Later, as Mary prepares to hang the portrait of “the willfully dismembered Leroy,” another boarder notices a sketch on the back of the painting that presents a traditional drawing of Leroy’s face. Mary decides, however, to display the fractured picture since that is how Leroy “wanted to be remembered.”<sup>13</sup> Her fidelity to exhibiting Leroy in the manner he desired celebrates the interpretive capacity of the black folk mind. Although Mary has not attended college like Invisible or studied modern art theory, her sophisticated understanding of humanity and deep cultural roots guide her intuitive comprehension of Leroy’s preferred portraiture style. Upon hearing Treadwell’s explanation of cubism, she willingly revises her attachment to realistic imaging and accepts a radically abstract one.

By turning to cubism, an art style that flattens images onto the canvas in order to show different sides simultaneously from different angles, Leroy asserts his multifaceted identity. Ellison was enamored with this revolutionary style that gave rise to a radical reassessment of the interaction between form and space.<sup>14</sup> Ellison describes Picasso as “the greatest wrestler with forms and techniques” because he “never abandoned the . . . symbolic forms of Spanish art . . . that allow the artist to speak of complex experiences and to annihilate time with simple lines and curves.” He proceeds to aver that Picasso’s method allows “the viewer an orientation, both emotional and associative, which goes so deep that a total culture may resound in a simple rhythm, an image” (CE, 213–14). Ellison believed the success of black writers depended upon a similar approach, and through Leroy’s abstract portrait, he forthrightly exploits cubist philosophy. Yet the published text omits Leroy’s portrait and, thereby manifests Ellison’s increasing focus on portraying Invisible’s failed vision in less obvious terms.<sup>15</sup> When Ellison turns to the Hickman Novel, he crafts a very different protagonist who reflects his evolving understanding of the importance of visual culture.

After the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison received new opportunities to see the world beyond the United States. Unlike many African American artists during the 1950s, he approached traveling abroad as a chance to continue educating others about black identity and US race relations as opposed to an opportunity to experience less racial prejudice. His letters, along with his wife Fanny’s correspondence, capture his serious

attitude toward his first teaching experience in Europe. After he accepted an invitation to teach in Salzburg, the organizer described the European students Ellison would teach as rather limited in their knowledge of US culture and race relations.<sup>16</sup> Rather than discouraging Ellison, this description galvanized him. He wrote back in January 1954 with a clear declaration of his plans for his lectures:

I shall adapt my lectures to the backgrounds of the students as I come to know them, and that the problem of their possible attitude toward America in no way bothers me. I feel neither the necessity to attack or defend. I am interested only in helping them discover the complex truth of American reality. To this end, I commit myself and will give as much of my time as the students are willing to take.<sup>17</sup>

During his time in Salzburg as well as his fellowship in Rome, Ellison toured museums filled with European masterpieces. These years of European travel and greater exposure to visual art coincide with Ellison's work on Book 1 of *Three Days Before the Shooting*. . . . John Callahan and Adam Bradley confirm that Ellison first began drafting parts of Book 1 in the 1950s. In a return to some of his earliest literary experiments, Ellison places his narrative in the hands of a white narrator. By creating Welborn McIntyre as a foil to Reverend Alonzo Zuber Hickman, his African American hero who emerges as a fully developed, culturally complex, yet admirably grounded black man, Ellison emphasizes the importance of white and black readers honing their ability to interpret visual art. The rather insecure McIntyre recalls *Invisible* and spotlights their similarities. But Ellison ultimately focuses upon Hickman, a mature example of the folk heroes Ellison fails to realize fully in *Invisible Man*. His time in Europe solidified his belief that white Americans and Europeans alike failed to understand the modern world they inhabited and needed men like Hickman to save them.

As an African American jazzman turned preacher, Hickman's visual analyses exhibit the power of a black reader of visual art who confidently translates his interpretation of visual displays into a deeper understanding of American identity. In fact, textual moments such as Hickman's DC study of the black Christ painting, Lincoln Memorial, and *The Fall of Icarus* tapestry argue for the necessity of diverse interpretations of national and cultural experiences to develop a nuanced understanding of US race relations. Ellison invites readers to witness his preacher putting his visual knowledge to good purpose. In one of the most blatantly ekphrastic moments, Hickman attempts to piece together the mystery of Bliss's

disappearance by returning to a report from an old acquaintance, Walker Millsap. Millsap's report details his discovery of a young man who fits Bliss's description and is currently connected to an African American trickster known as Mississippi Brown. In a somewhat bizarre digression, Millsap admits that the white-looking Bliss and brown-skinned "Sippy" remind him of two paintings featuring George Washington and his slave, William Lee (TD, 687–89). Millsap describes both paintings ekphrastically, leaving no doubt that he refers to an engraving, *George Washington holding the Declaration of Independence and the Treaty of Alliance with France* (1780) by Noël Le Mire, and a painting, *The Washington Family* (1789–96) by American portraitist Edward Savage.

These eighteenth-century portraits featuring George Washington and William Lee seem to display African American vision in the traditional terms intended to convey reverence for white inviolability. But Millsap's musings illustrate Ellison's decision to evoke this established narrative only to depart from it. Rather than remove white authority, Ellison radically reinterprets Washington's relationship to his slave. Referring to the engraving, Millsap translates William Lee's smile into a puckish recognition of the irony pervading the scene. The engraving shows Washington holding the Declaration of Independence and the Treaty of Alliance with France in the field during the American Revolutionary War. As the sole observer of Washington performing his commitment to liberty, Lee bears the responsibility of offering the first sign of approval for US republican government. Millsap's emphasis on Lee's grin and knowing gaze hints that the slave discerns the contradiction the presence of his black body parades: How can Washington magnanimously embody freedom pictured beside his African American slave? Implicitly noting this paradox, Millsap reminds Hickman, "Black William Lee was with George Washington for thirty-one years, during which time an undeclared independence of observation was, perhaps, his only self-defining area of freedom. But don't forget that although a slave he was still privy to many matters having to do with affairs of family, state, and politics" (TD, 688–89).

Millsap converts William Lee from a powerless slave and symbolic contributor to the creation of mythic American character into a witness of US potential who refuses to overlook the hypocrisies separating American ideals from their realization. He also defines Lee's uninhibited vision as "freedom" leading to deeper self-understanding. Turning to the family portrait, Millsap speculates that in addition to keeping Washington grounded and humble, William Lee "foreshadows other 'shadows' to come." Unable to refrain from riffing, Millsap concludes, "And here you

might recall that the father of our country fathered no children of his own” (TD, 688). Millsap not only insists upon the slave’s liberated vision and thoughts, but he also claims for William Lee a peculiar opportunity to betray the first US president. Millsap hints at black Americans’ power to influence their masters and masters’ children in self-serving ways. At the same moment that he confers the status of a son on Lee, he imagines him capable of transgression. And Ellison seemed particularly invested in stressing the father–son relationship, adding the sentence that notes Washington “fathered no children of his own”<sup>18</sup> after drafting many versions of the scene.<sup>19</sup>

Ellison introduces the engraving and the painting to exhibit Hickman’s impressive ability to translate Millsap’s visual interpretation and to use his protagonist to declare a historically established role for black Americans. The legacy he establishes demands an acknowledgement of moral responsibility at a moment when many would argue that blacks lacked the political power for such an admission to be possible. Ellison begs to differ. And in doing so, he advances his contention that African Americans have consistently contributed to the formation of US character as well as to its most revered institutions. Acknowledging Lee’s influence from the inception of the country makes it impossible to discount the impact of his vision. Hickman’s acceptance of Millsap’s interpretation of the images – as well as his willingness to relate them to Bliss – displays the preacher’s capacity for the kind of contemplative sight long associated with intellectual complexity. As Anne Dvinge argues, with Hickman, Ellison portrays the “searching and experimenting element of ‘Americanism’” that insists “on a more complex vision, one that can hold past, present and future in one gaze.”<sup>20</sup>

Ellison’s rendering of African American vision in his fiction endows it with significance without proclaiming it inviolable. Just as Hickman need not emerge in unblemished terms, his sophisticated vision need not represent the kind of improbable virtue too often assigned to respected national figures. After all, such claims initially led to the manipulation and negation of black sight in the rush to proclaim the righteousness of white American vision. Ellison refuses to repeat the errors of this history. He moves from a protagonist who advocates invisibility, the most extreme rejection of a legacy committed to befouling black appearance, to heralding the power of a “Hickman,” an untutored man honest enough and courageous enough to accept himself and his country, faults and all. What he refuses to accept is an attitude of resignation that declines the challenge to change the legacy of denying, ignoring, and misrepresenting the vision of black Americans. Hickman’s expansive vision embraces the totality of the United States in



terms Ellison advocates more Americans should accept. Ellison continued to wrestle with the importance of this truth throughout his career. Although many would accuse him of abdicating his responsibility to engage fully in the political discussions unfolding throughout the second half of the twentieth century, his continued engagement with the visual arts suggests otherwise.

### Notes

1. Ralph Ellison to Langston Hughes, August 24, 1936, Box 54: Folder "Correspondence," 1936–1964, Langston Hughes Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.
2. Margaret Vendryes explains that black critics accused Barthé of "perpetuating damaging stereotypes" and objectifying "black people." See "Casting Feral Benga: A Biography of Richmond Barthé's Signature Work," Anyone Can Fly Foundation, [www.anyonecanflyfoundation.org/library/Vendryes\\_on\\_Barthé\\_essay.html](http://www.anyonecanflyfoundation.org/library/Vendryes_on_Barthé_essay.html) and *Barthé: A Life in Sculpture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 101.
3. Lawrence Jackson thoroughly examines Ellison's early musical training. See Jackson, 54–82.
4. Vendryes recounts, "Ellison's apprenticeship under Barthé was tumultuous and short-lived"; see "The Lives of Richmond Barthé" in *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, ed. Delroy Constantine-Simms (Los Angeles, CA: Alyson Books, 2001), 274–87.
5. For a wide-ranging discussion of Ralph Ellison's investment in visual art, see Lena Hill, *Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 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.
6. Peter E. Wood, *Weathering the Storm: Inside Winslow Homer's Gulf Stream* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 91.
7. Ross Posnock offers a compelling analysis of Ellison's investment in James as a means for understanding the complex nature of his literary cosmopolitanism. See *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 184–219.
8. Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 177.
9. See Shelly Eversley, "Female Iconography in Invisible Man," *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Ross Posnock (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 172–87.
10. Kimberly Lamm, "Visuality and Black Masculinity: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Romare Bearden's Photomontages," *Callaloo* 26 (July 2003), 818.

11. See Hill, *Visualizing Blackness* and Lena M. Hill, "Performing Political Responsibility: Ralph and Fanny Ellison's Appeal to Visual Arts," *American Studies* 54.3 (2015), 83–100.
12. Another interesting example in the MS occurs directly before Invisible witnesses Clifton's death. He enters a bookstore where a white Brother fails to recognize him. Describing the space, he notes, "Paintings flashed upon the walls, Gauguin's . . . A phrase, 'the anonymity of the mass' whirled up in my brain. The crowd . . . cancelled you out. We, he and I, wore the lenses of Brotherhood. We were not blind like the crowd, I thought." Part I: Box I: 143, F.3 "Brotherhood," REP. In a different version, Invisible observes, "Gauguin's, Dufy's, Leger's." Part I: Box I: 143, F.5 "Brotherhood," REP. The artwork defining the space where he begins to suspect Brotherhood hypocrisy advocates learning to read visual art to better interpret social reality.
13. Part I: Box I: 142, F. "At Mary's," REP.
14. Elizabeth Yukins considers the relationship between Ellison's interest in cubism and his writing in "An 'Artful Juxtaposition on the Page': Memory, Perception, and Cubist Technique in Ralph Ellison's Juneteenth," *PMLA* 119 (October 2004), 1247–63.
15. This major revision was also encouraged by Harry Ford of Knopf: "Careful reading leads me to feel quite strongly that Leroy's diary should be dropped entirely. Prolix, didactic and inimical to the narrative – a crutch for the narrator which never entirely works . . . It seems to me that either Leroy has to be introduced as a character (if it is really necessary to project his highly sophisticated viewpoint) or eliminated entirely. I would prefer the latter." Part I: Box I: 151, F.6, REP.
16. Perkins explained that the students "will probably have, for example, a distorted view of the Negro problem" December 7, 1953, Part I: Box I: 173, F.1, REP.
17. 28 January 1954, Part I: Box I: 17, F.1, REP.
18. Part I: Box I: 127, F.4, REP.
19. See Lena Hill, "The Politics of Fatherhood in *Three Days Before the Shooting* . . .," *The New Territory: Ralph Ellison and the 21st Century*, ed. Marc Connor and Lucas Morel (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 142–66.
20. Anne Dvinge, "Complex Fate – Complex Vision: The Vernacular and Identity in Ralph Ellison's Juneteenth," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 51.2 (2006), 203.