FLYING HOME: RALPH ELLISON’S OKLAHOMA

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By

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This thesis explores Ralph Ellison’s Oklahoma writings as a discrete intellectual project. Ellison’s Oklahoma writings, primarily essays and lectures, remain a critically under-examined body of his artistic and intellectual output. These texts, a blend of published documents and archival manuscripts located in the Ralph Ellison Papers at the Library of Congress, offer valuable insights into Ellison’s artistic and political views as they evolved in response to the increasing militancy of the 1960s and 70s. I assert that Ellison began to adopt his black Oklahoma history as a countermythic rejoinder to the artistic priorities, linguistic views, and historicism prevalent among black nationalist, Pan-African, and Third-Worldist movements which gained intellectual currency in these decades. In positing Oklahoma as a black frontier, Ellison created a usable past that could demonstrate the complexity and fluidity of American culture, which placed African Americans at the center of American cultural identity. But in writing about his Oklahoma experience, Ellison also performed important cultural history, documenting the unique culture of the black Oklahoma City community at a time when a black Oklahoma history had yet to be written.
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PREFACE

Sometime around 1981, a 67-year-old Ralph Ellison sat down at his typewriter to draft a memoir—an incomplete and unpublished typescript written in the second-person perspective, the document recounts his childhood in Oklahoma. Ellison begins thusly:

When you were a young boy in Oklahoma you day-dreamed of adventure. At their vaguest these were fantasies in which you left home and resolved all complaints and dissatisfactions by an abrupt change of scene. Nor was there anything unusual about such dreaming, for many of your friends talked of taking off for “up north”—meaning Kansas City or Chicago—where by a simple change of geography they’d not only become blissfully free, but men among men and Rudolph Valentinos among women…

Being bookish, your own running away took the by no means unique form of daydreamed journeys down the Mississippi on a raft with New Orleans, the ‘home’ of jazz and an early haunt of your next door neighbor’s father (a barbershop owner who gave you your first lessons on the alto horn and trumpet) your destination. Sometimes your dream-journey’s were shared by his son, sometimes with your brother, but usually your companion was featureless. The fantasy was constantly revitalized by your reading of Huckleberry Finn which, by proving an exotic, other-worldly pattern for vague emotional needs, negated any temptations from running away from home.¹

Ellison, likely writing from his adopted home of 730 Riverside Drive near Harlem, New York, looks back on his childhood in an odd fashion. He remembers a childhood of longing for flight, daydreaming of escaping to the North to find adventure by virtue of a “simple change of geography”—however, being unable to leave Oklahoma, he adopts an daydream-like escapism, at times creating an imaginary and “featureless” companion to accompany him in his escape down to New Orleans, the “home of jazz.”

But there’s an irony in Ellison’s memoir draft—though Ellison poses in his narrative that he daydreamed to escape, we know that unlike the vast majority of his friends from Oklahoma City, Ellison did leave Oklahoma, never to live there again and only to return a few times in the rest of his life. However, though he managed to physically leave his home state, it also appears that imaginatively and emotionally, Ellison retained a deep imaginative, creative, daydream-like connection to Oklahoma that persisted throughout his lifetime. This thesis explores the nature of Ellison’s relationship to his home state and examines his Oklahoma writings in relation to his larger project of positing a cultural, artistic, and intellectual potential for African Americans within the context of American scene as a whole.

And, of course, the second-person reads a bit like a sly allusion to the protagonist of *Invisible Man*. Ellison’s narrative “you” beckons the reader to enter his story—his private history growing up in the 46th state of Oklahoma—suddenly conflating his experience so it operates on a new and deeper frequency: “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies,” Ellison might ask the reader when writing about his Oklahoma childhood, “I speak for you?”

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CHAPTER ONE – STUMBLING OVER HISTORY

For a man so attuned to the unconventional and unexpected in American life, it seems that Ralph Ellison’s commemoration at Brown University’s Ralph Ellison Festival on September 18, 1979 presented him with a moment that left him—at least momentarily—unable to put his emotions into words.

Poet and Brown University Professor of English Michael Harper recalls that the festival, organized to commemorate the completion of Ellison’s professorship at New York University, needed to find a way to entice Ellison to attend. Harper asked Ellison to come and speak in honor of Inman E. Page, the first African American to receive a doctorate from Brown. Ellison agreed to attend, but it seems that he was caught completely off-guard by the ceremonious presentation of a large oil painting of Inman E. Page in honor of his attendance. For Ellison, receiving this gift before his dedication speech for the event, the event seemed to encapsulate a instance that represented the unexpected moments of American history that Ellison celebrated—further, to Ellison, it seemed to operate as a metaphor that illustrated how he saw his purpose in his intellectual milieu. Though the commemoration of Inman E. Page, a pioneer for African Americans in higher education, might have been reason enough for Ellison to come to speak at Brown, he had a much stronger reason to come. Inman E. Page was Ralph Ellison’s high school principal in Oklahoma City.

From 1929 to 1933, the young Ellison, who had lost his father at the age of 3, revered Page as a “grand, dignified elder” whose influence extended throughout his youth and instilled in

him a sense of academic discipline and creative purpose.\(^4\) Though it is clear he knew his purpose upon speaking at Brown’s literary festival was in part to commemorate Page’s legacy, it seems that he was caught completely off-guard to receive this portrait of a figure who loomed magisterially in Ellison’s memory.

From an examination of the transcript of Ellison’s speech, it is difficult not to notice the emotion in Ellison’s voice: “When confronted by such an unexpected situation as this, what does one say?” he asks, unable to pull together the language for the moment. He remembers Inman E.

Page’s dominant authority at Frederick A. Douglass high school in Oklahoma City, one so powerful “that his voice and image are still evoked by certain passages of the Bible,” he tells the audience.⁵ For Ellison, even speaking about Page seems to reverse a hierarchical order that was nearly sacrilegious to upturn. As Ellison notes, “it is as though a preordained relationship has been violated, and as a result, my sense of time has begun leaping back and forth over the years in a way which assaults the logic of clock and calendar, and I am haunted by a sense of the uncanny.⁶

Perhaps gaining his composure midway through his dedication, Ellison falls back on humor, and begins to see this reunion between Ellison and Page in an unlikely temporal moment that “assaults the logic of the clock and calendar” and in the improbable location of Providence, Rhode Island, as a sort of practical joke played upon him. However, for Ellison, practical jokes, as an “old American pastime,” can serve as “agencies of instruction,” and he improvises a bit to turn the moment into a meditation on American history:

But such speculations aside, how could such an occasion such as this come about?

Through the medium of time, of course. And through the interplay, both intentional and accidental, between certain American ideals and institutions and their human agents. More specifically, it has come about through the efforts exerted by the members of one generation of Americans in the interest of the generations to follow.⁷

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⁶ In the dedication speech, Ellison also tells this Ibid., 113-4.
⁷ Ibid., 115.
The following day, Ellison, given perhaps a chance to regain his composure, gave a speech entitled “Going to the Territory,” which expresses a bit more eloquently Ellison’s surprise and illustrates more clearly a lesson on American history that Ellison had communicated consistently for decades. “Your campus,” Ellison says, “has become the scene in which certain lines of interpersonal, institutional, and even historical relationships have not only come together but have collided in a way which I find most confounding.”8 “And yet,” he continues, “considering the ironic fact that Americans continue to find themselves stumbling into (as well as over) details of their history, tonight’s is a most American occasion. For it is one in which by seeking to move forward we find ourselves looking back and discovering surprise from whence we’ve come. Perhaps this is how it has to be.”9

The 1979 Ralph Ellison Festival, and the thoughtful presentation of a portrait of Inman E. Page, might be thought of as a representative moment of Ellison’s career, in which a number of Ellison’s own convictions as an author and public intellectual combine to elucidate a message that Ellison had been repeating ceaselessly, explicitly since Invisible Man and implicitly before that: that Americans have an ironic tendency to forget their history, only later to stumble into (and over) it. The occasion of the festival gave Ellison a chance to write another chapter in what he called “the underground of our unwritten history”—a history that, when ignored or forgotten, “defies our inattention by continuing to grow and have consequences. This happens through a

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8 Ellison, “Going to the Territory,” Going to the Territory, 120.
9 Ibid., 123.
process of apparently random synthesis; a process which I see as the unconscious logic of the democratic process.”

Another feature of this occasion—and I believe this one has been largely overlooked or understated—is that Ellison, by speaking about Inman E. Page, a figure from his Oklahoma childhood, had an opportunity to document a very specific form of American history that he felt was lacking in his current moment. From roughly 1964 until his death, Ralph Ellison wrote frequently on his Oklahoma upbringing, composing numerous essays that detailed specific moments from his childhood and writing short biographies of the lives of figures from Oklahoma City that impacted his life creatively and intellectually. For a man who only returned to Oklahoma a handful of times after hopping on a train car and leaving for Tuskegee, what might have led him to return to Oklahoma, both imaginatively and intellectually, so often?

Perhaps the simplest answer is that Ellison learned to value Oklahoma and simply missed the city where he grew up. The correspondence between Ellison and Albert Murray, his friend and peer from college days who later became a professor of English at Tuskegee, reveals that Ellison had fond memories of Oklahoma and felt nostalgia towards the geography, people, and institutions that made up the Oklahoma City of his childhood. On March 22, 1950 Ellison, deep in the editing process of *Invisible Man* and looking forward to a new novel, wrote to Murray that he planned “to scout the southwest. I’ve got to get real mad again, and talk with the old folks a bit. I’ve got one Okla. Book in me I do believe.”

By July 16, 1953, in the wake of the success of *Invisible Man*, Ellison finally returned to Oklahoma City, where he received a warm welcome

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10 Ellison, “Going to the Territory,” 126.
from his old friends, teachers, and family (“Indeed, that’s one town where I just drip with charisma!”), and perhaps for the first time, he records a sense that Oklahoma City might be a unique city, one that offers for African Americans a different range of opportunities, experiences, and outlooks than what he had experienced at Tuskegee or in Harlem:

The city has expanded tremendously and there are several new additions financed by Negroes, and for the first time in the history of the city large numbers of Negroes are living in houses which were never the whites’ to abandon. All in all, it’s a prosperous town, too, and what with the continuous decentralization of our industry, should continue to grow. The people are still aggressive, though some of the old teachers are discovering that they really want segregation and are discouraging their students from attending the University of Oklahoma. They aren’t getting anywhere, however, and I’m told that over three hundred Negroes are attending classes there. The old order changeth and a lot of asses are out in the cold wind of reality. But for the provincialism, I’d return to live there… boy, the barbecue is still fine and the air is still clean and you can drive along in a car and tell what who is having for dinner; and it’s still a dancing town, and a good jazz town, and a drinking town; and the dancing still has grace. And it’s still a town where the eyes have space to travel, and those freights still making up in the yard sound as good to me as they ever did when I lay on a pallet in the moon-drenched

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kitchen door and listened and dreamed of the time when I would leave and see the
world.\textsuperscript{13}

Clearly, upon his return to Oklahoma City Ellison saw qualities in the state capitol that seemed
unique, particularly in comparison to his experiences in the South and the North. Here, he notes
the rapid expansion of the city, thanks in a large part to a booming oil industry, and he admires
the aggressiveness of his African American community, which fought both for literal and
symbolic space within the city. His diction in this letter seems inspired by the age-old American
rhetoric of the frontier – by noting the city is a place “where the eyes have space to travel,” he
gestures toward an ability to seek new possibilities and opportunities, perhaps in opposition to
the landscape of Harlem, in which buildings and organizations limit sight.\textsuperscript{14}

At the end of his letter to Murray, Ellison attached a poem entitled “DEEP SECOND,” a
surprisingly moving piece that places Ellison as narrator in a culturally significant strip of city
blocks in Oklahoma City—nicknamed “Deep Second,” or “Deep Deuce”—where he grew up,
worked, listened to jazz performances, and participated in the black cultural life of the city. He
mentions to Murray, “this ain’t much but it’s probably the first time anyone was mad enough to
try to put Deep Two into a poem.”\textsuperscript{15} In the poem, the narrator returns to Deep Second, a place
that has changed over time so that when he returns, he sees the area as both “man and boy,”
captured in a Wordsworthian fashion between memory and present reality, set aside “to puzzle
always the past and wander blind within the present... My second coming into deep second, that

\textsuperscript{13} Murray and Callahan, \textit{Trading Twelves}, 51.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., \textit{Trading Twelves}, 56.
frontier valley / between two frontier hills…”\textsuperscript{16} In the poem, Ellison portrays Deep Second as both memory and dream, and as a place of revelation:

The earlier birdsong sounding behind the now-dawn’s awakening thrill.
And all the past was shaken up, and all the old speech singing
In the wind, and their once clear skins and once bright eyes
Looking through to see me in my passions venture.
Recaptured, held, their promise still promise and all their days
Dawn
In my awakened eyes. And me a red cock flaming on the hill,
Dying of the fire of past and present, and yet exalting
That in me and only me they live forever.
I who can give no life but of the word would give them all—

The “now-dawn,” summoned by birdsong, casts light on the awakening black Oklahoma community, causing the past to become “shaken up.”\textsuperscript{17} The memory and history of Deep Second moves through the transitory and ephemeral actions of nature, both in the sunrise and birdsong, and with the “old speech singing in the wind.”\textsuperscript{18} Ellison synthesizes the prairie winds and sunrise with the black Oklahomans on the frontier. For Ellison, the people of Deep Second, as his muse, represent a kind of democratic possibility—he becomes the “red cock flaming on the hill” that, singing a song of past and present, heralds the potential of the inhabitants of the black Oklahoma community, writing of Deep Second’s “fathers rich with humanity and mothers beautiful / and lovely” that would “make for their children a dew-fresh world.”\textsuperscript{19} “Oh,” he writes, “I would with them make all of us heroes and fliers… Would make heroes and world-makers and world-lovers,” admiring the future of the African American children who grow up in Oklahoma City. In

\textsuperscript{16} Murray and Callahan, \textit{Trading Twelves}, 55.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 55.
a surprising turn for Ellison, he generously engages in a dream of world-making, and alludes to the kind of story he would like to tell about his people in Deep Second. He writes that he

Would make heroes and world-makers and world-lovers,
And teach them the secret of that limping walk, that look
Of eye,
That tilt of chin, the world-passion behind that old back-alley
Song
Which sings through my speech more imperious than trumpets
Or blue train sounds—
Yes, would heal the sick of heart and raise the dead of spirit
And tell them a story
Of their promise
And their glory.
Would sing them a song
All cluttered with my love and regret
And my forgiveness
And tell them how the flurrying of their living shaped
Time past and present into a dream
And how they live in me
And I in them.20

Clearly, given the content of the poem, Oklahoma City held an emotional significance in Ellison’s memory, but by the late 1950s and throughout the following two decades, Ellison discovered that he could employ Oklahoma as an important resource for articulating the diversity of black experience in the United States, whose “promise” and “glory” demonstrated through heroic individual and communal acts served as a synecdoche for the democratic potential of African Americans within the larger scene of the United States. By 1953, Ellison had spent enough time away from his home state to become struck by the bravery of his African American community in Oklahoma City, whose everyday acts of living within the chaos of race prejudice

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20 Murray and Callahan, Trading Twelves, 55.
brought on by the rapid implementation of Jim Crow laws – “the flurrying of their living” – ended up powerfully shaping Ellison’s intellectual life and creative outlook.21

In response to Ellison’s poem, Murray wrote, “…I don’t know what you’re doing, but that Okla stuff is coming through in your letters like it aint gonna wait too damned much longer…”22 Of course, no Oklahoma novel emerged in Ellison’s lifetime. But in what follows I argue that Oklahoma figured as one of Ellison’s major intellectual projects for the remainder of his life, a biographical fact that Ellison scholars have not paid sufficient attention.23 While Ellison spent the majority of his career as an intellectual who continued to speak for African Americans in the context of democracy and the United States, writing the history of black Oklahoma began to function as a way for Ellison to chafe against both majority and minority discourses in the United States, which generally tended to split along an oppositional axis that divided art, politics, or even consciousness into dialectical formations of North/South,

21 Murray and Callahan, Trading Twelves, 55.
22 Ibid., 63.
23 The scholars who emphasize Ellison’s Oklahoma past as a crucial aspect of his intellectual and artistic perspective tend to be those who have spent significant time with archival material and who take a primarily biographical approach to his life and writing. Arnold Rampersad’s Ralph Ellison: A Biography (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), which provides an extensive background of Ellison’s life in Oklahoma, also tends to portray Ellison’s Oklahoma as a source of his inability for completing his second novel. Lawrence P. Jackson’s Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007) also treats Oklahoma as a major part of Ellison’s intellectual upbringing. Adam Bradley teases out Ellison’s Oklahoma past as it finds its way into his novel-in-progress in Ralph Ellison in Progress (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), and Jerry Gafio Watts’s Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life (United States: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994) is sensitive to Ellison’s perspectives on Oklahoma – and I’ll return to that monograph throughout. But what scholars have yet to explore is crucial: scholars have yet to examine Ellison’s Oklahoma writings as a discrete body of work and a distinct intellectual project that can stand on its own. Even more importantly, scholars have yet to consider the function of Ellison’s Oklahoma writings as they pertain to the larger cultural and political context of Ellison’s career as intellectual and artist.
white/black, or canonical/vernacular. Oklahoma – as a frontier state that exhibited qualities that aligned perhaps better with the West or Southwest but also had anomalous features as a state due to its late statehood, artificially engineered population, and strong federal presence which fended off some of the atrocities of Southern Jim Crow racism – became important for Ellison for challenging sweeping assumptions about regionalism, race, and aesthetics that intellectuals and artists began to politicize in the late 1950s through early 1970s.

In this manner, Ellison’s use of Oklahoma was an antidote and challenge to a cultural shift that both damaged his reputation as an artist and as a speaker on race relations in the United States. As the optimism of the late 1950s and early 1960s generated by the Civil Rights Movement gave way to more disillusioned and nationalistic forms of black political engagement, Ellison’s integrative vision of race relations – expressed most visibly in his 1952 novel *Invisible Man* – lost currency as a way of articulating an African American future in the United States. By tracing a brief history of Ellison’s critical reception among intellectuals and artists over the years immediately following *Invisible Man* and leading into the late sixties and early seventies, one can begin to perceive that as responses to his work became more politically heated and militant in tone, Oklahoma assumed to Ellison an increasingly important role as a rebuttal and prism through which he could examine the complexities of black life the American scene.

“A Cold Oklahoma Negro Eye”

To discuss Ralph Ellison as an intellectual, one can’t ignore the looming presence of his single most influential cultural contribution: *Invisible Man*. The book not only looms in the sense that it remains Ellison’s most well-known prose work, but for Ellison, no document had a more powerful and visible symbolic representation of who Ellison was as an artist and public
intellectual. Because the book had such a tremendous and immediate impact on American
culture, it elevated Ralph Ellison to the status of critical commentator on race relations in the
United States. Additionally, *Invisible Man*, as Ellison’s only novel he published in his lifetime,
perhaps unfairly sealed his public reputation in two ways: first, to a large audience, it portrayed
Ellison as a single-book author, a one-hit-wonder. Secondly, *Invisible Man*, with its positive and
democratic vision of racial interdependence in the United States, became the primary form of
contact that individuals had with Ralph Ellison, a document that for readers would read as a way
of comparing their own convictions about race politics and the role of African Americans in the
American future.

To put it differently, in any forum where Ellison participated, *Invisible Man* preceded
him, and for the rest of his life, Ellison was held to account for, basically, “what he meant” in the
novel. The formal innovation and mastery of *Invisible Man*, along with its tempered optimism on
race relations in the United States, provided Ellison with the credentials and qualifications to
speak as both artist and intellectual, opening Ellison to new, large, and increasingly visible
intellectual forums that very few African Americans had yet been able to access in American
public life. Yet precisely at the time that Ellison assumed the mantle of black public intellectual,
*Invisible Man* began to lose its relevance as a novel that could express a statement on race
relations in the United States. African American claims to identity in the United States began to
grow increasingly radical and writers of the next generation increasingly rejected Ellison’s vision
of racial integration. Through tracing the reception of *Invisible Man* from its publication in 1952
and into the following two decades, I intend to show a shift in how American intellectuals
viewed the role of the artist and how African Americans ought to position themselves as artists and intellectuals in the United States.

In 1952, the year of its publication, *Invisible Man* had yet to reach a wide audience, but it did receive largely positive reviews. However, Ellison and his family were shocked to learn that *Invisible Man* had won the National Book Award Prize for 1953, beating Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* for the honor. Suddenly, *Invisible Man* skyrocketed in popularity and critical acclaim, the novel generating a large body of praise-filled reviews.²⁴

Due to the success of *Invisible Man*, Ellison found himself elevated—or made visible—to a larger audience than he’d found before. Given the opportunity to speak as prominent lectures and to provide interviews in popular literary and cultural journals, Ellison became a speaker for African Americans in the United States (ironically resembling the way that Invisible had the role forced upon him in the novel), and *Invisible Man* itself became a new representative for the African American novel. With its experimentation in form and its aversion to the “hard-boiled” literary tendencies of the protest novel that might be epitomized in works by Richard Wright, *Invisible Man* expanded the notion of what black literature could look like and accomplish in the United States. Ellison’s literary reputation remained popular during the relative optimism of the early Civil Rights Movement, but not long afterwards, as the political climate United States began to increase in intensity, reviewers, critics, and contemporaries began to re-examine *Invisible Man* and determined that the novel, with its aversion to political protest, stood in the way of progress for African Americans in the 1960s. Sometimes, even former supporters felt

compelled to change their early embrace of the novel. Scholar and Marxist cultural critic Irving Howe, one of Ellison’s earliest endorsers, published a second essay on *Invisible Man* titled “Black Boys and Native Sons” in 1963. Heavily influenced by the recent Civil Rights movements, Howe questioned the desire of black authors to evade protest fiction, and reserved particular criticism on Ellison for his lack of political conviction. “How could a Negro put pen to paper,” he writes, “how could he so much as think or breathe without some impulsion to protest, be it harsh or mild, political or private, released or buried?”

The negative reviews continued to pour in. In his 1967 essay, “Negro Images in American Writing,” Ernest Kaiser, editor of the militant Pan-Africanist journal *Freedomways,* profaned Ellison as

an establishment writer, an Uncle Tom, an attacker of the sociological formulations of the civil rights movement, a defender of the criminal Vietnam war of extermination against the Asian (and American Negro) people, a denigrator of the great tradition of Negro protest writing and, worst of all, for himself as a creative artist, a writer of weak and ineffectual fiction and essay mostly about himself and how he became an artist.

Kaiser’s essay brutally aligns Ellison with a variety of positions that hurt his credibility as an artist and public intellectual in the 1960s. In the 1968 *Negro Digest Poll,* young black American

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27 Ibid., 152-63.
authors considered Ellison “irrelevant” in the broader scheme of literary affairs in the United States and “did not speak of Ellison as an author to be emulated.”

Toward the end of the 1960s and into the early 1970s, militant and Pan-African movements in the United States intensified, particularly among young artists and intellectuals. Jerry Gafio Watts characterizes the success of the black nationalist movement as succeeding in establishing black nationalism as a “hegemonic ideology within the Afro-American intelligentsia” which “consistently scrutinized and even labeled ethnically traitorous” black intellectuals who challenged the ideals of black nationalism. Many of these writers and intellectuals, a cadre Ellison overwhelmingly tended to ignore or disparage, scorned Ellison for his consistent vocal opposition to their work and thought. At the same time, the black

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29 Watts, Jerry Gafio. *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life* (United States: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994): 10. Watts’ excellent book – and one of the earliest monographs on Ellison – provides a nice overview of the politics of the black nationalist movement and Ellison’s relationship to it. Watts provides a particularly scathing review of the movement, writing that the “black nationalist movement quickly became mired in black parochialism; cathartic/therapeutic, ethnic cheerleading; and sectarianism. It produced little of lasting intellectual and artistic value relative to its overblown, insipid claims. Furthermore, black nationalist intellectual opportunism ran amok… As such, these intellectuals were often as committed to material acquisition and status attainment as anyone within the academy. That is, many of the black intellectuals who embraced black nationalism had little authentic commitment to black nationalism as an oppositional form of politics… Despite its militant-sounding rhetoric, black nationalism became an ideology of economic and status mobility for bourgeois intellectuals” (8-9).
30 An interview that Ellison conducts with Harold R. Isaacs, “Five Writers and Their African Ancestors, Part II” (*Phylon* Vol. 21, No. 4 [4th Qtr., 1960]: 317-336) is helpful for providing a sense of Ellison’s developing antagonism with black nationalism and Pan-Africanism: “Like Wright,” Isaacs writes, “Ellison rejects racial mysticism and he also strongly rejects the idea that there is any significant kinship between American Negroes and Africans. But unlike Wright, Ellison feels this so strongly that he has not even allowed himself any curiosity about the matter. He was offered a trip to Africa in 1955 but turned it down. ‘I said I had no interest in it,’ he told me, ‘no special emotional attachment to the place. I don’t read much on Africa nowadays. It is
nationalist movement found an unlikely stronghold on university campuses, and as black studies and Africana studies began to develop within university campuses, young African American college students began to adopt nationalist frameworks to reject Ellison’s conciliatory message in *Invisible Man*, as well as Ellison’s status as public intellectual. At the height of the movement in 1969, the young black novelist and reporter James Allen McPherson followed Ralph Ellison as he spoke at a series of university campuses. The resulting article, published in *The Atlantic* as “Indivisible Man,” conveys a deep sense of Ellison’s pain and frustration as his reputation at universities had taken a major hit. McPherson records an exchange with a student as an example of the general feeling among young black university students on Ellison:

“He spoke at Tougaloo last year,” a black exchange student at Santa Cruz told me.

“I can’t stand the man.”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t understand what he was saying. He wasn’t talking to *us*.”

“Did you read his book?”

“No. And I don’t think I will, either. I can’t stand the man.”

Ellison was unimpressed with the black nationalists he’d encountered, expressing that “Negroes either repeated all the very negative clichés, or else laughed at Africa, or, in some cases, related to it as a homeland” (317). Lastly, Ellison distinguishes between those who struggle to make sense of being black and American with those who take on exile in order to escape their national identity: “While I sympathize with those Negro Americans whose disgust with the racial absurdities of American life leads them to live elsewhere, my own needs—both as citizen and as artist, make the gesture of exile seem mere petulance… Personally I am too vindictively American, too full of hate for the hateful aspects of this country, and too possessed by the things I love here to be too long away” (318).

McPherson details frequent instances in which Ellison became an inflammatory figure among college students and the black writers and artists that inspired them. Though Ellison didn’t attend these events, “his shadow lies all over their writers’ conferences, and his name is likely to be invoked, and defamed, by any number of the participants at any conference,” McPherson notes, later mentioning that one man “would like to shoot Ellison.”

Around April 1969 at Oberlin, a black college student remembers his speech he gave for a literary event. “His speech was about how American culture had blended into American white culture. But at the meeting with the black caucus after the speech, the black students said, ‘You don’t have anything to say to us,’” she recalls. “What did he say?” McPherson asks her.

“He just accepted it very calmly. One girl said to him, ‘Your book doesn’t mean anything because in it you’re shooting down Ras the Destroyer, a rebel leader of black people.’”

“What was his answer?”

“He said, ‘Remember now, this book was written a long time ago. This is just one man’s view of what he saw, how he interpreted what he saw. I don’t make any apologies for it.’” Well, she went on to tell him, “That just proves that you’re an Uncle Tom.”

Later, the girl admits that she suspects that her fellow students at Oberlin might have been so hard on Ellison because LeRoi Jones was coming the next day: “the kids figured that Jones the Master was coming, so let’s get rid of that cat,” she says, voicing the popular opinion of black

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33 Ibid., 363.
students present at the conference. McPherson, however, also takes pains to document the girl’s respect for Ellison, who claims that “I think he’s very gutsy, in a day like today with all these so-called militants trying to run him into the ground, coming into Oberlin saying to the kids, ‘You are American, not African.’”

McPherson’s account of Ellison’s Oberlin’s appearance epitomizes the cultural shifts that seemed to displace Ellison in literary esteem among young black students and writers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As writers from the Black Arts movement, including LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ron Karenga, Hoyt W. Fuller, and many others, advocated an increasingly militant message and adopted aesthetic practices as vehicles for political practice, Ellison’s literary work (at least at first glance) seemed to lose its relevance as a novel that could represent black Americans as they struggled to address problems of race, politics, and art in the United States. McPherson speculates on another reason that Ellison might have frustrated adherents of writers like Jones: “Another of Ellison’s problems,” McPherson writes, “one peculiar to any black who attempts to assert his own individuality in his own terms, is that he challenges the defense mechanisms of the black community. Because of a history of enforced cohesiveness, some blacks have come to believe in a common denominator of understanding, even a set number of roles and ideas which are assumed to be useful to the community.”

*Invisible Man* did not assert a delineated political programme. In many ways, it sought to depict the plurality of Black subjectivities and to explain that one African American’s experience is not the same as another’s, and by doing this, his message bristled with the one that the Black

35 Ibid., 366.
36 Ibid., 366.
Arts movement hoped to portray – one of a deep history shared among African Americans in the United States that led back to common ancestry in Africa. However, McPherson notes that Ellison’s assertion was one of “individual vision,” in which the goal was to challenge this history of politically-minded “enforced cohesiveness.”

McPherson writes:

But when a black man attempts to think beyond what has been thought before, or when he asserts a vision of reality which conflicts with or challenges the community’s conception, there is a movement, sometimes unconscious, to bring him back into line or, failing that, to ostracize him… For a black thinker such as Ellison, this assertion of individual vision is especially painful because the resultant ostracism carries with it the charge of ‘selling out’ or ‘trying to be white.’

In the foment of the black nationalist response across university campuses, Ellison receives the double insult of being an Uncle Tom and of “trying to be white.” At the moment of McPherson’s interview, Ellison provides a somewhat startling response to the heated atmosphere surrounding the militancy and Pan-Africanism latent in universities and among black artists and intellectuals. Ellison provides a simple yet potent response: “I have to look at things with a Cold Oklahoma Negro Eye.”

A Cold Oklahoma Negro Eye—a striking phrase, and an essential one for critically examining how Ellison began to position himself intellectually in the 1960s and for the rest of his life and career. By 1958, Ellison turned to employ Oklahoma as an intellectual, historical,

38 Ibid., 366.
39 Ibid., 366-7.
and cultural resource to articulate a particular and personal history that came as a distinct response to his intellectual climate, in which black intellectuals had increasingly asserted a nationalist—and later a Pan-Africanist or Third-Worldist—identity that eschewed American-ness in exchange for a longer African history. If black nationalist historians, political intellectuals, and artists were to assert Africa as a source of agency, Ellison responded by writing cultural history of his childhood and of the heroic actions of his black Oklahoma City community to assert that black Americans could find power and identity in their own near histories, stories that stitched them into the fabric of American identity rather than omitted them.

Saul Bellow seems to provide useful perspective on Ellison’s Oklahoma historiographical process. In a 1998 *Partisan Review* piece, Bellow remembers that “Ralph was much better at history than I could ever be,” but that Ellison’s historical imagination extended beyond a mere interest. When Ellison talked about history, Bellow notes, it was “apparent that he was not merely talking about history but telling the story of his life, and tying it into American history.”

By 1958, Ellison began writing about his Oklahoma childhood with a distinct purpose—by telling the stories of Black Oklahomans, including jazz musicians like the electric guitarist Charlie Christian and vocalist Jimmy Rushing; Roscoe Dunjee, a Black newspaper editor; and the principal of his all-black school, Frederick A. Douglass High School, Inman E. Page, Ellison found in his Oklahoma experience a powerful way of articulating a history that could provide a potential for African Americans to see their own rootedness in American culture and their own capability of shaping the future of race relations within the United States. Specifically, Ellison

wrote and lectured on his Oklahoma experience, articulating the bravery, resourcefulness, and strength of the African American community in Oklahoma City as an intellectual counterstatement to the work of heated, politically oriented black writers, particularly those of the black nationalist, Pan-African, and later Third-Worldist artists and intellectuals. Ellison adopted a “Cold Oklahoma Negro Eye” to attempt to cool the political climate in which black intellectuals and artists tended to heatedly reject American identity, and by asserting a highly particular form of history that affirmed the political and intellectual contribution of African Americans in Oklahoma, he in turn asserted a larger claim—that African Americans were deeply interwoven into the fabric of American identity and had significant roles to play in shaping the American cultural, political, and intellectual future. Additionally, by using public figures such as Page, Christian, Rushing, Breaux, and Dunjee, Ellison found examples of Emersonian “representative men” who could serve as models for black possibility and grace under pressure in a nation hostile to black Americans. By telling stories about Oklahoma, Ellison could employ his “Cold Oklahoma Negro Eye” to examine strains of thought that emerged from the Black Nationalist movement and to assert that African Americans ought not to exchange their immediate heritage as participants in the United States for a long and mythic one in Africa.

Of course, by writing about Oklahoma, Ellison adopted a mythic history of his own—clearly, Oklahoma was marked by its own racial traumas, including its own brand of Jim Crow segregation implemented under the leadership under Governor “Alfalfa” Bill Murray as well as the horrific destruction of the black community of Greenwood, the “Black Wall Street” of Tulsa,
in 1921.\footnote{John Callahan’s introduction to \textit{The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison} (United States: Modern Library, 1994) alludes to Ellison’s own writings on Jim Crow, including his 1940 “A Congress Jim Crow Didn’t Attend.” Callahan mentions that Alfalfa Bill Murray attempted to give Oklahoma “the jim crow texture and laws of a Southern state” (xviii).} However, for black Americans both before and after slavery, the former Indian Territories—Oklahoma and Kansas, especially—symbolized a potential place of African American freedom and autonomy. Historian Arthur L. Tolson notes that even in the time of slavery, African Americans who “wandered aimlessly from place to place, testing their freedom” found the Indian Territory in Oklahoma to be a place where the burden of white discrimination was less severe than that of the South.\footnote{Tolson, Arthur L. \textit{The Black Oklahomans: A History, 1541, 1972} (New Orleans: Edwards Printing Company, 1974): 47. Tolson, son of the poet and Great Debater Melvin Tolson, offers in this book one of the earliest and most comprehensive perspectives of black Oklahoma history.} However, Oklahoma began to provide tangible resources for African Americans by 1866—namely, the availability of land for black settlers to purchase and develop. As Jimmie L. Franklin explains, the federal government’s decision in 1866 to demand the “Indian tribes of Oklahoma (who had supposedly sided with the Confederacy)” to “divide their communal lands and make individual allotments to their members—including their freedmen” made it possible for African Americans to see the territory as a place to settle, giving rise to the potential for ex-slaves to imagine the formation of autonomous black towns that were completely free from the oppressive presence of their white neighbors in the South.\footnote{Franklin, Jimmie L. “Black Oklahomans: An Essay on the Quest for Freedom,” in \textit{Alternative Oklahoma: Contrarian Views of the Sooner State}, ed. by Davis D. Joyce (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007): 38.} Similar to Benjamin “Pap” Singleton and Henry Adams’ famous 1879 “Exoduster” migrations of African Americans to Kansas, black Southerners turned to the Oklahoma territory for the rare prospect of owning land and to find ways to engage in economically and politically self-sufficient
In 1889, Kansan Edwin P. McCabe founded Langston, the first black town in Oklahoma, employing “climate, economic opportunity, and race as promotional tools” for bringing black settlers to Oklahoma, a process which eventually led to the creation of over 60 all-black towns, including Boley, Taft, Vernon, and Lincoln City, where black settlers could experiment with the promise of American democracy ostensibly without the interference of racism.

Ellison’s parents arrived in Oklahoma City around 1910 and were among the early black pioneers to Oklahoma. Born only seven years after Oklahoma’s statehood, Ellison could cultivate a sense of self and a cultural identity that improvised upon the quintessentially American myth of the frontier. Unlike many African Americans, Ellison seems to have been profoundly influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, whose formulation of the frontier as a place where “[t]his perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion

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44 For a detailed history of the Exoduster movement, consult Nell Irvin Painter’s *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976. Painter details a remarkable quote from a black Texan, who captures the oppressive sentiments of African Americans in the Reconstruction-era South: “There are no words which can fully express or explain the real condition of my people throughout the south, nor how deeply and keenly they feel the necessity of fleeing from the wrath and long pent-up hatred of their old masters which they feel assured will ere long burst loose like the pent-up fires of a volcano and crush them if they remain here many years longer” (185).


46 Ellison’s father, Lewis Ellison, born outside of Abbeville, South Carolina, and Ellison’s mother, Ida, who grew up on a rural farm in Walton County, Georgia, met in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where they came into contact with the Afro-American Colonization Company from Guthrie, Oklahoma. This group had recently gained a substantial land grant from Edwin P. McCabe to settle in Oklahoma, and Lawrence P. Jackson writes that around 1910 “Lewis Ellison pitched a tent on the banks of the Southwest city’s largest estuary, the Canadian River” (12). I am indebted to Jackson’s *Ralph Ellison: The Emergence of Genius* for his painstaking biography of Ellison, and I highly recommend reading it for an evocative perspective on Ellison’s early life (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2007): 12.
westward with its new opportunities” resonated with his experiences as a child growing up in Oklahoma City.\(^47\) For Ellison, writing itself was taken on the mythic qualities of the frontier: “The American novel is in this sense a conquest of the frontier; as it describes our experience, it creates it,” he explains in his 1955 *Paris Review* “The Art of Fiction: An Interview.”\(^48\) But Ellison improvised upon the frontier mythology to interpret his childhood—and the African American community in Oklahoma City—as a place where he had unique opportunities to explore what it might mean to be American. In “That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview,” Ellison reminds his interviewer that Oklahoma, as a relatively new state, “had no tradition of slavery” and that “while it was still segregated, relationships between the races were

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\(^47\) Turner, Frederick Jackson. “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” and Other Essays*, with commentary by John Mack Faragher (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994): 32. Another idea which clearly impacted Ellison was that of the mutual impact of the American landscape on American identity: “Little by little” the frontiersman “transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the development of (33) Germanic germs, any more that the first phenomenon was a case of reversion to the Germanic mark. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American” (34). A major strain within African American history and critique challenges whether the frontier myth has any place for African Americans. In *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture*, Houston A. Baker claims, “[t]he legends of men conquering wild and virgin lands are not the legends of black America. When the black American reads Frederick Jackson Turner’s *The Frontier in American History*, he feels no regret over the end of the Western frontier. To black America, *frontier* is an alien word; for, in essence, all frontiers established by the white psyche have been closed to the black man” (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia: 1972): 2. Michael K. Johnston’s 2002 *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature* reiterates this theme by claiming that the frontier myth “has most often served the interests of the dominant race, class, and gender, providing a mythic justification for the positions of power held by middle-class white males. The myth is based on a racial opposition between the ‘civilized’ (white) and the ‘savage’ (non-white, usually American Indian but often African American or even lower-class whites or white immigrants) and tells the story of the evolutionary inevitability of the triumph of civilization over savagery and the dominance of the white race over all other races” (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007): 7.

more fluid and thus more human than in the old slave states." Ellison recalls his parents and other black Oklahomans “had come to the new state looking for a broader freedom and had never stopped pushing against the barriers. Having arrived at the same time that most of the whites had, they felt that the restriction of Negro freedom was imposed unjustly through the force of numbers and that they had the right and obligation to fight against it.”

In his introduction to *Shadow & Act*, Ellison the Oklahoma where that he grew up was a “chaotic community, still characterized by frontier attitudes,” and that as children, “we were ‘boys,’ members of a wild, free outlaw tribe which transcended the category of race. Rather we were Americans born into the forty-sixth state, into the context of Negro-American post-Civil War history, ‘frontiersmen.’”

For Ellison, understanding Oklahoma as not only a frontier but a *black* frontier offered a way of complicating essentialized notions of race in the United States and provided an image of how African Americans could operate within the larger context of American history and democracy. He shares this sentiment in a 1966 interview with Oklahoma City newspaper *The Oklahoman*, explaining, “America is no longer a provincial nation… it is time for the American artist to know as much about the United States as he knows about England, Italy, or Greece.” It is likely that Ellison had Oklahoma in mind when saying this—throughout his career, Ellison returned repeatedly to the recent Oklahoma past to detail the courage, still, and discipline of

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50 Ibid., 6.
black Oklahomans who despite oppressive forces of racism managed to enmesh themselves in the fabric of American identity. In doing so, Ellison intertwined the mythic history of the American frontier with his particular black Oklahoma past to create a countermyth to the increasingly popular Africanist histories that took hold among the black nationalists and Pan-Africanists in the United States. If black nationalist historians sought to recover an ancient past of grand African civilizations in order to assert identity and agency among black Americans, Ellison found the myth of a near American history—one of courageous and talented African Americans who struggled to assert their own identity as Americans despite living in a racially oppressive environment—to be a more effective way of asserting one’s own identity that allowed for black Americans to find a way to understand themselves within the framework of American history and culture. For Ellison, the black nationalist and Pan-African movements represented willful departures from reality that would result in further suffering for black Americans. In “That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure,” Ellison voices this concern, bemoaning, “I see a period when Negroes are going to be wandering around because, you see, we have had this thing thrown at us for so long that we haven’t had a chance to discover what in our own background is really worth preserving. For the first time we are given a choice, we are making a choice. And this is where the real trouble is going to start.” 53 By employing his “Black Oklahoma Negro Eye,” Ellison found in the mythic frontier of Oklahoma a focalized place that could a complicated perspective of African American identity that might prevent the artistic and intellectual “wandering around” of groups who sought to escape their own immediate past and identity as shareholders in American culture.

Ellison took his Oklahoma writing seriously: by writing about figures like Roscoe Dunjee, Charlie Christian, Jimmy Rushing, and Inman E. Page, Ellison was one of the first writers to take on the project of documenting Black Oklahoma cultural history. In response to a political and intellectual climate that increasingly shrugged off its American history, Ellison did the work of uncovering and conveying an invisible history – the struggles, failures, and triumphs of Black Oklahomans who contributed in various and important ways, Ellison believed, to American democracy. By writing about Oklahoma, Ellison made the effort to remind Americans of the significance of the notion that they were already interwoven into the fabric of American identity and were deeply involved in the American democratic project, and his Oklahoma writings served as reminders of how Americans, drawn into the rapid change and expansion of American culture, tend to “stumble into (as well as over) details of their own history.”

For the moment, we will leave Ellison at the podium alongside his portrait of Inman E. Page and delve deeper into Ellison’s own history, turning to Ellison’s memories of his childhood, growing up in Deep Second, the jazz center of Oklahoma City.
CHAPTER TWO

Solo Flight: Developing a Politics of Aesthetics in Ellison’s Oklahoma Jazz Essays

Lost Jazzmen

It seems unlikely that LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) could have expected Ralph Ellison to publish such a harsh review of his 1963 book *Blues People*, Jones’ sociological and historical study of the development of African American music—after all, Jones had been an enthusiastic supporter of Ellison’s own perspectives on the subject. In a 1958 letter, Jones sent a letter to Ellison on his *Yugen* literary magazine letterhead, in which he praised Ellison’s response to Stanley Edgar Hyman, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” for his critique of Hyman’s limited view of how African American artists ought to create. In the letter, Jones expresses his admiration for Ellison’s recent publications on jazz in the *Saturday Review*, particularly his piece on Charlie Christian:

Another article of yours I enjoyed recently was the piece on Charlie Christian in the *Saturday Review*. I though that was the finest piece of Jazz writing I have seen in quite a while. A friend of mine, Dick Hadlock, editor of The Record Changer, was so excited by it that the told me he was going to try to talk to you about it… Perhaps I can drop up to see you one afternoon when you are not too busy… whenever that is.\(^5^4\)

\(^{54}\) Box I:54, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
It seems that Jones took Ellison as an exemplary model for blues and jazz writing, going so far as to give him the nod by citing Ellison’s definition of “blues people” as “those who had accepted and lived close to their folk experience” in his chapter on modern jazz.  

Yet the admiration between Jones and Ellison was not mutual. In response to Jones’ book, Ellison drafted a review of *Blues People* for the *New York Review of Books*, and by February 6, his essay emerged, publicly excoriating Jones’s sociological approach to the formation of African American musical forms in the United States. For Ellison, Jones’s political commitments got in the way of viewing the art forms of blues and jazz for what they were, and he disparages the young author for adopting a militant tone – a style that for Ellison was both inaccurate and distasteful:

*Blues People*, like much that is written by Negro Americans at the present moment, takes on an inevitable resonance from the Freedom Movement, but it is in itself characterized by a straining for a not a militancy which is, to say the least, distracting. Its introductory mood of scholarly analysis frequently shatters into a dissonance of accusation, and one gets the impression that while Jones wants to perform a crucial task which he feels *someone* should take on—as indeed someone should—he is frustrated by the restraint demanded of the critical pen and would like to pick up a club.

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But Ellison’s anger at LeRoi Jones’s book might be best considered in light of his growing frustration from 1958 onwards not only with jazz writers’ perspectives on musicians but also with the evolving tastes of jazz musicians in the late 50s and early 60s. An examination of his correspondence with Albert Murray while teaching at Bard College illuminates Ellison’s growing anger with artists’ treatments of jazz as an artistic form and as a cultural perspective. Contemporary jazz musicians had embraced the musical form of bebop, which for Ellison was barely tolerable for the musicians’ inexpert attempts at virtuosity and their antagonistic mannerisms with their audience. “I finished a long piece on Minton’s,” Ellison writes to Murray on September 28, 1958, “trying to talk to those screwedup musicians, drinking beer so that I could listen to their miserable hard-bopping noise (defiance with both hands holding their heads).” Ellison laments that the musicians all seem to try to be copying Charlie Parker: “as miserable, beat and lost as he sounded most of the time, but hell, they believe in the

57 In other words, jazz wasn’t just an art form but also a representation of African American culture. Even though Ellison was highly averse to putting race to culture, he certainly felt responsible for jazz and the way black people would use it as a representation of African American identity. If African Americans were going to represent themselves in jazz, they ought to do it in a way that doesn’t alienate the public – so Ellison would think.

58 In “On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz,” Ellison deplores the way that contemporary jazzmen began to openly display their contempt for their audiences – as an attempt to resist the traditional perspective of jazzman-as-entertainer or clown, the scornful performative gesture of artists “following the lead of Parker and Davis” who “showed an elaborate contempt for his mainly white audiences by often turning his back to them while playing or by spurning his applause” made the jazzman “no less an entertainer or clown” (Rampersad 387). Arnold Rampersad sums up the aesthetic of jazz performers of the late 50s well: “Black disdain, seen by some observers as a form of ‘political resistance,’ had become mainly another part of the jazzman’s schtick. When the performance was over the white man still possessed his power, while the black man, the jazzman, had lost his dignity” (387).

59 I:58, Folder 2, Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington D.C.
witchdoctor’s warning: If Bird shits on you, wear it.”  He reserves special ire for Miles Davis, “who on this occasion sounded like badly executed velocity exercises.” Ellison worries about where jazz musicians are headed, as he tells Murray:

[These cats have gotten lost man. They’re trying to get hold to something by fucking up the blues and a spiritual… Taste was an item conspicuously missing from most of the performances, and once again I could see that there’s simply nothing worst than a half-educated Mose unless it’s a Mose jazz modernist whose convinced himself that he’s a genius, maybe next to Beethoven, or at least Bartok, and who’s certain that he’s the only Mose jazzman who has heard the classics or attended a conservatory.]

For an author as dedicated to the importance of geography and location in the way that culture and art emerge, the concept of jazz musicians becoming “lost” becomes a resonant trope for discussing an artist’s – particularly, a black artist’s – grounding in tradition. Not only had jazz musicians lost their way by breaking from the performance musicians like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, artists who exemplified to Ellison masters of their instruments and of demonstrating grace under pressure, but the new jazz musicians had also abandoned the origins of the art, which stemmed from the “downhome” musical forms that were developed in the largely rural regions of the United States.

When jazzmen appeared to be “lost” to Ellison, he turned to the place he knew best—his memories of jazz in Oklahoma City’s Deep Second. In his letter to Murray, the notion of being

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60 Ellison Papers.  
61 Ibid.
“lost” immediately leads Ellison into a rumination on location and memory, and as he tells Murray about a performance by Duke Ellington in New York, Duke’s virtuosic excellence leads Ellison to conjure memories of the skilled bands heard in Oklahoma City as a youth. At this concert in New York, a party held by Columbia Records, Ellington, Miles Davis, Jimmy Rushing, and Billy Holiday performed so well and with so much feeling, Ellison notes, “[i]t was one of those occasions when the whole band was feeling like playing and they took off behind him and it was like the old Basie band playing a Juneteenth ramble at Forest Park in Okla. City.”

Ellison’s criticism of bebop as an increasingly “lost” form, one that has lost touch with tradition and its cooperation with an audience, brings him back to Oklahoma City. This progression becomes another instance of Ellison seeing things with his “Cold Oklahoma Negro Eye”—by looking at the world in terms of the local and the particular by turning to Oklahoma City experience, Ellison uses Oklahoma to critique the dual movement of jazz criticism as political and militant writing and the development of bebop, which in many ways became an artistic embodiment of militancy and that carried strains of black nationalism that Ellison considered to be misleading ways of thinking about the African American’s relationship to the United States. In his Saturday Review publications of 1958, Ellison found that in writing about jazz music – specifically, writing about his own experience of being part of a jazz culture in Oklahoma City – a vocabulary and way of conceptualizing a critique against the rapidly shifting intellectual culture of black nationalism that began to surge in the late 1950s. The Saturday

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Review jazz pieces—“The Charlie Christian Story” and “Remembering Jimmy”—were the first time that Ellison began to find Oklahoma was a useful vantage point for articulating flaws in artistic forms that raised the primacy of politics and race identity over art’s ability to express complexity and potentiality that comes with the mastery of an artistic form and the effort to transcend prior artistic traditions while remaining indebted to them. In short, Ellison’s focus on his childhood heroes, Charlie Christian and Jimmy Rushing, provided him with a conceptual model for historicizing the development of art in the United States, particularly as it pertains to African Americans. To put it simply, it was Ellison’s Oklahoma that gave him the intellectual and cultural resources to challenge intellectuals like LeRoi Jones, and the black jazz community of Deep Second, documented within Ellison’s 1958 Saturday Review essays, constituted some of the earliest sources of Ellison’s complex views of syncretic culture and history.

It will be useful to look at Ellison’s critiques of Blues People and see how Ellison already addressed the problems that Jones tries to address through his writings in “The Charlie Christian Story.” It appears that Ellison’s key concepts in “The Charlie Christian Story” not only outlined his formulation of jazz as a symbol of unrecorded (or poorly recorded) history, but also a reflection of the nature of art and its relationship to the black community in the United States, and, finally, as a reminder of the importance of “lowdown” forms as they blend with the dominant art forms in the American scene.
Unrecorded History

LeRoi Jones’s Blues People’s major shortcoming, according to Ellison, was that a sociological analysis of African American musical forms necessarily enacts a form of historicist violence. Jones’s concern with demonstrating blues and jazz as forms of resistance and the “sociology of Negro American identity and attitude” overlooks the humanistic joy inherent in artistic creation and its relationship with community building—a theoretical “burden” that, to Ellison, is tremendous “enough to give even the blues the blues.”63 In his review of Blues People, Ellison foregrounds the problem of a politicized, polemic history that Jones propounds.

Perhaps more than any other people, Americans have been locked in a deadly struggle with time, with history. We’ve fled the past and trained ourselves to suppress, if not forget, troublesome details of our national memory, and a great part of our optimism, like our progress, has been bought at the cost of ignoring the processes through which we’ve arrived at any given moment in our national existence. We’ve fought continuously over who and what we are, and, with the exception of the Negro, over who and what is American.64

For Ellison, the need to recover a complex history with its “troublesome details” but also its stories of triumph in the face of struggle is part of the project of developing a better sense of America’s past, and a clearer sense of the African American past as it relates to the dominant, predominantly white culture provides a model for the future. “But nothing succeeds like rebellion,” Ellison writes in “Blues People”: “[Jones’s] theory flounders before that complex of

64 Ibid., 250.
human motives which makes human history, and which is so characteristic of the American Negro.”

“For Jones has stumbled over that ironic obstacle which lies in the path of any who would fashion a theory of American Negro culture when ignoring the intricate network of connections which binds Negroes to larger society. To do so is to attempt a delicate brain surgery with a switch-blade. And it is possible that any viable theory of Negro American culture obligates us to fashion a more adequate theory of American culture as a whole. The heel bone is, after all, connected, through its various linkages, to the head bone. Attempt a serious evaluation of our national morality and up jumps the so-called Negro problem. Attempt to discuss jazz as a hermetic expression of Negro sensibility and immediately we must consider what the ‘mainstream’ of American music really is.”

Ellison’s harsh diction barely conceals his anger at the way Jones theorizes about “American Negro culture” and his mobilization of the African American spiritual, blues, and jazz in order to assert a resistant political ideology. By ignoring the “intricate network of connections which binds Negroes to larger society,” Jones might as well perform “delicate brain surgery with a switch blade.” As a jazz critic, according to Ellison, Jones failed to capture the complex role that African Americans share in American society. Additionally, Ellison’s anger might have stemmed back to LeRoi Jones’s early letter– for all his praise of Ellison’s essay, Jones seems to

66 Ibid., 253
67 Ibid., 253.
have not understood the historical and cultural project of “The Charlie Christian Story.” Within the brief essay, Ellison uses the essay form to establish a sophisticated exploration of the intricacy of African American societies and the art that emerges from these communities, and by turning to Oklahoma City’s Deep Deuce, Ellison creates a case study for how to record the history of African American experience even as it begins to fade from memory.

While teaching at Bard College in 1958, Ellison had the opportunity to write and publish a string of jazz reviews for *Saturday Review*, a weekend supplement to the *New York Evening Post*. In these essays, Ellison established several key concepts that would guide his perspectives on art and culture throughout the remainder of his career. First among these is the importance of remembering America’s recent history – the vast unrecorded experiences that face the danger of being forgotten with the passage of time. As opposed to pursuing an alternate or radical sense of history that gained popularity among the black nationalist movements which sought to elevate African history as a both a way of disclaiming American identity and promoting political resistance, Ellison employs his memory of Oklahoma as a rhetorical device that demonstrates the potential for African Americans to embrace a positive view of culture as Americans. By recollecting and putting the vanishing traces of African American jazz history in Oklahoma City into a historical narrative, Ellison creates an important parallel between the historical

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68 Of course, Ellison had already found jazz as a productive metaphor for describing the unwritten history of the United States, particularly of black Americans. *Invisible Man*, with Ellison’s virtuosic ability to narrate the protagonist’s plunging outside of history in the prologue, demonstrates his early sense that music, with its polyphony, undertones and overtones, and syncopated rhythms, can conjure multiple histories with varied depths and can evoke American memory that would otherwise remain unrecorded. However, he hadn’t yet linked these ideas to his own childhood in Oklahoma City.

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development of jazz and the development of the United States. In his introduction to “The Charlie Christian Story,” Ellison writes:

Jazz, like the country which gave it birth, is fecund in its inventiveness, swift and traumatic in its developments and terribly wasteful of its resources. It is an orgiastic art which demands great physical stamina of its practitioners, and many of its most talented creators die young.  

From the outset, jazz operates as an extended metaphor for the United States—a highly innovative form that exacts a high physical and mental toll on its practitioners. For Ellison, jazz as an art form is incredibly difficult to trace—jazz, as a largely unrecorded medium transmitted through the ephemeral space that musical performance occupies, necessarily makes for a challenging project for historians. Ellison refers to this challenge as he writes:

Some of the most brilliant of jazzmen made no records; their names appeared in print only in announcements of some local dance or remote ‘battles of music’ against equally uncelebrated bands. Being devoted to an art which traditionally thrives on improvisation, these unrecorded artists very often have their most original ideas enter the public domain almost as rapidly as they are conceived to be quickly absorbed into the thought and technique of their fellows.”  

Because of the historian’s struggle to capture jazz history, Ellison turns to personal experience of jazz music history in Oklahoma City, a place where he fortunately had a rich sense of the intricate networks that brought jazz into existence.

70 Ibid., 234.
However, in Oklahoma City, Ellison writes, jazz was far from an act of resistance. Instead, Ellison describes it as a way of feeling or way of being in his Deep Second community. Among his many essays, Ellison provides examples of how jazz permeated ways of life. In “The Same Pain, That Same Pleasure,” Ellison recalls how the Negro veterans from the Spanish-American War and World War One would recruit young boys and teach them military drills on the all-white Bryant School grounds (now covered with oil wells, Ellison notes). Even in these drills, “jazz was so much a total way of life” that as they would go over “complicated drill patterns” while being barked at by their “enthusiastic drillmasters,” upon mastering the patterns “the jazz feeling would come into it and no one was satisfied until we were swinging.”

At the time Ellison composed “The Charlie Christian Story,” jazz critics largely held a somewhat simplistic view of its origins and tended to view musical innovation as a process that depended on the arrival of new performers who revolutionized musical style by essentially showing up at a jazz club and shocking the audience and performers with an innovative and original jazz aesthetic. He writes:

“Worse, it is this which is frequently taken for all there is, and we get the impression that jazz styles are created in some club on some particular club on some particular occasion and there and then codified according to the preconceptions of the jazz publicists in an atmosphere as grave and traditional, say, as that attending the deliberations of the Academie Française. It is this which leads to the notion that jazz was invented in a particular house of ill fame by “Jelly Roll” Morton, who admitted the crime himself; that swing was invented by

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Goodman about 1935; that T. Monk, K. Clarke, and J. B. “D” Gillespie invented “progressive” jazz at Minton’s Playhouse in Harlem about 1941.  

This simplified view of jazz innovation, though, does a disservice to both the origins of musical forms but also ignores the complex interactions that bring new styles of music into existence—the processes of diffusion, circulation, and collaboration that are essential to regional culture. For Ellison, location is primarily responsible for one’s artistic and intellectual perspective. Interestingly, Teddy Hill, the former manager of Minton’s Playhouse in Harlem remembered Charlie Christian’s rise to fame as one that seemed nearly out of nowhere: “When we were kids growing up here in New York, we watched [Benny Goodman, Dizzy Gillespie, and Roy Eldridge] grow from a squeaky beginner to a master musician… But what about Charlie? Where did he come from?” Musicologist Andrew Berish responds to Hill’s question: “Christian appeared to have materialized from nowhere, a musician without a geography.” The perception of Christian as a musician who emerged from “out of nowhere” led Ellison to assert how Charlie Christian exemplifies the way that students of jazz tend to forget about the rich cultural backgrounds of their performers:

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73 Andrew S. Berish, Lonesome Roads and Streets of Dreams: Place, Mobility, and Race in Jazz of the 1930s and ‘40s (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012): 168. Berish’s chapter on Charlie Christian is particularly interesting because of the way he emphasizes the importance of Oklahoma City and Christian’s migration to Harlem as two essential forces that shaped his craft: “Somewhere between competing musical and social priorities, Christian carved his own path and created his own musical identity. Through a mixture of talent and luck he moved from ‘local jazz hero’ to national music star. His story, though, is a reminder of how many musicians never leave the ‘local’ and how impoverished our jazz history is for not telling their stories” (171). The chapter on Christian provides a nice biography of Christian’s career and a strong reading of his musical style and influences.
74 Ibid., 168.
“When we consider the stylistic development of Charles Christian we are reminded how little we actually know of the origins of even the most recent of jazz styles, or of when and where they actually started; or of the tensions, personal, sociological, or technical, out of which such an original artist achieves his stylistic identity. For while there is now a rather extensive history of discography and recording sessions there is but the bare beginnings of a historiography of jazz. We know much of jazz as entertainment, but a mere handful of clichés constitutes our knowledge of jazz as experience.”

Ellison attempts to bring jazz history beyond the casual adoption of clichés and easy narratives and begins to construct a jazz history that foregrounds the importance of Oklahoma for the development of artists such as Charlie Christian, Jimmy Rushing, and himself.

…the effort to let the history of jazz as entertainment stand for the whole of jazz ignores the most fundamental knowledge of the dynamics of stylistic growth which has been acquired from studies in other branches of music and from our knowledge of the growth of other art forms. The jazz artist who becomes nationally known is written about as though he came into existence only upon his arrival in New York. His career in the big cities, where jazz is more of a commercial entertainment than part of a total way of life, is stressed at the expense of his life in the South, the Southwest and the Midwest, where most Negro musicians found their early development. Thus we are left with an

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impression of mysterious rootlessness, and the true and often annoying
complexity of American cultural experience is oversimplified.”

As Ellison pulls back the clichéd narrative of Charlie Christian as the young guitarist who
seemingly explodes onto the Harlem jazz scene from nowhere, brandishing an electric guitar and
playing single notes on it like a horn, he reveals the complex method by which artistic innovation
occurs, and by doing so, brings attention to the unique culture of Oklahoma City that might have
permitted Charlie Christian to flourish. Ellison turns to the details of Charlie Christian’s musical
upbringing in Oklahoma City, since to Ellison, “[t]he facts in these matters are always more
intriguing than the legends.” As he would explain in “Hidden Name and Complex Fate,”
Oklahoma in the middle and late twenties was “still a new frontier state.” Oklahoma City was
“one of the great centers for southwestern jazz, along with Dallas and Kansas City,” Ellison
notes—later he would claim “it is perhaps pardonable if I recall that much of the so-called
Kansas City jazz was actually brought to perfection in Oklahoma City by Oklahomans—and
famous orchestras, blues singers like Ma Rainey and Ida Cox, and bands like King Oliver’s
would stop in the capital city to perform.” Oklahoma City’s vibrant music scene was bolstered

77 Ibid., 236.
78 Ralph Ellison, “Hidden Name and Complex Fate,” *Shadow & Act* (New York: First Vintage
   xiv.
80 The fact that Ellison mentions Oklahoma City as a “great center” for southwestern jazz is no
   small statement, either. Even into the 1970s, jazz historians seemed to routinely ignore
   Oklahoma City’s status as a performance hub. For example, in *Jazz Style in Kansas City and
   the Southwest*, Ross Russell claims Charlie Christian as a Texas musician and divides the
territorial bands into three groups: “Kansas City bands, Texas bands, and bands associated with
various cities like Denver or Omaha” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971): 72.
by the “active and enthusiastic” music program at Douglass High School, where Zelia N. Breaux taught “any child who had the interest and the talent” how to play a musical instrument and participate in the school band or the orchestra. Interestingly, though, Charlie Christian only attended school at Douglass on occasion and did not participate in Breaux’s bands, spending most of his time taking care of his blind father and roving through wealthy parts of town, performing on an acoustic guitar with his father and brother to raise money for sustenance.

These details of Charlie Christian’s upbringing provide a glimpse of the unrecorded history of jazz in Oklahoma, and Ellison’s perspective on jazz as a culture, unlike LeRoi Jones’s views of African American music, has very little to do with resistance. For Ellison, the state of Oklahoma was important in creating a cultural sensibility that was productive for jazz—in early drafts and notes of “The Charlie Christian Story,” Ellison foregrounds the crucial role that Oklahoma played in Christian’s artistic development. “Several conflicts shaped his art,” Ellison writes. “He grew up in a state which was at the time of his birth” was “only _____ old. No history of slavery – no long established tradition of race – although there was also racial conflict.”

For Ellison, Oklahoma City as a frontier state, where slavery had not become a deep-rooted part of the state’s cultural fabric, complicated Jones’s notion in _Blues People_ that African American music, including blues and jazz, was necessarily a form of musical resistance. Instead, by examining Oklahoma City as a sort of counterpoint to the political, even militant, views of some jazz historians, Ellison writes about jazz as a cultural way of being in the world. In a 1961 interview, “That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure,” Ellison narrates the way that jazz in

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81 Box I:95, Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington D.C.
Oklahoma was less of a style and more as a “total way of life.”

Jazz was so prevalent in Oklahoma City, Ellison remembers, “that it got not only into our attempts at playing classical music” at school, but it got “into forms of activities not associated with it: into marching and into football games, where it has since become a familiar fixture.” Ellison provides a humorous anecdote about how in Oklahoma City, jazz managed to find its way into military drill:

There were many Negro veterans from the Spanish-American War who delighted in teaching the younger boys complicated drill patterns, and on hot summer evenings we spent hours on the Bryant School grounds (now covered with oil wells) learning to execute the commands barked at us by our enthusiastic drillmasters. And as we mastered the patterns, the jazz feeling would come into it and no one was satisfied until we were swinging. These men who taught us had raised a military discipline to the level of a low art form, almost a dance, and its spirit was jazz.

Far from being a form of resistance, jazz to Ellison was a sort of feeling or spirit, and one not easily reducible to a simple explanation. This sort of anecdote, which blends seemingly disparate elements – military veterans, rigid drills, and jazz – is one of Ellison’s favorite techniques that he employs to challenge perspectives that art by African Americans must be overtly political or resistant in nature.

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83 Ibid., 10-11.
84 Ibid., 11.
On the other hand, though art to Ellison need not be overtly political, he clearly articulates in “The Charlie Christian Story” that art ultimately operates as a form of politics. Ellison’s explanation of the roles of jazz improvisation in his review of *Blues People* suggests a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between the musical improvisation in jazz and the resources of American identity than Jones’s. According to Ellison, Jones conceptualized African American musical expression as a product of the conditions of slavery and racial oppression, who performed in musical modes “which were essentially African,” and as they lost memory of their African heritage, African American music became thought of as music of the “American Negro” (251). Jones’s view, Ellison claims, claims the “American Negro as the product of a series of transformations” in the United States, rendering a passive view of American black culture that conceives African American expression as merely responsive to social and political oppression. Jones’s claim in *Blues People* that “a slave cannot be a man,” then, falls into a similar logical problem – Ellison explains that thinking about black culture, even under the extreme repression of slavery, as responsive, overlooks a more complicated view of black humanity. “But what, one might ask,” Ellison challenges,

of those moments when he feels his metabolism aroused by the rising of the sap in spring? What of his identity among other slaves? With his wife? And isn’t it closer to the truth that far from considering themselves only in terms of that abstraction, ‘a slave,’ the enslaved really thought of themselves as men who had been unjustly enslaved? And isn’t it the true answer to Mr. Jones’s question, ‘What are you going to be when you grow up?’ not, as he gives it, ‘a slave’ but most probably a coachman, a teamster, a cook, the best damned steward on the
Mississippi, the best jockey in Kentucky, a butler, a farmer, a stud, or, hopefully a free man!\textsuperscript{85}

Ellison’s insistence on the humanity and cultural striving of enslaved African Americans opens up a different way of thinking about musical performance as a way of striving toward mastery and aesthetic pleasure despite the harshly repressive qualities of African American life in both times of slavery and in Ellison’s contemporary scene. It would be a political misreading, Ellison writes, to think of black musicians as artists whose political engagements are primary to their musical form. Even among slaves, Ellison images, the musician would have been driven by a different motivation than resistance. Instead, “[h]is attitude as ‘musician’ would lead him to possess the music expressed through the technique, but until he could do so he would him, whistle, sing, or play the tunes to the best of his ability on any available instrument.”\textsuperscript{86} Desire to master musical technique, regardless of the barriers to opportunity (including access to instruments), comprised the primary goal of black musicians. Ellison explains that “it was, indeed, out of the tension between desire and ability that the techniques of jazz emerged,” and “[f]or this, no literary explanation, no cultural analyses, no political slogans—indeed, not even a high degree of social or political freedom—was required. For the art—the blues, the spirituals, the jazz, the dance—was what we had in place of freedom.”\textsuperscript{87}

I write this to mention that musical mastery in jazz as Ellison conceives it – as a vocation that seeks to perfect an artistic craft – ultimately becomes a political act. For Ellison, jazz draws from European musical traditions \textit{as well as} “cultural tendencies inherited from Africa”:

\textsuperscript{85} Ellison, “Blues People,” 254.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 254.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 254.
therefore, musical technique of African Americans, as a “key to creative freedom” and a “will
toward expression,” embodies a plural musical form. 88 “Negroes have taken, with the
ruthlessness of those without articulate investments in cultural styles” from both European and
African culture in order to “express their own sense of life—while rejecting the rest.” 89 In this
sense, Ellison articulates that jazz exemplifies the pluralistic nature of American culture, and “it
was the African’s origin in cultures in which art was highly functional which gave him an edge
in shaping the music and dance of this nation.” 90 Ellison’s insistence on the pluralism of
American culture – which was pluralistic even before the official founding of the nation –
suggests that Ellison’s artistic claims are inherently political.

“The Charlie Christian Story” provides an early window into Ellison’s perspectives on
the utility of employing the trope of musical improvisation as a demonstration of the process of
American cultural history, and by turning to black Oklahoma cultural history, Ellison finds the
resources to begin to challenge developing theories of a black aesthetic predicated on ideas of
African American music and, by extension, culture as a form of Africanist resistance to white
European oppressive forces latent in the American scene. Ellison portrays Charlie Christian as an
improvisator par excellence, who, growing up in Ellison’s highly synthetic hometown of
Oklahoma City, draws influence from a wide variety of musical sources to combine them into a
pioneering expressive medium through the mastery of the electric guitar. Christian’s attitude
toward craft, as Ellison describes it, though not explicitly political, remains deeply expressive of
the political condition that emerges from the melding of disparate cultural influences. This

88 Ellison, “Blues People,” 255.
89 Ibid., 255.
90 Ibid., 255.
process, Ellison notes, at times draws from the blend of white European influences with black sensibility. But Ellison notes another productive cultural tension in the challenge of African American artists to transcend tradition while remaining indebted to it. This is, for Ellison, a “cruel contradiction implicit in the art itself.”

For true jazz is the art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it—how often do we see even the most famous of jazz artists being devoured alive by their imitators, and, shamelessly, in the public spotlight?

For Ellison, the art of improvisation, crucial to the performance and creative ability of the artist, relies on the ability to acknowledge one’s debt to tradition while pioneering a new identity based on the remediation of previous materials. This may be read as Ellison’s position on the relationship between art and politics, and it elucidates the purpose of Ellison’s anger at LeRoi Jones for his historicism which strategically misreads the complexity of African American experience. If we read Ellison’s complex view of jazz improvisation as a statement on art and politics, it additionally helps to situate his disdain for bebop performers during the late 1950s –

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92 Ibid., 234.
between their antagonistic stage presence, avant-garde melodicism, and Africanist aesthetic posturing, they risked breaking from tradition in a manner that could erase a sensibility toward a history that understood black experience in America that despite the tragic burden of white oppression resulted in beautiful, diverse, and deeply meaningful life.

For Ellison, a major problem of Black Nationalist views of art as resistance exemplified in Jones and in bebop was its tendency to seek respectability and institutionalization. As with movements that strive for institutionalization, it performs the dangerous task of rejecting art that fails meet its requirements of respectability and political efficacy. In Ellison’s essay, he posits the work of Charlie Christian (and Jimmy Rushing) as a “case in point”: as a direct foil to a sense of aesthetics and politics that seeks respectability, whose willingness to engage in the art embraced by the lower class actually provided the inspiration for the future of jazz.93

With jazz this has made for the phenomena of an art form existing in a curious state of history and pre-history simultaneously. Not that it isn’t recognized that it is an art with deep roots of the past, but that the nature of its deep connection with social conditions here and now is slighted. Charlie Christian is a case in point. He flowered from a background with roots not only in a tradition in music, but in a deep division in the Negro community as well. He spent much of his life in a slum in which all the forms of disintegration attending the urbanization of rural Negroes ran riot. Although he himself was from a respectable family, the wooden tenement in which he grew up was full of poverty, crime and sickness. It was also

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alive and exciting, and I enjoyed visiting there, for the people both lived and sang the blues.\textsuperscript{94}

In “The Charlie Christian Story,” Ellison explores the class tensions in Oklahoma City and examines the significance of Christian’s willingness to absorb the style of jazz, a decision deplored among the “respectable Negroes of the town,” who considered jazz “a backward, low-class form of expression.”\textsuperscript{95} Ellison notes the cultural problem that stems from the “marked difference between those who accepted and lived close to their folk experience and those whose status strivings led them to reject and deny it.”\textsuperscript{96} Luckily, Ellison writes, Christian, who “had heard the voice of jazz” and “would hear no other,” willingly chose to celebrate his folk heritage while seeking to innovate jazz music through the electric guitar. The choice of guitar further exemplifies Christian’s willingness to work within the folk tradition even in innovation – the guitar, as Ellison notes, was “long regarded as a traditional instrument of Southern Negroes” – and as he began to voice the guitar as a solo instrument, “made possible through the perfecting of the electronically amplified instrument,” Christian became a master of Ellison’s artistic ideals of improvisation.\textsuperscript{97} Christian was a master of synthesis between the “low-down” folkways in black cultural experience in the American scene and the innovative aspects of musical theory and technology. In Ellison’s formulation, Christian blended two “separate bodies of instrumental techniques” that had actually been inherent in jazz all along—“the one classic and widely

\textsuperscript{94} Ellison, “The Charlie Christian Story,” 238.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 238.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 238.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 238.
recognized as ‘correct’; and the other eclectic, partly unconscious, and ‘jazzy.’” Ellison employs Christian’s improvisatory approach resembles Ellison’s perspective of appropriate history, one that makes visible the elements of American history that are most likely to fade out of cultural memory but are also essential for understanding the complex, jazz-like composition of American culture. Ellison draws on his memory of Charlie Christian, one of his Oklahoma resources, not only to critique Black Nationalist historicism but also to celebrate the ephemerality of jazz experience and culture in early 20th-century Oklahoma City, a style of music that was a resource for community feeling and that was a vibrant celebration of life despite external pressures of segregation and discrimination.

*Remembering Jimmy, Remembering Oklahoma*

Less than two months after writing “The Charlie Christian Story,” Ralph Ellison published a second Oklahoma City jazz piece, “Remembering Jimmy,” on July 12, 1958 in *The Saturday Review*. “Remembering Jimmy,” an homage to jazz and blues singer Jimmy Rushing, who had gained fame by performing with the Blue Devils Orchestra in Oklahoma City and who later joined Count Basie’s band as lead singer. If we read “The Charlie Christian Story” as Ellison’s argument for a theory of jazz as cultural experience and for improvisation as a cultural and political metaphor, it might be useful to read “Remembering Jimmy” as an Ellisionian celebration of the phenomenological experience of jazz as a communal event and as a joyful

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98 Ibid., 239.
expression. “Remembering Jimmy” reads the way Ellison believes jazz to be—an ephemeral state of transcendence grounded in the traditions of a black Oklahoma City past. In this piece Ellison sets the scene, and begins with music:

In the old days the voice was high and clear and poignantly lyrical. Steel-bright in its upper range and, at its best, silky smooth, it was possessed of a purity somehow impervious to both the stress of singing above a twelve-piece band and the urgency of Rushing’s own blazing fervor. On dance nights, when you stood on the rise of the school grounds two blocks to the east, you could hear it jetting from the dance hall like a blue flame in the dark; now soaring high above the trumpets and trombones, now skimming the froth of reeds and rhythm as it called some woman’s anguished name—or demanded in a high, thin, passionately lyrical line, ‘Baaaaay-bay, Bay-aaay-bay! Tell me what’s the matter now!’—above the shouting of the swinging band.

Through highly lyrical prose, Ellison traces the movement of Rushing’s voice across the city blocks of Oklahoma City—Rushing’s tenor does the work of improvisation as he sings along with the brass and wind instruments of the Blue Devils’ jazz outfit. As an improviser, Rushing’s voice simultaneously blends and soars above the other instruments, at once a blue flame that soars and skims across the melodies of the band. Ellison’s mixed metaphors emphasize the strength of improvisation to assume new expression that builds on the tradition of jazz standards

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99 Also in this note: “Jazz criticism has been the province of adolescent enthusiasts, or opportunists, or champion of the great white hope, and, most of all of the ignorant.”
yet burns in the ephemeral search of new forms of expression. To Ellison, Rushing is a master of the joyful spirit of jazz, and in his voice he seemed to carry the distinctly Oklahoman spirit of possibility: “for Jimmy Rushing was not simply a local entertainer,” he writes, but “he expressed a value, an attitude about the world for which our lives afforded no other definition.”¹⁰¹ As Ellison describes the segregation of Oklahoma City where African Americans were “pushed off to what seemed to be the least desirable side of the city,”¹⁰² and whose “system of justice was based on” a particularly harsh form of Jim Crow “Texas law,” black Oklahomans had cause to feel hope:

…there was an optimism within the Negro community and a sense of possibility which, despite our awareness of limitation (dramatized so brutally in the Tulsa riot of 1921), transcended all of this; and it was the rock-bottom sense of reality, coupled with our sense of the possibility of rising above it, which sounded in Rushing’s voice.¹⁰³

For Ellison, possibility emerged in Oklahoma City in jazz’s ability to synthesize the disparate elements of African American society that seemed limited by institutional frameworks that were partly formed through segregation and by class striving which rendered lower-class and folk ways of life as disrespectful. “Jazz and blues did not fit into the scheme of things as spelled out by our two institutions, the church and the school,” Ellison explains, “but they gave expression to attitudes which found no place in these and helped to give our lives some semblance of

¹⁰² Ellison’s knack of irony comes out here. The area of Oklahoma City - the East Side – turns out “some years later” to be “found to contain one of the state’s richest pools of oil” (242).
¹⁰³ Ibid., 242
wholeness.”\textsuperscript{104} Ellison remembers his childhood hero, Jimmy Rushing, becoming a quasi-religious figure for the “third institution” of jazz and “the leader of a public rite” in the Deep Second community: “Now, that’s the Right Reverend Jimmy Rushing preaching now, man, someone would say. And rising to the cue another would answer, ‘Yeah, and that’s old Elder ‘Hot Lips’ signifying along with him; urging him on, man.’”\textsuperscript{105} In Oklahoma City, Jimmy Rushing’s role as cultural synthesist emphasized the importance of jazz as a form of “communion” and whose task as artist was to find possibility in traditional numbers, bringing new interpretations to old ballads and the blues. Ellison credits Rushing for his skill at bringing “the imposition of a romantic lyricism upon the blues tradition,” which only could have happened, Ellison believes, on the Oklahoma frontier. This lyricism was:

…not of the Deep South, but of the Southwest: a romanticism native to the frontier, imposed upon the violent rawness of a part of the nation which only thirteen years before Rushing’s birth was still Indian territory. There is an optimism in it which echoes the spirit of those Negroes who, like Rushing’s father, had come to Oklahoma in search of a more human way of life.\textsuperscript{106} Rushing’s dedication to the blues, Ellison explains, was one inspired by an innate sense of limitation of language and musical form and one that strove to transcend these boundaries to explore the boundaries of meaning. “The blues is an art of ambiguity, an assertion of the irrepressibly human over all circumstance whether created by others or by one’s own human failings,” Ellison writes, and the blues form stands in American music as “the only consistent art

\textsuperscript{104} Ellison, “Remembering Jimmy,” 243.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 243.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 245.
in the United States which constantly remind us of how far we can actually go. When understood in their more profound implication, they are a corrective, an attempt to draw a line upon man’s own limitless assertion.\textsuperscript{107}

In his lyrical, elegiac odes to Jimmy Rushing and Charlie Christian, two of his Oklahoma City childhood heroes, Ellison explored the craft of jazzmen in his home state and found that the work of black artists was far more than merely an assertion of political will. By returning his local memory of jazz experience in Deep Second, Ellison discovered the complex manner in which art occurs—as an amalgamation of traditions both European and African, established and “low-down,” and complicated further by the rapid movements of culture along U.S. highways and soundwaves—and came to the conclusion that a proper analysis of American and black American art would rely on attempting to understand and appreciate the intricate, contingent networks that comprised the transmission of influence. Rather than an essentialized, authentically black form of music that embodied African resistance and response to white oppression in the United States, jazz expression was an effort to draw upon the resources of American cultural history and performance and find ways to “feel out the territory”—to seek and push against the limits of artistic expression that were permitted in a plural American democracy. Ellison’s jazz essays, and particularly “The Charlie Christian Story” and “Jimmy Rushing,” drew upon Ellison’s innate sense of the frontier and aided him in finding new ways of conveying his complex views of culture in the United States, mysteries that he would continue to explore for the remainder of his career.

\textsuperscript{107} Ellison, “Remembering Jimmy,” 246.
If Ralph Ellison hadn’t known Roscoe Dunjee, he would have never been able to drop out of Tuskegee his junior year and move to Harlem in 1936. Instead, if it hadn’t been for the Oklahoma City public figure, journalist, and editor of the popular local African American newspaper, the *Black Dispatch*, Ellison would have had to give up on his studies one semester earlier. For the spring semester of his junior year, Ellison encountered a problem that happens to many college students—he was unable to renew his tuition grant because he did not fulfill the 90-hour requirement to authorize the continuation of his scholarship.

Ellison’s late arrival to Tuskegee during his freshman year resulted in a clerical error on his Tuskegee transcript—his first semester of courses didn’t make it onto his records. At first glance, this problem seems that it could have easily been solved: if Ellison would simply mail the Oklahoma Board of Education and report the clerical error, the employees could mend the paperwork and let him finish his third year of university education. Unfortunately, this is precisely what Ellison did, but either through incompetence or racial discrimination (or perhaps a blend of both), the Oklahoma Board of Education never responded to his letters. That winter of 1936, Ellison found himself in a precarious position, unsure if he’d be able to resume his studies. It’s tempting to speculate: would Ellison have taken a train to New York City, undaunted by the financial setback, and continue to find success as a novelist—or would he have returned to Oklahoma City? One can sense Ellison’s distress that winter in a letter preserved in the Ralph
Ellison Papers among the correspondence between Ellison and the Board of Education. A small white card reads in a woman’s handwriting, “Ellison Are you going to eat dinner with me, or is the disposition still miserable?”\textsuperscript{108} Despite his likely misery of facing the prospect of being unable to return to Tuskegee that spring, Ralph Ellison was fortunate to know Roscoe Dunjee, and must have sensed that if any black man in Oklahoma City could help out, it would be him. Ellison wrote on December 24, 1935 to Dunjee’s address at the Black Dispatch, explaining the financial situation and requesting aid, claiming, “[k]nowing of your close association with the State Department officials, I am writing to ask if you will please intercede for me in gain some action on this application.”\textsuperscript{109} At the end of the letter, he offers a brief apology: “I hope you will pardon me for annoying you with my problems, but I am almost solely dependent upon this aid. At present I am not in school because of insufficient funds.”\textsuperscript{110}

This letter must have proved effective. Roscoe Dunjee, responded on January 4, 1936, mentioning that he contacted Norman L. Duncan from the Board, confidently claiming “I assume I will hear from him in a day or two and when I do I will forward you his answer.”\textsuperscript{111} Within a few weeks, Norman L. Duncan mailed Ellison to inform him that Oklahoma would provide his tuition for the next semester.

It is clear that Ralph Ellison held Dunjee in high regard for the rest of his life. Dunjee, born at Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia in 1883, was fortunate enough to grow up with a rare education not often accessible to African Americans in the Reconstruction era. His father, a

\textsuperscript{108} Box I:32, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. \textsuperscript{109} Ibid. \textsuperscript{110} Ibid. \textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
publisher of the local paper *Harper’s Ferry Messenger*, financial agent for a local college, and employed by the American Baptist Missionary Society, purchased land east of Oklahoma City and moved his family there in 1892, and Dunjee had the rare opportunity to read extensively in his father’s library of over 1,500 books, encouraged by his father to enter the field of journalism.\(^{112}\) Dunjee started out working for various black-owned newspapers including the *Bookertee Searchlight* in Bookertee, Oklahoma and eventually bought a printing plant, addressing the challenge of retaining talented black journalists by seeking out capable writers from the state prison, “the only location in Oklahoma which did allow journalism training for

\(^{112}\) Charles A. Simmons, *The African American Press: A History of News Coverage During National Crises, With Special Reference to Four Black Newspapers, 1827-1965* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1997): 51. There is very little scholarly work on the life of Roscoe Dunjee, but Simmons’s chapter on the *Black Dispatch* is perhaps the most detailed account of Dunjee’s life and development into a prominent black journalist. Another helpful source, written for a more general audience, is *Roscoe Dunjee: Champion of Civil Rights*, by Bob Burke and Angela Monson (Edmond: UCO Press, 1998), which helpfully provides a selection of Dunjee’s editorials. Kay Teall’s *Black History in Oklahoma: a Resource Book* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma City Public Schools, 1971) contains a wonderful elegy of Dunjee provided by Jimmy Stewart, longtime President of the Oklahoma City charter of the NAACP. Stewart recalls that Dunjee was “one of the most thought-provoking editorial writers of his day” and that he “might be described as the best lawyer without portfolio I have ever known” who was instrumental in ending government-supported residential segregation in Oklahoma, which had previously led to ghettoization and overflow of African Americans along the North Canadian River and where “every attempt to break the ‘ghetto’ hold placed on them was met with disappointment, arrest, and even bombings” (196-7). In the efforts to provide equal rights and dignity for African Americans in Oklahoma, Dunjee “set out like a man with three hands and ten feet, going in all directions to secure these objectives. His ideas were at least twenty-five years ahead of his time. Local people, white and black, told him he was a fool” (198). Stewart recalls that even the notoriously racist Governor “Alfalfa” Bill Murray, upon meeting Dunjee, one of his first statements was, “You fellows have been listening to Roscoe Dunjee and he’s 100 years ahead of his times” (198). Despite these sources, there is likely still productive and illuminating work to be done in uncovering the influence of Dunjee in Oklahoma and in the United States.
Negroes,” as Charles A. Simmons relates.\textsuperscript{113} On March 4, 1914, Dunjee published his first issue of the \textit{Black Dispatch}.\textsuperscript{114} Dunjee stated his editorial philosophy as follows:

The policy of the \textit{Black Dispatch} is not to publish stories of brutality and crime in the spirit of the yellow journalist. Every week we try to take the news field for subjects that will be inspirational to the race and promote and develop good citizenship…

In keeping with this idea we feel that it is our responsible duty to let the white man know the plain truth of how we view conditions now…

Suppose the editor of this paper would go to Wheeler Park in Oklahoma City, a city owned park, at the entrance we would find a sign informing us that ‘No Negroes Allowed’ and not far from it another sign which informs him that ‘No Dogs Are Allowed,’ do you feel that the editor would feel that the taxes which Negroes have paid the general fund, that has gone to establish and maintain the splendid zoo that cost thousands of dollars and ought to be of educational service to all of the children of Oklahoma City were being handled in a democratic way.”\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{113} Simmons, \textit{The African-American Press}, 52.
\textsuperscript{114} Dunjee explains that the title \textit{Black Dispatch} was a controversial one. According to Dunjee, “The \textit{Black Dispatch} was given its name as a result of an effort to dignify a slur,” explaining that “[e]ven in this day when many people seek to refer to an untruth they resort to an old expression, ‘That’s black dispatch gossip.’ The influence of this statement is very damaging to the integrity and self-respect of the race. All of this has developed a psychology among Negroes that their color is a curse and that there is something evil in their particular pigmentation. It is my contention that Negroes should be proud to say, ‘I am a black man.’” Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 53. Interestingly, Ellison often recounted the story of his mother confronting police for attempting to bring the young Ellison and his brother in to the Oklahoma City Zoo.
Dunjee’s editorial style in the *Black Dispatch* deftly managed to avoid focusing merely on the tragic and violent aspects of racial oppression in Oklahoma while simultaneously bravely challenging the white establishment for their breaches in constitutional democracy. Dunjee’s newspaper also “rattle[d] some cages” among the African American community in Oklahoma City: Simmons explains that “more than anything else, he was angry over the lack of reaction by Negroes to [oppressive] treatment and their deafening silence. Dunjee wanted a medium to inform, to stir, to arouse his people to fight for the right to survive and to live with a common dignity”—and he delivered this message in a vigorous, intense writing style that drew a readership which extended across the entire nation.¹¹⁶

For the young Ellison growing up in Oklahoma City, Dunjee’s influence must have been palpable on a daily level. Before Ellison could read, Dunjee had hired him as a youth to sell newspapers in Deep Second. In addition, his mother was close to Dunjee’s family, and not only did Ellison maintain a subscription to the *Black Dispatch* until the 1980s, but he corresponded with Dunjee at various times during his career on the topic of journalism.¹¹⁷ As a journalist and editor in New York, Ellison wrote a personalized letter to thank Dunjee for advertising the *Negro Quarterly* in the *Black Dispatch* and expressing admiration for his recent editorials on the Durham Conference. Ellison went so far as to add a postscript, writing, “if you’d like to do a

¹¹⁶ Simmons, *The African-American Press*, 54. Jimmy Stewart recalls the nationwide response to Dunjee’s editorial prose: “As we traveled throughout the country, persons remarked about Dunjee’s editorials, and although all who knew him or mad them knew they would be the world longest, at no place have I met a person who said they failed to read them because of their length. This, to me, is a tribute to the writer as well as to the content of his editorials” (55, spelling errors in text, not mine).

¹¹⁷ To add, Lawrence P. Jackson suggests that Ida Ellison groomed her song “in the image of her brilliant friend Roscoe Dunjee, insurgent editor-in-chief of the Oklahoma City *Black Dispatch*.” *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*, 26.

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piece for the next issue of the Quarterly on the broad aspects of this problem…” that he could contribute to Ellison’s journal. Clearly, Dunjee occupied a monumental space in Ellison’s creative and intellectual heritage, and he represented for Ellison an Oklahoma who effectively used the medium of the newspaper to clearly assert the position of African Americans in an environment that increasingly adopted Jim Crow policies in Ellison’s young life in Oklahoma City. Dunjee was the only African American model he had for writing in Oklahoma City, as he notes in “Hidden Name, Complex Fate”:

“Negro Oklahoma City was starkly lacking in writers. In fact, there was only Roscoe Dunjee, the editor of the local Negro newspaper and a very fine journalist in that valuable tradition of personal journalism which is now rapidly (153) disappearing; a writer who in his emphasis upon the possibilities for justice offered by the Constitution anticipated the anti-segregation struggle by decades. There were also a few reporters who drifted in and out, but these were about all.

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118 Box I:32, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
119 Though this may prove tangential, a study of the importance of the news in Invisible Man may be revelatory as well for determining Dunjee’s importance to Ellison’s awareness of the power of the press. Newspapers appear 29 times within Invisible Man—they are subjects of discussion, crinkled up in readers’ hands, and sometimes lie out of reach. Invisible’s protagonist makes the “mistake” of speaking of “social equality” to the white men in the Battle Royal scene, a phrase he “had often seen denounced in newspaper editorials, heard debated in private (30-1). Dr. Bledsoe claims that “[t]hese white folk have newspapers, magazines, radios, spokesmen to get their ideas across” (142). I’d argue that Dunjee’s influence finds its way into the text of Invisible Man, making the productions of the press—white or black—crucial strongholds in the battle for asserting cultural and political identity.
On the level of *conscious* culture the Negro community was biased in the
direction of music, [not writing].”¹²⁰

In Ellison’s writing, though, Dunjee became an Oklahoma resource that he used as a unique example to challenge a number of factors. On May 14, 1972, Ralph Ellison spoke at a Black Perspective Conference in New York City, an NAACP-sponsored event for black journalists, and he selected the topic “Roscoe Dunjee and the American Language” as an opportunity to speak to a number of different categories and problems at the same time. He used this opportunity to talk about the vernacular, democracy, and the obligations of the black press at this present time. But what might motivate Ellison to choose these topics? To respond, they were a blend of issues that Ellison had cared about deeply at the time and had been increasingly under attack with the rise of Black journals and Afro-centric thought.¹²¹

*Ellison Under Attack*

Ellison may have started to think about the role of the black press with the 1961 return of the black journal *Negro Digest*, under the editorial helm of Hoyt W. Fuller.¹²² In the June 1961

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¹²¹ To my knowledge, the only existing piece of scholarship on Ellison and Roscoe Dunjee is an essay by Alfred L. Brophy entitled “Ralph Ellison and the Law” (*Oklahoma City Law Review*, 26 3 [Fall 2011]: 823-26. The piece is far more interested in pursuing Ellison’s understanding of the Constitution as inspired by the editorial work of Dunjee than making any sustained claim about the relationship between Dunjee and Ellison’s views on the American quality of the English language. The study of Ellison’s relationship to Roscoe Dunjee deserves further exploration than the limits of my essay: one could perhaps assert that more profoundly than Richard Wright was ever one of Ellison’s literary ancestors that Roscoe Dunjee’s editorial style permeated Ellison’s sense of artistic craft and political perspective.

¹²² For an overview of the black press in American history, including its successes and struggles within the broader American culture, consult the following works. Note that some black press scholars tend to incorporate a black nationalist strain within their research:
edition, Fuller explains the reason for the return of *Negro Digest* was due to “recent events” of civil rights tension and of decolonization in Africa, and the sense that the “talented young Negro writer does not always find a ready outlet for his creative efforts.” Dedicated to black authors who wrote primarily about Pan-Africanist themes and who asserted a resistant tone toward American race and democracy, the journal quickly became popular among radical black artists and intellectuals. Literary historian James C. Hall notes that at the time Hoyt Fuller became

In *Black Journalists in Paradox: Historical Perspectives and Current Dilemmas*, Clint C. Wilson II traces the role of the black press all the way back to the oral, dance, and musical expressions “developed by the great African civilizations” and adapted this African communications system in the United States “through the ordeal of slavery and the ravages of racism and discrimination” (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991): 19. Julius E. Thompson’s “The Role of the Publisher as an Agent for Social Change” (*Africana History, Culture and Social Policy: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. James L. Conyers, Jr. and Alva Barnett [New York: International Scholars Publications]) traces the development of the black press as a key force in unifying and providing influence and power within the black community. Similarly, Pamela Newkirk’s *Within the Veil: Black Journalists, White Media* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) adopts a slightly nationalist tone, arguing that the black press was way for “Africans in America to have a say in what Derrick Bell has aptly called ‘an alien place called home’ … The black press… was from the outset determined to challenge the ways in which the white media rendered blacks invisible or cast them as inferior to whites. In doing so, the black press served as the black counterpart and counterpoint to the white press as it reflected black tastes and sensibilities. However, unlike the white press, the black press was required to have a double consciousness and report on the activities of whites because of their profound effect on black life” (38). Finally, Clovis E. Semmes provides an overview of the *Black World/Negro Digest* and argues for its status as both the pinnacle of “the growing coalescence between political and artistic activism” as well as being “the most complete voice of the Black Arts and Black Consciousness movement, and it is the first scholarly publication owned and managed by African Americans to provide a comprehensive and broadly read intellectual vehicle that placed African, African-diasporic, and African-American concerns at the center of the dialogue… *Negro Digest/Black World* had the acumen, financial support, and infrastructure of Johnson Publications behind it” (xiii). *Roots of Afrocentric Thought: A Reference Guide to Negro Digest/Black World*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998.

123 *Negro Digest*, June 1961.

124 The power of the black nationalist press at this time certainly was not limited to the *Negro Digest/Black World*, though. Peniel E. Joseph discusses in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006) that militant activists
editor, the *Black World* was a “national magazine with significant distribution resources, dedicated solely to African-American cultural concerns,” and located in Chicago, which was “arguably the most resourceful black community in the United States.”\textsuperscript{125} Fuller, whom Hall mentions “marked the magazine with his cosmopolitanism, his international and specifically Pan-African concerns, and his sharp wit,” became one of Ellison’s loudest and sharpest critics in the late 1960s and early 1970s.\textsuperscript{126} Fuller repeatedly criticized Ellison for his “Olympian” stance toward younger black writers, portraying him as a distant figure who was more likely to be antagonistic toward young African American writers rather than support them. In the September 1964 issue of *Negro Digest*, Fuller noted Ellison’s conspicuous absence from a black writer’s conference in Berkeley, California, claiming that LeRoi Jones “has yet to confront Mr. Ellison in the wake of his highly (the word is used advisedly) negative review of Mr. Jones’ *The Blues People.*”\textsuperscript{127} Fuller worked in his editorial writings to shift the aesthetic approach back toward protest despite the works of Baldwin and Ellison to critique this movement. “The ‘race problem’ began to see the power of the newspaper editorial as a vessel for cultural critique. In addition, “Periodicals that provided radical coverage of Cuba and the larger Third World, such as *Muhammad Speaks, The Baltimore Afro-American, Soulbook, Freedomways,* and *Liberator,* became vital conduits for early Black Power activists. Simultaneously inspiring and regaling readers with bold declarations of African independence and denunciations of Afro-American ignorance, this literature deepened black knowledge of the outside world” (12).


\textsuperscript{126} Hall, “On Sale at Your Favorite Newsstand,” 197.

\textsuperscript{127} Hoyt W. Fuller, “Assembly At Asilomar,” *Negro Digest* XIII 11 (September 1964), 42-77.
is an inevitable trap for the Negro writer, and there is no honest escape. Nor is there any objective reason why there should be,” Fuller wrote. “Even Baldwin and Jones, after disclaiming any necessity for writing ‘protest’ literature, find that their work falls into that category. Only Ellison, looking down from his personal Olympus, continues to talk as if considerations of art are above and beyond the question of involvement.”\(^{128}\) In later issues, Fuller critiques Ellison for supporting James Alan McPherson’s novel *Hue and Cry* while disparaging Ellison for castigating “black writers for not learning ‘the craft and forms of fiction’” while “actually… demanding that they write like their white peers and predecessors.”\(^{129}\) Fuller challenged Ellison for stifling what he considered “any creative works which dealt honestly and in depth with the racial situation in this country.”\(^{130}\)

Fuller’s portrayal of Ellison as an aloof and misguided author clearly hurt him, despite his efforts to shake off the insults. Ishmael Reed, Quincy Troupe, and Steven Cannon from *Y’Bird Magazine* asked Ellison about his relationship with Hoyt W. Fuller. “He’s lashed out at you, hasn’t he?” Reed asks. “Oh yes, over and over again. He’s made me a scapegoat,” Ellison replied. “I don’t know why, but perhaps it’s because I’ve been around longer…” he replies, somewhat unconvincingly.\(^{131}\) When asked about Fuller’s ideology, Ellison vaguely responded,

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\(^{130}\) Ibid., 88.

I suppose it’s a sort of Black nationalism—I almost said ‘black racism’—but, whatever it is, it seems to have given him an Ellison phobia. All I know is that I’ve never replied to his attacks. My attitude toward this complex Negro American situation leads me to feel that there’s so little to be gained from our fighting with one another that I can afford to ignore such attacks.\footnote{Ellison, “The Essential Ellison,” 342.}

From Ellison’s perspective, the writers from *Black World* operated like hegemonic powers of black ideology—they controlled a particular perspective of blackness that refused to allow for critical dissent:

Today, barking behind what they consider to be the protective ‘big gate’ of *Black World*, they perform like Supercargo in *Invisible Man*, barking and snarling at me in order to keep other possible dissenters in line… [They] have lived in New York for years, but they still retain their Calvinist compulsion to control the acts and imagination of others that you find in certain Black, down-home communities.\footnote{Ibid., 347-8.}

Part of the imaginative influence/control that Hoyt Fuller had on the work of black writers at the time was a concern with the capability of the English language to properly express the needs of African American writers. Perhaps more specifically, Fuller held deep skepticism toward the formal control of English – as long as African Americans used English, they would be held responsible for Western concepts of style and language that would render their ideas as second-class in the United States.\footnote{Fuller anticipates the postcolonial and Third-Worldist discourse regarding the complicit relationship between colonial usage of the language of the imperial nation. Explored early in...} In “Toward a Black Aesthetic,” Fuller discusses the work of black...
poet Joseph Bevans, whose embrace of a nonconventional form challenges the viability of the English language to fully capture the resonance of African American experience. “If a poem lacks the resonances of William Shakespeare, that is intentional,” Fuller writes.\textsuperscript{135} “The ‘great bard of Avon’ has only limited relevance to the revolutionary spirit raging in the ghetto. Which is not to say that the black revolutionaries reject the ‘universal’ statements inherent in Shakespeare’s works; what they do reject, however, is the literary assumption that the style and language and the concerns of Shakespeare establish the appropriate limits and ‘frame of

texts like Frantz Fanon’s \textit{Black Skin: White Masks}, who acknowledges that “[t]o speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization” (1-2) but who also claims that “the more the black Antillean assimilates the French language, the whiter he gets—i.e., the close he comes to becoming a human being” (2). Later scholars complicate Fanon’s ideas regarding language and the relationship of postcolonial nations and those who speak the language of the colonizer, including Chinua Achebe in his famous 1964 speech, “The African Writer and the English Language”: “Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it.” Ngugi wa Thiong’o in \textit{Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature} (London: James Currey Ltd, 1986) sees Achebe’s statement as a “paradox,” urging African artists and authors to eschew the language of their colonizers, claiming, “[t]he use of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. Hence language has always been at the heart of two contending forces in the Africa of the twentieth century” (4-7). Language as “a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (13) alienates those who adopt a language other than their native tongue, and in Thiong’o’s case, conditions Africans to associate their native languages – and themselves – with “low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence and ability or downright stupidity, non-intelligibility and barbarism” (18). Returning to Hoyt W. Fuller, it is easy to see the parallels between postcolonial resistance of the language of the colonizer and argument he makes in \textit{Black World/Negro Digest} to distrust the English language, a language that artists and intellectuals operating under a black nationalist paradigm would see as imposed upon them despite their will that replaced their native African languages and therefore their very cultural identities as Africans in America.

In his muscular prose, Fuller asserts the limits of the English language in its capability to refer to African American experience, and for black writers to convey their experience, they must write in a way that will chafe against predominantly white expectations of style and language.\[^{136}\]

The stance among black artists and intellectuals that English was both a limited medium for black expression and a form of communication that was inherently oppressive had become increasingly in vogue by the mid 1960s. For example, Malcolm X expresses this feeling in *Malcolm X Speaks* that “[t]he language you and I have been speaking to this man in the past hasn’t reached him… If he speaks French, you can’t speak German. You have to know what language he speaks and then speak to him in that language.”\[^{138}\] Other artists put it more forcefully. In his manifesto, “On Black Art,” Ron Karenga writes “[w]e need a new language to break the linguistic straight jacket of our masters, who taught us his language so he could understand us, although we could hardly understand ourselves.”\[^{139}\] Among English educators, Ossie Smith articulated in “The English Language is My Enemy” that “the sheer gut power of words” in specific words in English are “[w]ords which control our action” and strove for a transformation of the English language.\[^{140}\] Though there’s clearly a spectrum of thought regarding how African Americans ought to use the English language, it became important to black intellectuals and writers to reject the English language as a power structure that

\[^{137}\] Ibid., 9.
\[^{139}\] Quoted in Carolyn M. Rodgers, “Breakforth in Deed” in *Black World* (September 1970).
disenfranchised African Americans and was also insufficient for expressing the black experience in the United States.

Between the personal attack of Hoyt Fuller and the Black World on Ellison’s legacy, and the perspective that posits English as an oppressive language (an theory that Ellison rejected), Ellison felt compelled to speak out on these topics to challenge Fuller and other radical journalists for their conception of the role of the black press and for what he considered to be a limited and overly political perspective of the English language. Ellison drew upon his memories of the black editor Roscoe Dunjee to complicate the views of the black press and the Pan-Africanist views on language. On May 12, 1972, Ellison’s lecture, “Roscoe Dunjee and the American Language,” became another event that allowed Ellison to bring his “Cold Oklahoma Negro Eye” to both of these views, using Dunjee as an Oklahoma resource to demonstrate the complexity of the role of the black press. Despite the sheer amount of negativity that Ellison faced from his detractors during this time, Ellison found in the memory of Dunjee’s life an affirmation of his beliefs in the power of African Americans to use language to their advantage to bring black communities closer to the ideals of equality in the United States. By leveraging the language of the Constitution and the power of the black press, Dunjee demonstrated mastery of language that to empower Ellison’s Oklahoma City community.

Perhaps more effectively than his critiques, “Roscoe Dunjee and the American Language” succeeds because of Ellison’s ability to bring his audience into the world of Oklahoma during Ellison’s youth. “I must confess my debt to a great newspaperman who influenced me long before I realized I would be anything but a musician,” Ellison explains.
“That man’s name is Roscoe Dunjee.”141 Ellison traces the quasi-parental role the Black Dispatch had on developing him as a youth – he sold the newspaper when he was “fresh out of diapers,” selling it when he “could barely talk.”142 He recalls the centrality of the newspaper in grounding the Negro community across the state, remembering the newspaper’s importance in Oklahoma City and McAlester, Oklahoma, as he and his friends would shout “their headlines through the black community for hours until we had either lost our voices or had all the money we could make on…Sunday mornings.”143 Ellison further brings the audience into the world of Oklahoma by remembering the trauma of the Tulsa riot of 1921. He remembers the devastation of the “prosperous Negro community of Greenwood,” becoming a witness to the destruction the white community had on black Tulsans. Returning from a trip to Gary, Indiana in 1921, Ellison and his family passed through Greenwood to see that it “had been devastated and all but destroyed by bomb and fire in that riot of 1921.”144 Ellison details his memory of Oklahoma, with its segregation and its volatile capacity for violence, not to “bore you with how hard life has been for us in the United States,” but rather to “emphasize the courage of Roscoe Dunjee.”145 As if in response to the editors and critics in Ellison’s milieu, including Hoyt W. Fuller, Ellison begins to provide a vision for the role of black press as a courageous instrument that could voice

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142 Ibid., 455.
143 Ibid., 455.
144 Ibid., 455.
145 Ibid., 456.
opposition on behalf of African Americans. Like the militants, “Dunjee was a fighter”—but, unlike the militants, Ellison might have thought—“he was more than that.”

Breaking away from the black intellectuals who sought to orient the English language as an oppressive medium of speech, Ellison proceeds to demonstrate the limitations of Pan-African rhetoric on language by reframing the English language in the United States as a distinctly American language—that is, a language whose practical use, or instrumentality, fluctuates to the demands of the landscape, class and race, and the democratic hope embedded in the vernacularizing of the English tongue in the United States. Ellison signals the importance of an awareness of the instrumental nature of the American language. “One of the major problems of American civilization has been a struggle with the English language and its proper usage,” Ellison explains, mentioning that the process of becoming American required citizens to “revamp their concept and use of the English language.” To Ellison, early Americans had to understand and, when necessary, reinterpret the overtones and undertones of a language forged in a world they had never made, with a king at the top and God above him, a language which had given birth to great poetry, philosophical writings, and drama.

Ellison proceeds from a theory of language heavily indebted to W. H. Auden, whose study of early American language represented the necessity for the American emigrant to “improvise

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147 Ibid., 456-7.
148 Ibid., 457.
himself from day to day.”

During his tenure as Albert Schweitzer Chair of the Humanities at New York University, Ellison taught courses on literature and the American language, including “The American Vernacular as Symbolic Action,” and had committed his views in an unpublished 1970 essay entitled “Notes on the American Language.” This essay—much like his earlier works like “20th-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” or “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke”—offers an eclectic series of readings and literary theory, this time on the challenge that the “inheritance of the English language” provided for determining the “American’s conception (or mis-conception) of himself—the well-known problem of American identity.”

Under the influence of the English language yet in a new land whose environment demanded new verbiage—the “yet unarticulate speech of the untamed land,” as Ellison calls it—the quickly transforming language of Americans represented the effect the new country had on their sensibilities and identity. To Ellison, early attempts by Noah Webster and Benjamin Franklin to codify the English language demonstrated the anxiety that Americans felt in the quick mutations of their language—which Ellison argues was an example of Americanness occurring to Americans more quickly than they would have liked. Due to the transformations in language

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Ellison submitted this essay at the request of University of Chicago History professor Daniel Boorstin, who asked him to contribute an essay on “Language, Literature, and the Information Arts.” Boorstin had to reject the essay, claiming “[i]t’s too long and was not ‘a conspectus of the American achievement in language and literature which is what we need from this chapter.’” However, this essay might be considered invaluable for providing a clear sense of the theoretical framework of Ellison’s own theories of language.

150 Arnold Rampersad details Ellison’s professorship at New York University in Ralph Ellison: A Biography, 473.

among early Americans, “they were experiencing difficulty in recognizing where their British identity ended and where their American identity began.” A major change, a “disturbing turmoil in the mother tongue,” was that new and archaic words and phrases “were finding their way into the common usage” and in “backland and frontier alike the aristocratic standards of the King’s English were being crudely assaulted by disorderly forms of native American speech.”

In this essay, Ellison provides a view of American English that becomes a far more nuanced view of the nature of language than those of Malcolm X, Ron Karenga, and others. Far from being a language that precludes black Americans from being capable of expression, Ellison argues that American English language has always been a flexible form that was both a site of identity conflict and of world-making possibility, and African Americans had just as important a stake in the potential of the American English language than whites or other racial groups.

Ellison’s Oklahoma City hero, Roscoe Dunjee, remains an important example for this greater point, and he asserts that Dunjee sensed this potential in the English language. “From the beginning,” Ellison explains, “[Dunjee] understood intuitively and consciously that the English language had to be made our own before we could unlock the secret of other Americans, before we could understand how we were different from English men or Europeans…” To Ellison, Dunjee was a master manipulator of language and used language in a generative sense—“he understood that the American newspaper was a force for cohesion…and that in speaking, describing, and bringing together the diversity of the experience that was occurring in this vast

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153 Ibid., 9.
nation, we would discover ourselves and perhaps create new hope for mankind.” In “Roscoe Dunjee and the American Language,” Ellison draws on his black Oklahoma cultural history to assert a far more empowering sense of the capabilities of language than his intellectual and artistic rivals.

To return to the importance of language—in Ellison’s lecture, he distills his theory of language into a cohesive and practical formulation. For Americans,

[O]ne of the first problems of the United States was to master the language, to convert it, to squeeze the assumptions out of it and adapt it into a flexible instrumentality which would tell people what was new here. The birds, the climate, the waters, the weather, and the terrain were all different. There was no word in the English language to describe those long, flat stretches of land which had few trees and a great abundance of grass, so we took the word *prairie* from the French. There was no precise way of expressing in the King’s English the groping spirit which men were exhibiting in this country, where they were no longer held in the bounds of a class structure supposedly handed down from God through kingship, so the term ‘individualism’ came into being.

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156 It’s a little hard to tell how Ellison *actually* would have felt about this, but it really seems that Amiri Baraka and Ron Karenga, by Ellison’s definition, *were* pushing the expressive range of the English language in a distinctly American way. In their innovations and incorporation of African themes and poetic rhythms, they brought a democratic sensibility to American English. But Ellison’s problem with them wasn’t *what* they were doing, it was *how* people like Baraka and Karenga framed their work. By attempting to break outside of the “confines” of American identity, they were failing to realize that they were being ultra-American… or something like that.
157 Ibid., 457.
Ellison stresses the complex process of adapting language in the United States to demonstrate both the rhetorical mastery involved in *converting* and *squeezing* the language to explain “what was new here” in the land and in the potential of language. He incorporates a metaphor of musical mastery, employing the diction of interpreting the “overtones” and “undertones” of the English languages – the higher and lower frequencies of language, perhaps, that may aid in the process of speaking for others. Ellison uses the first person plural pronoun, “we,” specifically to refer to the role that black Americans have in the English language. Ever since the “colonials imported our black forefathers,” Ellison proceeds, African Americans were involved “in a terrific struggle to save the American reality, to come to grips with a New World reality through a fog of English terminology.”\(^\text{158}\) Almost in response to his critics among black intellectuals and artists, he emphasizes the role that African American have had in the potential of the language. “When I say ‘we,’” he explains, “I am quite conscious that we black people were already here causing all sorts of turbulence in the king’s town—in religion, music, science, and so on.”\(^\text{159}\) Since slavery, Ellison argues, African Americans participated in the transformation of the English language through their turbulent reactions—both in resistance and in artistic creation. In Ellisonian fashion, he refuses to portray slavery as a completely dehumanizing experience, instead emphasizing the humanity of slaves in America: “Yes, we were slaves, but we were living persons. We were chattel, but speaking chattel, chattel with a moral sense, chattel with an artistic sense and with a great capacity for creation.”\(^\text{160}\)

\(^{158}\) Ellison, “Roscoe Dunjee,” 457.
\(^{159}\) Ibid., 457.
\(^{160}\) Ibid., 458.
Ellison elevates the role of African Americans in the formation of American identity, whose presence within American culture created the “turbulence within the language,” the “conflict between profession” of democratic, egalitarian ideals and “practice” of chattel slavery tested the foundation of the “Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence,” the documents whose language depicted equality.\footnote{Ellison, “Roscoe Dunjee,” 458. Also consult David L. Carson’s 1973 interview, “Ralph Ellison: Twenty Years After” (Studies in American Fiction 1 [1973])—in it, one gets a sense of Ellison’s perspective on African American rootedness in the United States, despite the work of scholars like Herskovitz who assert that black Americans are actually displaced Africans: “…my problem with Herskovits is a problem that I have with many sociologists, and it was not that I denied that we were from Africa, but that the context—and the way he put it—seemed to imply that we needed to apologize—that we needed a past. I believed then, and I think I still believe, that one of the costs of being an American, a conscious American, is an acceptance of the fact that the past does not have the relevancy that it had in Europe. That’s the reason for democracy. And this goes on today. You get all of these apologies. You get Negro-Americans walking around top-heavy from trying to Africanize themselves when that which is authentically African in them has come down to us through more subtle ways, and we are not the only inheritors of it. I’m afraid white southerners inherit a hell of a lot of it too” (197). Later, Ellison challenges the notion that African Americans have compromised their identity through the forced acquisition of the English language is suspect: Carson: Can we go back to the American vernacular tradition for a moment? Ellison: That’s exactly where American independence lies. In this course I give down at NYU, it is one of the things I keep pointing out: through our vernacular speech we made a counter-assertion which at first we accepted in a self-effacing way, and then we grew conscious by affirmation and we realized that it was an / assertion of a separate identity. This is how our language, the American language, got started. We still remain respectful and bemused, some of us, and stand in awe of proper English usage, but it was the vernacular we used, always, when asserting our ‘felt’ identity. In this country the vernacular tradition is the basis of our revolutionary tradition. You know all this. Carson: And yet here in our city we teach prescriptive grammar in English-as-a-second-language courses. I wonder if we aren’t going about it in the wrong way? Ellison: Well, I’ve had to tell some critics: ‘Well alright, buddy, you’re telling me what this is all about, and you can’t even understand the language.’ This whole business of language and trying to assume an identity through linguistic style very often leads people to betray themselves and to lose their heritage (208-9).
“flexible instrumentality” by which he could alter American politics and identity in the United States. To Ellison, Dunjee’s heroism seems to be a result of his early emigration to Oklahoma, as he stresses Dunjee’s early arrival to Oklahoma in 1907, the “beginning of statehood,” and that he founded his newspaper in Oklahoma City with an “awareness of what newspapers were supposed to do, and what every good newspaper in this country has focused on.”162 Dunjee’s strength as an editorialist was an awareness of “what undercut the bright dream of America both then and now,” which was “the unwillingness to come to grips with a problem with which we had asserted we would come to grips.”163 Here, Ellison draws on his Oklahoman ethos, embracing the rugged identity of black Oklahomans who struggled with white racism in a way that was feasible in the West in a way that the North and South were not capable of doing due to its long-standing infrastructures of racism and Dunjee becomes Ellison’s linguistic hero, whose understanding of the “possibility of words made sacred” in the black press actually led to pioneering work in civil rights.

The first real inroads for desegregated education on the university level came out of Oklahoma City. Some of the first battles won against lynching—the Jess Hollins case and others—originated in Oklahoma. These battles were fought by a newspaperman who had the courage to meet his obligations as a reporter and editorialist. In these efforts the word was made flesh by a man who understood

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163 Ibid., 459.
what America was about better than most of his colleagues on the other side of the color line. He was in the great tradition of American journalism.\textsuperscript{164}

Instead of embracing the escapist aesthetic of black presses like \textit{Negro Digest/Black World} and other popular magazines, Ellison’s Dunjee, as a man with a deep sense of American identity as a black frontiersman in Oklahoma, actually understands America \textit{better} than anyone else, white or black. Ellison positions Dunjee as quintessential American rather than an African in the Americas, challenging the Pan-Africanist perspectives in vogue among the black presses and positing a reconfiguration of the materials of black identity in the United States. The purpose of a black press, according to Ellison, was not to police conceptions of blackness but instead to “instill democratic ideals” and “make cohesive the widely diversified experience of black people.”\textsuperscript{165}

Ellison’s sense of geography and diversity emerges in the final segment of his lecture. Perhaps recalling his unique upbringing in Oklahoma City, he channels his sense of American—and African American—cultural complexity by invoking the crucial relationship between geography and identity. “Being black,” he explains, “we sometimes forget that our experience is diversified. Our forefathers didn’t; they understood that slavery in North Carolina was a bit different from slavery in Alabama or Georgia or Mississippi.”\textsuperscript{166} Further deepening the geographical sense to a topographical level, he claims, “[t]hey understood that slavery on rocky ground was different from slavery near watercourses. They understood that slavery in the Delta

\textsuperscript{164} Ellison, “Roscoe Dunjee,” 459-60.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 460.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 460.
was different from slavery in the Tidewater country.”

The newspaper often worked to explain these differences—“Our need was to feel out the land,” Ellison writes of the black press, “to test the people, to project the possible, and to inspirit the ideals of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence into our own reality.” Ellison understood the capacity of language to create and distort reality, and it was a responsibility of the black press to convey and spread a more accurate version of American experience from the perspective of black Americans. The black newspaper, according to Ellison, “started out as a voice of moral accusation documenting the failure of American ideals,” and when it worked at the height of its editorial capacity, “the black press was also a rectifier of news reporting from the other side.”

In this, the black press inhabited a strong role for articulating the unique experience of black communities in a local setting, modifying and broadening the use of American language to better express the particularities of black American life—“[e]ditorially and in spirit,” the black press “has always belonged to the entire American experience.” Sticking to his principles, Ellison speaks of the black press as quintessentially American rather than incidentally or begrudgingly one. Drawing from his conception of the frontier, Ellison asserts that:

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168 Ibid., 461.
169 Ibid., 462. Ralph Ellison’s interview with Leon Forrest, “A Conversation with Ralph Ellison” (Muhammad Speaks [15 December 1972]), further explores the responsibility of the black press. “There is every reason why the Black newspapers should be cracking the great stories,” he tells Forrest. “We should be the people to affirm the people’s right to know… It was Adam Clayton Powell, not the reform Democrats—Mrs. Roosevelt’s group—who broke the power of Carmine De Sapio, in Tammy Hall (in New York). You don’t need the white newspapers to do this” (219).
170 Ibid., 462.
this country cannot be run without adequate reporting from all levels, directions, and frontiers… There is no sociology of ideas in this country. You cannot tell who is thinking what or where he gets his ideas.”¹⁷¹ This was vaguely understood during the Haitian Revolution early in the nineteenth century, when Southern governors and politicians became distraught because the ideas of the French Revolution had surfaced among the slaves.”¹⁷² By invoking the Haitian Revolution, Ellison begins to display the revolutionary potential of the black press as exhibited in Dunjee’s *Black Dispatch*:

The Oklahoma *Black Dispatch* launched sit-ins before they occurred in North Carolina. They started with grade-school children in Oklahoma City. I don’t know whether it was reported accurately, but that is what happened. The whole concept of changing segregation through appeals to the Supreme Court was present in Oklahoma City when I was a boy, and was propagated through the columns of a weekly newspaper.¹⁷³

Almost as if in response to the cries of Pan-Africanists who strove to create a black history by returning to the source in the mythic great African history, Ellison credits Dunjee for knowing black history in Oklahoma. Unlike people today, Ellison explains, “[w]e never complained about the issue of black history because Dunjee was always printing black history for us to read.”¹⁷⁴ Thanks to Dunjee, Ellison and other black Oklahoma City residents were aware of their deep-rootedness in American history—they were aware of their status as interpreters among Native

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¹⁷² Ibid., 462.
¹⁷³ Ibid., 462.
¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 463.
American tribes and as founders of black Oklahoma towns and cities, even if “most people living in them” did not “realize they were founded by black men. But we knew it, we knew it,” Ellison proudly claims.¹⁷⁵

For Ellison, Dunjee’s ability to work language as a “flexible instrumentality,” working in both the tradition of American journalism and as a pioneer in the Civil Rights movement, demonstrated Dunjee’s understanding of the mythic nature of American identity—and, by extension, the English language’s role in complicating and manipulating the myth toward more democratic ideals. “Somehow Roscoe Dunjee understood that American moves through myth—and by myth I don’t mean lies,” Ellison explains.¹⁷⁶ Rather than fleeing the work of myth, as his nationalist and Pan-African contemporaries seemed to have done, Ellison believed that black Americans were vital in the definition of American identity. He stresses that Dunjee “understood that heroic efforts and sacrifice are repeated by the nature of things. The problem is to keep up with this metamorphosis and find out who Frederick Douglass is today, who Nat Turner is today, who Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith are today, who Sojourner Truth is.”¹⁷⁷

Turning from his example of Dunjee and the Black Dispatch, Ellison turns his focus to American complexity and the need for the black press to provide this mythic dimension to language: “[w]e need great myths; we need to understand, translate, and interpret for ourselves the meaning of our experience… We look back and say, ‘That was slavery’ or ‘He was an Uncle Tom,’ while in our hearts we understand that we are by the nature of our circumstance a complex

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¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 463.
¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 463.
people, torn in many ways.” What was needed, Ellison argues, was not for the black press to isolate itself and reject the resources of local experience and American history but rather to work like jazzmen. Like jazz musicians, who “could take all the complexity of music and refine it, redesign it, restructure it to make their own statement,” black reporters (Ellison included) needed to “use our training, vision and passion to find paths of the entire nation.” “There are no second-class standards,” Ellison challenges. “We are the descendants of courageous, insightful people, people who had the tragic sense of life and how could spend themselves preciously. If we can’t look out upon this nation and foresee what problems are going to surface, no one can.” In what reads like an overt challenge to his critics, Ellison adds:

And if we think that we can walk away from problems or substitute easy rhetoric for analysis, description, and eloquence, we’re kidding ourselves. I’m not talking about political solutions; I’m talking about that much maligned, misused phrase, ‘telling it like it is.’ If you tell it like it is, everyone has to look and listen, because you will cut right down to the bark.

As Ellison concludes his lecture, he reminds his audience of black newspapermen that they have the unique capacity to describe the United States “in its fullness and complexity, with all its comic overtones and tragedy,” more deeply and accurately than any other American. With this challenge, Ellison restates his position within his cultural and intellectual milieu. Again, Ellison turns to black Oklahoma cultural history to suggest a broader, more complex view of the United

179 Ibid., 464.
180 Ibid., 464.
181 Ibid., 464.
182 Ibid., 464.
States that bestows agency to his peers, urging black writers and intellectuals of his time to use the “flexible instrumentality” of American English language not to reject the myth of American identity but rather to explore the potential of the myth—to, like jazz musicians, draw upon the traditions of American identity in order to develop the virtuosic ability to redefine, redesign and restructure the American myth so that it operates on the terms of its democratic ideals rather than despite them.
CONCLUSION

“Going to the Terr’tor”: Ellison’s Comedic Approach to History

What has yet to be said, though, is that black intellectuals and artists alike had plenty of reasons to be dissatisfied with their history as Americans. Those sympathetic to Black Nationalist and Pan-African historical perspectives were correct to critique their history, because at the moment, history didn’t include them in it. A glance at Oklahoma history books during the mid-20th century provides a damning portrayal of American historiography in which white scholars excluded African Americans from the literal pages of history. These comprehensive histories privileged the rollicking tales of the Land Run, the white pioneers’ interactions with Native Americans, and the stories of former governors, largely rendering African Americans silent, unrecorded, invisible within the state’s history. A 1941 history book compiled by the Writer’s Program of the Works Project Administration, *Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State*, devotes three paragraphs to African Americans in its 445 pages. It overlooked African American participation in Oklahoma culture completely, save for a single paragraph on Negro spirituals that made their way into Choctaw music – for example, it omits any mention of Zelia E. Breaux and her musical ensembles in an exhaustive list that mentions the Kiltie band, the Oklahoma Symphonic Choir, the MacDowell Club, and the Apollo Club. Edward Everett Dale and Morris L. Wardell’s *History of Oklahoma* only cites African Americans as percentages of towns.

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and in reference to specific African American schools and universities. Edwin C. McReynolds’s 1954 *Oklahoma: A History of the Sooner State* does marginally better, giving three pages to African Americans in Oklahoma – but two of them are dedicated to the horrors of the Tulsa Race Riot in 1921. McReynolds awkwardly mentions that the event brought “much unfavorable publicity to Oklahoma” and “[a]ctually there was enough blame for all concerned, and the good citizens of Tulsa were heartily ashamed of the affair,” writing about the event as if it were perhaps better to simply move on instead of dwelling on the tragic and violent affair.\(^{184}\) Even by 1977, African Americans had yet to make it into history books such as H. Wayne Morgan and Anne Hodges Morgan’s *Oklahoma: A Bicentennial History*.\(^{185}\)

It is clear that for African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s, the task of writing themselves into history was a hotly debated and immensely challenging theoretical problem. When Black Nationalists such as Malcolm X urged for African Americans to know their history, they asserted that black Americans, omitted from the pages of American history books, had two tasks: to assert Africa as a paradigm for history and to depict black history in America as a tragic occurrence. Stokely Carmichael – later Kwame Ture – and Charles V. Hamilton assert in the seminal 1967 text, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, that “[m]ore and more black Americans are developing this feeling” of a long history stemming from Africa.\(^{186}\) “They are becoming aware that they have a history which pre-dates their forced introduction to this


\(^{185}\) Another important Oklahoma history text that privileges the history of white Oklahomans is Angie Debo’s *Prairie City: The Story of an American Community* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944).

country… Too long they have been kept in submission by being told they had no culture, no manifest heritage, before they landed on the slave auction blocks in this country.”

For Carmichael and Hamilton, the teaching of African history was steeped in resistance – “If black people are to know themselves as a vibrant, valiant people, they must know their roots.”

Black Nationalist historians worked both to elevate African history and heritage and to challenge and critique the role of African Americans in the making of American history.

In effect, the process of consulting a deep and mythical past in Africa was a counterhistory, and in this work, the task extended into the work of the Black Arts. Scholar James Edward Smethurst asserts that the poetry and drama of the Black Arts was “often marked and linked by a sort of Edenic story of implicit paradise, fall, and potential salvation,” and works like Amiri Baraka’s Slave Ship adopted subjective and ritualized versions of historical experience in order to “get beyond history” that might take readers to a “common space outside European culture and European notions of history.”

In LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal’s 1968 Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing, James T. Stewart exhorts the black artist to “construct models which correspond to his own reality.” These models, including historiography,

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187 Ture and Hamilton, Black Power, 38.
188 Ibid., 38-9.
“must be non-white” since “[h]istorically and sociologically we are the rejected.” Smethurst additionally points out poet Jay Wright’s thematic use of “history as a sort of death” and Maulana Karenga’s emphasis on “new, ahistorical or prehistorical African traditions” as ways for black Americans to adopt “antihistory” or counterhistory to reject American history and culture.

On one hand, Black Arts-inflected historicism gave the resources to create agency, political power, and racial solidarity. Stories of Ethiopian and Egyptian royalty gave African Americans a sense of a history that helped to ameliorate the traumatic past of centuries of slavery and racial oppression, and by summoning a mythical Africa as motherland, Black Nationalists could establish a counterhistory that moved outside of the currents of white American history and attempted to both reject and transcend it. For many black artists and intellectuals, American history remained too violent, too tragic – a history of barbarity that was too heavy to celebrate.

Ellison hated this approach. He found it misguided. As he got older, Ellison began to see the humor in the movements. African Americans were no longer African, he realized from several trips to Europe and in encounters with Africans. They were American, and they had a stake in the composition and future of the country. Like the Black Nationalists, Ellison deeply believed in the power that history had on creating agency, political power, and solidarity – on the other hand, he felt that the Black Nationalists, by focusing on an African essentialism, had missed the mark. What African Americans needed was not to reject the fabric of American

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192 Ibid., 83-4.
identity and history but to claim for themselves what about American culture was theirs. The historical project, then, for Ellison, was to reclaim American history as a vernacularized process, one in which black Americans embody the quintessence of American potential.

So Ellison went back to the Oklahoma history books and began to narrate an history that had yet to be told – the story of black Oklahoma. Ellison narrated the stories of African Americans in his community, both exceptional and mundane participants in the black community, and began to create a Black Oklahoma cultural history, one that instead of marginalizing African Americans in Oklahoma history and culture, affirmed the essentiality of African Americans in American culture and identity. Ellison tells the stories of people he admired – people like his principal Inman E. Page, music teacher Zelia E. Breaux, jazz musicians Charlie Christian and Jimmy Rushing, journalist Roscoe Dunjee, and lawyer W. H. Slaughter – who all played personal roles in his life but also played significant roles in altering the fabric of American identity, culture, and democracy, and he raises them as representative men and women who told the story of African Americans and the role they played in shaping American identity. By doing this, Oklahoma became a crucial rhetorical device for Ralph Ellison that both critiqued Black Nationalist historicism but also posited a restorative and restorative view of the crucial cultural and political role of African Americans within a country that struggled to give them a voice. Ellison’s Oklahoma writings ought to be seen not as mere nostalgia on the part of Ellison, but as part of his arguments he had made all along – that African American experience was immensely complex and not easily essentialized into a single political (or even racial) category; that American culture was best thought as a vernacular process that blended European influences
with Black ones, high-class influences with low-class ones; and that ultimately, Americanness was a mystery that was worth exploring.

*Comic Oklahoma*

It seems like the coordinators of Brown’s Ralph Ellison Festival in 1979 were ready to accept Ellison’s Oklahoman perspective as a unique and effective way of being a black American. Brown’s Winter 1980 *Carleton Miscellany*, published after the Ralph Ellison Festival, primarily focused on Ellison’s legacy as writer and intellectual. The editor (probably Michael Harper) credits Ellison for emphasis on regional identity and frontier sensibility and its potential for a sense of artistic identity—“for Ralph Ellison,” he writes, “goin’ to the territory’ meant more than that flight to the Indian ‘nations’ recounted so often and with such relish in the tales of fugitive slaves: to Ellison it meant also the movement toward imaginative freedom this festival celebrates” (7). A dedication in the Winter 1980 *Miscellany* lists Ellison as “frontiersman, folklorist, comic story-teller, musicologist, photographer, sculptor, novelist, cultural essayist, and trustee of American constitutionalism,” whose “stance in confronting our swiftly changing world is in the best tradition of the explorers, the thinker-tinkerers of geography and jazz. [His] narrative techniques meld vernacular and classical modes with elegance, conscientiousness, and healing power” (8).193

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193 This poem by Michael Harper is just amazing and a really cleverly allusive poem to Ellison’s entire oeuvre and artistic position throughout his life. Here it is as a footnote:

“Going to the Territory: Icons of Geography of the Word: A Meditation on the Life and Times of Ralph Waldo Ellison.” By Michael Harper

*Ethical schizophrenia* you called it:
The editors of Brown’s *Carleton Miscellany* virtuosically provide an important framework for examining Ellison’s historic and artistic sense, which seems to have increasingly turned toward the comic as a way of explaining American history and movements of democracy.

Now, we’ll return to Ellison, who has been patiently standing at the podium of Brown University’s 1979 Ralph Ellison Festival, where he’s been ready to tell us a few jokes.

*“Going to the Territory”*

Like many of the positions that Ellison had developed over his career, one can trace his interest in the comic back to *Invisible Man* and earlier in short stories like the Buster and Riley

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come back to haunt the cattle drive,
Indians coming into blacktown
because it’s home; your father’s will
lies uncontested, his blood welling up in oil;
‘Deep Second’ hones its marks in Jimmy Rushing;
Charlie Christian’s father leads the blind.

Such instruments arrange themselves
at Gettysburg, at Chickamauga;
the whites in Tulsa apologize
in the separate library,
all the books you dreamed of,
fairy tales and Satchmo jesting
to the court of St. James,
infirmary is the saints already home.

The hip connected to the thigh
converges in tuberculosis; your mother’s
knees spank the planks of rectory,
your father’s image sanctified
in documents, in acts won out
on hallelujahs of ‘A’ train,
nine Scottsboro Boys spun upward
over thresholds of Duke’s dance.

Dance and mask collect their greasepaint,
idioms stand on bandstand, in stove-pipe pants of riverman, gambling shoes,
gold-toothed venom vexing sundown,
the choir at sunrise-service cleansing
a life on a jim crow funeral car.
series or in “King of the Bingo Game.” But in the late 70s and early 80s, Ellison returned to a serious appreciation of the presence of the comic on the stage of American history. In “An Extravagance of Laughter,” Ellison explains that “Aesop and Uncle Remus have taught us that comedy is a disguised form of philosophical instruction; and especially when it allows us to glimpse the animal instincts operating beneath the surface of our civilized affectations.”194 But even more than that, “by allowing us to laugh at that which is normally un-laughable, comedy provides an otherwise unavailable clarification that calms the clammy trembling which ensues whenever we pierce the veil of conventions that guard us from the basic absurdity of the human condition” (146). For Ellison, whose experience growing up in Oklahoma presented itself in harsh contradictions, amusing complexities, and absurd upheavals of tradition (often in the unexpected ways that black Americans embraced the conventional or made it their own), a comedic view was necessary in order to make sense of life as a black boy in Oklahoma. In “A Portrait of Inman Page” and “Going to the Territory,” Ellison brings a comedic voice to the stage at Brown in order to stitch together the life of a black Oklahoma youth to attempt to provide a restorative vision of American history.

In “A Portrait of Inman Page,” his first of two lectures given in response to Brown’s gift of the portrait of his former administrator, Ellison frames the unexpected gift in terms of the comic. “Now, I don’t know whether Dr. Page indulged in the old American pastime of practical joking when he was a student here,” Ellison explains, “but I do know that practical jokes can be used as agencies of instruction, and that they can indeed be calculated to challenge one’s wits

and test one’s alertness.” For Ellison, jokes can serve as a means of “elevating the lowly for a brief moment to the level of their superiors,” and help to make sense of the “mysterious processes of time and authority,” or of history and power embedded in the fabric of American identity. For Ellison, the joke was that despite efforts of whites (and blacks) to segregate, the United States had been integrating on a cultural level since before its inception. Page himself becomes a somewhat comic figure through his sheer will to transcend a world that strove to limit his opportunity—but more importantly, he complicated distinct notions of “‘white culture’ and a ‘black culture’” by moving between the two, synthesizing as he went—as a freed slave, he received a “New England education” and moved to teach in an all-black school, leading lectures where he taught letters of St. Paul and made “the language of Shakespeare and the King James version of the Bible resound within us in such ways that its majesty and beauty seemed as natural and as normal coming from one of our own as an inspired jazz improvisation or an eloquently sung spiritual.”

Again, it was Oklahoma that became the focal point for Ellison’s exploration of the inadequacies of dividing culture into distinctly “black” and “white,” and in “Going to the Territory,” given the day after “Portrait of Inman Page,” he uses Oklahoma for its “flexible instrumentality” (to borrow the phrase from his descriptions of the vernacular) in articulating the

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196 Ibid., 114. 
197 Ellison, “Going to the Territory,” 137.
joke of identity in America. In “Going to the Territory,” Ellison further develops the sense of American identity and history as comic by conceiving the nation as a public stage:

But no matter how we choose to view ourselves in the abstract, in the world of work and politics Americans live in a constant state of debate and contention. And we do so no matter what kinds of narrative, oral or written, are made of our common experience. American democracy is a most dramatic form of social organization… Ellison continues this dramatic framing, repurposing his famous scene in Invisible Man by explaining, “...a battle-royal of conflict of interests appears to be basic to our conception of freedom, and the drama of democracy proceeds through a warfare of words and symbolic actions by which we seek to advance our interests while resolving our differences.” However, the challenge of conceiving the drama of American democracy as necessarily tragic is that it orients a narrative and symbolism in which “winners of a given contention are likely to forget the tragic fact that no human victory can be total,” and therefore only concern themselves with “the fruits of victory” while the “losers are left festering with the issues that are left unresolved.” For Ellison, a view of American democracy and history as tragedy tended to neglect the victories and contributions of African Americans in the United States, providing the extremely important example that in the conflict of American identity, parties tended to overlook “the sharing of

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198 Of course, Ellison tells the story of an accident on the stage of Douglass High School during an assembly that resulted in Page and Ellison swinging from the curtains in near-melee fashion, but I don’t have time to go into this story.
200 Ibid., 6.
201 Ibid., 6.
cultural traditions by groups of widely differing ethnic origins” and “the blending and metamorphosis of cultural forms out of which the definitive elements of our culture are constantly emerging.” Ellison then challenges the essentialist tendency of thinkers of ethnic authenticity, claiming:

We even ignore the fact that the blending of bloodlines which began before the founding of our nation has produced a racial type which exists neither in Europe or Africa. It is as though we dread to acknowledge our complex, pluralistic identity, and as a result we find ourselves stumbling upon our true national identity under circumstance when we least expect to do so.

It seems that Ellison conceived “Going to the Territory” as a comic response to this tragic view, and he draws from his Oklahoma experience to demonstrate the unexpected and incongruous processes that comprise the formation of culture and identity. For Ellison, Oklahoma was a place where the unexpected was probable, and he remembers his childhood linguistic play that prepared him to communicate in a rapidly shifting society. Language itself, with its conflicts between the “vernacular and standard speech… was a source of comedy which sharpened our eye for the incongruous.” For Ellison and his Oklahoma City friends, “[v]erbal comedy was a way of confronting social ambiguity,” and he speculates that as children, “we realized nevertheless that American society contained a built-in joke, and we were aware… that the joke was in many ways centered in our condition.” For Ellison, comedy was a way of viewing

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202 Early manuscript of “Going to the Territory,” 7.
203 Ibid., 7.
204 Ellison, “Going to the Territory,” 138.
205 Ibid., 138.
American identity that aided in providing a clearer sense of the complexities of culture and allows Americans to “contemplate those aspects of our experience that have become unspeakable.”

Speaking the unspeakable, telling the stories of a vanishing history, finding the lower frequencies—remained Ellison’s most consistent contribution to American culture, and he found in his Oklahoma childhood mythic figures, powerful memories, and thematic potential in a place where a comic framework might be a restorative counterpart to the tragic sense which seemed to come most readily for Ellison’s contemporaries. Ellison proceeds to tell the stories of black Oklahomans who experienced the sheer incongruity of success despite limitations. Oklahoma’s geography—one of Ellison’s favorite topics—emerges in the lecture to represent a state that powerfully embodied the symbolic paradox of American identity: as a place where black Americans could risk their lives for the hope of freedom:

But freedom was also to be found in the West of the old Indian Territory. Bessie Smith gave voice to this knowledge when she sang of ‘Goin’ to the Nation, Going to the Terr’tor’,” and it is no accident that much of the symbolism of our folklore is rooted in the image of geography. For the slaves had learned through the repetition of group experience that freedom was to be attained through geographical movement, and that freedom required one to risk his life against the unknown. And geography as a symbol of the unknown included not only places,

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Ellison, “Going to the Territory,” 139.
but conditions relating to their racially defined status and the complex mystery of a society from which they’d been excluded.  

Ellison recalls the Oklahoma where he grew up as replete with heroic black figures who managed to transcend the limitations of racial discrimination, getting the last laugh by upturning fixed ideas of racial identity in his home state. He remembers Professor Johnson C. Whittaker, a “white black man,” who had been appointed to West Point but whose career “ended in a racial attack during which he was seized by other cadets who tied him to his cot and notched his ear,” making him an unfit for West Point graduates who had to attain the standard of being “physically perfect.” However, “the Army’s loss was to be the Territory’s gain,” Ellison explains, since he became the principal at Douglass High School, introducing “elements of West Point discipline and military style to young Oklahoma Negroes.” For Ellison, Professor Whittaker was an example of the absurdity of racial discrimination—a man who embodied in his skin color the ambiguity of race yet who could find opportunity in Oklahoma to further enrich students’ sense of identity. For Ellison, Oklahoma became an unlikely magnet for talented and visionary African Americans, including his music teacher, Zelia E. Breaux, Inman Page’s daughter, whose “impact upon our community was in some ways as profound as that of her father” by bringing the musical “cultural artifacts” of European tradition—orchestral performance, musical theory and appreciation, and dance—to black Oklahoma students. Ellison speaks of Breaux’s contributions to his sense of identity in terms of comedy, remembering that Breaux would teach Douglass

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208 “Long before it became the State of Oklahoma the Territory had been a sanctuary for runaway slaves who sought there the protection of the Five Great Indian Nations.” Ibid., 132.
209 Ibid., 133.
210 Ibid., 133.
students how to dance European folk dances. “As would be expected,” he relates, “there were those who found the sight of young Negroes dancing European folk dances absurd, if not comic, but their prejudiced eyes missed the point of this exercise in democratic education.”

Ellison views Breaux’s influence as one that not only provided appreciation of “cultures of fellow Americans whose backgrounds lay in Europe,” but that also gave black students a chance to augment their sense of identity—“Thanks to Mrs. Breaux,” he considers, “we were being introduced to one of the most precious of American freedoms, which is our freedom to broaden our personal culture by absorbing the cultures of others.”

Like his appraisals of Charlie Christian and of Roscoe Dunjee, Ellison views the contributions of Inman E. Page, Professor Whittaker, and Zelia E. Breaux as people who, in the territory of Oklahoma, helped him to appreciate the complexity of American experience. These figures provided Ellison with a sense of the comic, a canny ability to laugh at the unexpected and to appreciate the ambiguity of what it might mean to be American.

Returning to Ellison’s “Cold Oklahoma Negro Eye”

In short, Ellison’s “cold Oklahoma Negro eye” needs to be reexamined a final time. Like Ellison’s perspective on jazz improvisation and on the importance of the vernacular in the American language, Ellison’s comic perspective of the drama of American history turns out not to be cold in terms of a harsh, impersonal, critical tone but rather more like a salve to cool the fever of political and intellectual hostility that began in the late 1950s and grew in intensity over

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212 Ibid., 136.
the following two decades. Ellison’s view of American culture, identity, and history sought to
give agency to black Americans and to remind that despite centuries of slavery and
discrimination, there was much to celebrate about being black in America and that the
contributions of African Americans had been critical shareholders in shaping the cultural identity
of the United States.

There remains much critical and scholarly work to be done in examining Ralph Ellison’s
Oklahoma writings and in his artistic debt to the culture of the Southwest. Ellison wrote
numerous other essays and short stories that focused on Oklahoma, and a thoughtful analysis of
these might provide more clarity on Ellison’s political and artistic views both in *Invisible Man*
and beyond. Additionally, in light of the research I’ve done here, especially regarding the ways
Ellison’s Oklahoma upbringing shaped his perspectives on art, it would seem to be useful to
analyze Ellison’s fiction to determine in what ways the Southwest manifests in his fiction, both
in his short stories and in *Invisible Man*. Lastly, Ellison’s Oklahoma essays and lectures—and
the way they help to critique the militant views of Black Nationalists and Pan-Africanists—ought
to provide a more clear framework from which to examine Ellison’s artistic principles that may
have directed the work of his unfinished novel-in-progress. I suspect that Ellison’s Oklahoma
essays might have emerged in tandem and in concert with the development of his second novel,
but this might merit an entire scholarly work altogether.

However, as I have argued, Ellison’s Oklahoma writings and lectures ought to be seen as
essential readings for understanding his perspectives on culture, history, and the role of the artist,
and clearly, Ellison found Oklahoma—along with the heroic black leaders of his Oklahoma City
community—to be an extremely useful thematic device from which to critique artistic and
intellectual movements that tended to eschew the vibrant cultural and political contributions of black Americans in favor of art and history that turned its back entirely on the American scene and focused instead on a long and mythic history oriented around Africa and isolationism. But just as importantly, Ellison’s Oklahoma writings turned out to be some of the earliest contributions to black cultural history in Oklahoma. In this sense, it may be useful to think of Ellison as one of the first black Oklahoma historians, a pioneer that by recording his memories of the black community in Oklahoma City ended up making visible the unwritten stories of his home state. For Ellison, it was this unwritten history that might provide the agency and power for future black Americans to see new methods of viewing themselves as members of American culture.

As concludes his speech at Brown University to a sympathetic and receptive crowd, it is fitting that he returns to the theme of forgotten history, as he reminds the audience,

What is more, our unwritten history is always at work in the background to provide us with clues as to how this process of self-definition worked in the past. Perhaps if we learn more of what has happened and why it happened, we’ll learn more of who we really are. And perhaps if we learn more about our unwritten history, we won’t be so vulnerable to the capriciousness of events as we are today.\(^213\)

Ellison, remaining true to his principles, knew that the stories he told about Oklahoma were important for his own navigation through a country that had both admired him and rejected him for his views on politics and the responsibility of the artist. For Ellison, the work of uncovering

\(^{213}\) Ellison, “Going to the Territory,” 144.
history as it was—its tragedy and comedy; in its vernacular and standard forms; in its odd ability
to, like jazz improvisation, transcend its medium while remaining faithful to earlier tradition—
was deeply rooted in his Oklahoma past and heritage, an identity he was proud to assume.
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PREFACE


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CONCLUSION


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