Introduction: Ellison’s Joking

Writing of late 1990s Hollywood films (*Independence Day, Men In Black*) in which black men and white bond in the midst of the greater dangers represented by alien invasions and incipient cosmic disasters, Paul Gilroy in *Against Race* (2000) finds them expressing a “real and widespread hunger for a world that is undivided by the petty differences we retain and inflate by calling them racial.” A few lines later his book concludes by posing a utopian challenge to bring visions of “planetary humanity from the future” into the present and reconnect them with “democratic and cosmopolitan traditions.”

If in our global, transnational age the renewed promise of cosmopolitan democracy has emerged as an animating ideal of popular, political, and academic culture, this is a way of saying that we are only now beginning to catch up with Ralph Waldo Ellison (1913–94).

Of all American writers, Ellison most forcefully took up the challenge of thinking beyond the imprisoning reductiveness of race and of liberating the cosmopolitan energies of democracy. It is apt that Ellison has long been ahead of us, for he found art and utopian thinking intimately aligned, describing the “true function” of both politics and fiction at their most serious as a “thrust toward a human ideal” which demands “negating the world of things as given.” Only then is the “potential” for effecting change possible. Gilroy leaves Ellison unacknowledged, an absence that perhaps suggests that the canonical (and simplistic) image of the novelist as a politically disengaged mandarin and high modernist still muffles the complicated actuality of Ellison’s thinking, much of it devoted, in fact, to exploring how, in American democracy, aesthetics and politics are entangled.

The *Cambridge Companion* aims to be a timely corrective. This volume will recover the urgency of Ellison’s vision for the contemporary moment and reveal new dimensions of Ellison’s art as it radiates out from the epochal *Invisible Man* (1952) into new domains – technology, political theory, law, photography, music, religion – and new texts. Since his death several volumes have appeared, including the magisterial *Collected Essays* (1995),
the compelling fragment *Juneteenth* (1999), and the raucous, wonderfully bracing exchange of letters between Ellison and Albert Murray published as *Trading Twelves* (2000). The *Collected Essays* of nearly 900 pages, reprinting Ellison’s *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986), includes eleven uncollected pieces and nine unpublished ones, and establishes definitively Ellison’s stature as that rare figure – both a major novelist and literary/cultural critic. Ellison’s achievement in criticism and in fiction is virtually unique among postwar American prose writers; for precedents one must turn to the creative and critical work of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound in the early decades of the century.

In enlarging the Ellison corpus, these posthumously published books will give new impetus to the effort to unsettle received wisdom, particularly the various static images affixed to Ellison over the decades. Lambasted by the Black Arts movement of the 1960s as apolitical, canonized by white liberals and neoconservatives as an icon of blandly affirmative Emersonian individualism, Ellison has suffered both caricatures. In an attempt to retire these simplifications, this introduction sketches the distinctive logic of Ellison’s sensibility as it informs the entwined dimensions of his aesthetic, cultural and political thought. Like all great writers, Ellison has his own ground rules, so to speak, which implicitly ask that we set aside or at least defer familiar moorings, standards and assumptions, the better to enter his imaginative universe with a minimum defensiveness. This relaxing of defenses is particularly important for Ellison because, like Emerson, W. E. B. Du Bois and John Dewey before him, he conceives democracy and art not simply as doctrine, or knowledge, or contemplation, but as strenuous, risky ways of acting in the world.

Ellison’s namesake Ralph Waldo Emerson noted in his journal that “flowing is the secret of things & no wonder the children love masks, & to trick themselves in endless costumes, & be a horse, a soldier, a parson, or a bear, and older delight in theatricals.” If “flowing is the secret of things” – of nature and of matter and of humans’ mimetic faculty – it finds its apotheosis in Emerson’s relentlessly expanding early nineteenth-century America. He looks around to observe that “new arts destroy the old. See the investment of capital in aqueducts, made useless by hydraulics; fortifications by gunpowder; roads and canals, by railways; sails, by steam; steam by electricity” (175). Emerson’s insight into the ubiquity of metamorphic flowing in his country’s natural, human, and social order echoes in Ellison’s famous claim (apropos of the Boston tea party when Americans disguised as Indians dumped tea into Boston Harbor) that “when American life is most American it is apt to be most theatrical.” Ever since, “the mobility of the society created in this limitless space has encouraged the use of the mask for
good and evil.” Masking, Ellison writes, is a joking “play upon possibility and ours is a society in which possibilities are many” (*Collected Essays* 107–8).

But if theatricality is second nature, Americans also deny it, famously insisting on a pristine Adamic innocence. Masking elicits denial perhaps because it shatters the cherished belief that governs the epistemology of American innocence – the transparent fit between appearance and reality. Recall, for instance, that impeccable individualist Isabel Archer at the start of *The Portrait of a Lady*; her fondest principle is that “she would be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was.” But with the advent of masking, as Ellison notes, at least two things intrude between “appearance and reality” – “ironic awareness of the joke,” and “perhaps even an awareness of the joke that society is man’s creation, not God’s” (108). In other words, masking plays havoc with transparent self-identity, precipitating a fall into knowledge of and responsibility for complexity and history. In flight from both, in flight from the destabilizing, denaturalizing “joke” inscribed in their country’s motley social and cultural order, Americans find refuge in fantasies of purism, of cloistered autonomy. These are ratified by absolute authority (God or Nature) that also sanctions as immutable truth the rule of invidious racial hierarchy and ethno-racial separatism.

Repressing self-division, we also have divided ourselves from each other and sapped the strengths of democracy. Fulfillment of democracy’s dynamic possibilities is continually deferred to the future, while the present remains stunted in the obdurate reflexes of American racism, leaving the citizenry mired in disavowals and fears of black and white fraternity. As an antidote, Ellison would in effect reinvigorate the capacity for joking, for improvising new forms, so that Americans can begin to come alive to the fact that the nation’s population and cultural life has always been a vibrantly miscegenated affair, mirroring the “fluid, pluralistic turbulence of the democratic process” (*Collected Essays* 500). What is required is psychic, social and political renovation. In making us aware of the urgent need for change, Ellison’s art is desperately serious joking, nothing less than a demand to embrace the anarchic energies of freedom within the variegated American scene.

Ellison, like Emerson, has always regarded trust in certitude, in the fixed and permanent, as little more than surrender to ideological conformity of any stripe; as he says of efforts to define America, to do so “is to impose unity upon an experience that changes too rapidly for linguistic or political exactitude” (*Collected Essays* 511). Forgoing the illusory comforts of exactitude, Ellison’s body of work from first to last solicits the power of the tentative and improvised especially as expressed in a nearly balletic
suppleness that embodies “a slightly different sense of time,” one in which “you’re never quite on the beat … Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes … and you slip into the breaks and look around.”

This famous passage from the prologue to Invisible Man should be read as a signature moment in Ellison’s thought; focusing on action rather than identity, it summons the subtle poetry of invisibility as the stance of maximum power, be it aesthetic or athletic (the reefer smoking narrator is, after all, describing Louis Armstrong bending his trumpet into a “beam of lyrical sound” and recalling a memory of a prizefighter suddenly slipping inside his opponent’s sense of time). What Philip Roth in The Human Stain (a novel that has been called a homage to Invisible Man) esteems as the capacity for “being game in the face of the worst. Not courageous. Not heroic. Just game,” suggests something of the craftiness for slipping into the breaks and looking around.

To be game is also in effect the advice of the narrator’s grandfather, the “odd old guy” and former slave who causes all “the trouble” by his deathbed whisper. He says: “keep up the good fight … our life is a war and I’ve been a traitor all my born days … Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins …” (16)

If Ellison could be said to have a creed (though this would seem to require the surrender to exactitude against which I have been arguing) both of these gnomic passages might be said to distill it. But it is a self-consuming creed for it imparts not a portable summary of beliefs but instead unsettling riddles that demand of their recipients an imperative to be game, to remain in agile off-balance alertness. The effect on the narrator is to keep him perpetually “running,” as his anxious dream discloses at the end of Chapter One. The demand to keep running, to keep weaving in and out of time, and to keep your head in the lion’s mouth, encourage the discipline needed for living in wartime, as does Ellison’s favorite oxymoron of “antagonistic cooperation.” All are modes of survival in a baffling world of transition where nothing solid is its solid self. This world is better known as American democracy, replete with “mysteries and pathologies”; but even the invisible can negotiate them and act politically, as grandfather’s advice implicitly insists. “Play the game but don’t believe in it,” counsels the brilliant, deranged Vet from the Golden Day. Or, as Ellison said years later, “grasp the mysterious possibilities generated by … our freedom within unfreedom” (Collected Essays 531).

Because they are never quite on the beat, these teasingly paradoxical statements spark thought in the reader, and the exertions of thinking are especially vital to uphold against “the feverish industry dedicated to telling Negroes who and what they are” (Collected Essays 57). Ellison turns his
back on the industry (he has the social sciences, particularly sociology, in mind) which works overtime to make the production of racial and ethnic identity a basic instrument in keeping US culture stratified and atomized, a permanent Jim Crow regime of segregation in effect. He opts for an alternative outlook whose impatience with “separate but equal” derives from the unassailable recognition that America comprises “motley mixtures of people”: “In this particular country even the most homogenous gatherings of people are mixed and pluralistic” (Collected Essays 500). And not only mongrel, but masked: “the declaration of an American identity meant the assumption of a mask” (107). Once one grants the American reality of masking, of impurity, of motley mixtures, once one grants, that is, the fact that “whatever the efficiency of segregation as a sociopolitical arrangement, it has been far from absolute on the level of culture,” then the repressive demands of identity enforced by hierarchies grounded in the fetish of blood, ownership and origin become stymied and precarious (163). What emerges is the primacy of practice which entails improvising evolving strategies of stylish being in the world. As his close friend Albert Murray once said, “anytime you’re talking about conduct, you’re talking about culture,” and cultural conduct is above all “a process of stylization; and what it stylizes is experience... It is a way of sizing up the world, and so, ultimately, and beyond all else, a mode and medium of survival” (qtd Posnock 201).

Keeping in mind Ellison’s fascination with practice, particularly with what he calls “the American compulsion to improvise upon the given,” will help loosen the grip of the received critical wisdom regarding Invisible Man – its (alleged) devotion to that familiar old chestnut American identity, be it expressed in the existential anguish of invisibility, or the narrator’s quest for self-discovery. The identity theme, however venerable, is ultimately too flat and static, too pacific, to engage Ellison’s passion for art’s joking, recalcitrant vigor: “it is in the very spirit of art to be defiant of categories” he says (Collected Essays 514). And he inscribes defiance at the start of his novel, in grandfather’s deathbed riddle which henceforward will itch at the narrator’s ears and the reader’s, and in overlaying urban realism with the surreal, disorienting prologue’s bending of time and space.

Instead of affirming the preordained or familiar, be it in regards to literary genre or anything else, Ellison pursues the incalculable “futuristic drama of American democracy” (Collected Essays 851). This drama conditions American art and identity, an inextricability that explains why the existential or “identity” reading of Invisible Man is inadequate: biased to the inward and psychological, this reading ignores the political, thus sundering what Ellison entangles. To represent a “society caught in the process of being improvised out of the democratic ideal” requires that the artist cultivate a
certain disposition, that he/she “hang loose and try to be as receptive, resourceful and as encompassing in capturing truth as his larger subject is in evading it”(Collected Essays 466).

The writer’s stance of alert flexibility encourages him or her to fashion prose supple and eloquent enough to take the approximate measure of the “experience of human beings living in a world of turbulent transition” and thereby train readers to become “conscious, articulate citizens” (Collected Essays 444, 482). Like Whitman before him, Ellison makes reading a “gymnast’s struggle” (the poet’s phrase) to sharpen minds for civic responsibility. Coming to learn to live in this world, the narrator of Invisible Man discovers, is to learn “to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties” (580). Joining author and reader are characters endowed with eloquence – Ellison names Henry James’s “super subtle fry” as exemplars of “ideal creatures” who were “unlikely to turn up in the world” but whose powers of articulation project a community of “human possibility.” Here “the interests of art and democracy converge” (Collected Essays 482). Fiction, says Ellison, is a “mere game of ‘as if,’ therein lies its true function and its potential for effecting change.” The community brought into being by literary experience is a “fictional vision of an ideal democracy” because it scrambles hierarchy and authority by, for instance, letting young boys and escaped slaves who are afloat together on a raft disclose “transcendent truth and possibilities” (482).

The aesthetic community, wherein is cultivated the requisite dexterity to negotiate the democratic “whirlpool,” stands in utopian rebuke of the fact that the “rich possibilities of democracy” are stunted by “glaring inequities” and “unfulfilled promises” (504). Compounding these problems is the resurgence, beginning in the 1970s, of the “feverish industry” of identity with its “heady evocations of European, African and Asian backgrounds accompanied by chants proclaiming the inviolability of ancestral blood. Today [Ellison is writing in the late 1970s] blood magic and blood thinking, never really dormant in American society, are rampant among us” (505). These are the kinds of remarks that earned Ellison the ire of black nationalists and, later, proponents of multiculturalism. But it is important to specify precisely what Ellison is criticizing. His target is not the familiar conservative one that decries ethnic consciousness as a violation of the sanctity of American unity.

Rather, Ellison’s complaint is that blood thinking is an anxious, defensive response to the radical challenge of American democracy. In the face of its demands American citizens are often overwhelmed, so they “seek psychic security from within” their “inherited divisions” (503). “We cling desperately to our own familiar fragment of the democratic rock, and from such fragments we confront our fellow Americans” (500). The result is that “deep
down, the American condition is a state of unease” (504). We “shy from confronting our cultural wholeness,” says Ellison in the crucial essay “The Little Man at Chehaw Station” from which I have been quoting, “because it offers no easily recognizable points of rest, no facile certainties as to who, what, or where (culturally or historically) we are. Instead the whole is always in cacaphonic motion” (504). Before this spectacle of barely controlled chaos which “eludes accepted formulations,” (512), proponents of ethnic and racial identity stand flatfooted, refusing to enter into the cacaphonic rhythm, or slip into the breaks and look around. To do so, to relish rather than retreat from the American “vortex,” requires a psychic elasticity equivalent to the reefer induced bending of time and space that the narrator experiences in the prologue. Perhaps those who advocate blood magic and blood thinking would loosen up after a bit of reefer. Then they would be ready to set aside their tribal armor and play the “appropriation game,” enter into the volatile mix of clashing styles and become “American joker[s]” (511, 507).

The ludic element in Ellison’s thought comes to the fore as a mimetic response to the volatile, motley mess of American culture, what he calls our chaotic “unity-within-diversity.” To enter into this mess produces “comedy,” says Ellison, both conscious and unconscious, and makes the American a joker. He gives us an exemplary instance: recalling the sight of a dashiki-clad blue-eyed mulatto in English riding boots and “fawn-colored riding breeches,” with a homburg on his “huge Afro-coiffed head,” who has just climbed out of a new Volkswagen Beetle “decked out with a gleaming Rolls-Royce radiator,” Ellison comments: “whatever his politics, sources of income, hierarchal status and such, he revealed his essential ‘Americanness’ in his freewheeling assault upon traditional forms of the Western aesthetic. Whatever identity he presumed to project, he was exercising an American freedom . . . Culturally he was an American joker,” playing “irreverently upon symbolism of status, property and authority” (506–7). In other words, the Americanness of this “American joker” is found not in a prior affirmation of essence, a fact of descent, but instead is derived from his playful act of assemblage. The joker achieves identity through his improvised pastiche. Decades before hip-hop, Ellison was asserting the centrality of its formal exuberance, if not its regressive content.

Blood magic and blood thinking abruptly short-circuit the game of improvisation with a party-pooping purism that is a symptom, says Ellison, of “the current form of an abiding American self-distrust . . . a gesture of democracy-weary resignation” (508). Against the exhaustion and unease of those who subscribe to various ideologies of American purity – be it Adamic innocence, “nature’s nation,” American exceptionalism, Jim Crow racism and Jim Crow (separatist) multiculturalism – Ellison sets the vitality of American impurity
embodied in the motor of the culture—“the appropriation game.” Everyone played it. Pilgrims played it with Indians, Africans with the Hebrew Bible, whites with African-Americans and vice-versa, all busy taking over useful elements from the other and remaking them for their own purposes:

It is here, if we would but recognize it, that elements of the many available tastes, traditions, ways of life, and values that make up the total culture have been ceaselessly appropriated and made their own ... by groups and individuals to whose own background they are historically alien. Indeed, it was through this process of cultural appropriation (and misappropriation) that Englishmen, Europeans, Africans, and Asians became Americans. (510)

To view American culture as an “appropriation game,” an approach pioneered in the 1930s by Constance Rourke, is to expose the myth of American innocence and its romance of autogenesis. Instead of an innocent, Ellison was a “blues-toned laugh-at-wounds who included himself in his indictment of the human condition,” as he once described the poised and stoical voice whose cadences he sought to render in the prose of his novel (481). In accepting complicity, Ellison means to break the spell of innocence, much as Philip Roth would do in his insistence that the human stain is indwelling, in everyone: “there’s no other way to be here. Nothing to do with disobedience ... it’s why all the cleansing is a joke. A barbaric joke at that. The fantasy of purity is appalling. It’s insane.”

It also tends to foment violence because purists tend to preserve their purity by producing difference as degraded, dangerous otherness, a stigmatizing that often leads to scapegoating of sacrificial victims to fortify the boundary of self and other. This is one reason Nietzsche said that the only idea of culture that is not deadly understands culture as a “certain ‘style’ of life, not given by nature or destined by history but formed of an assemblage of living institutions.” Commenting on this, Geoffrey Hartman observes that Nietzsche’s (and Ellison’s we could add) notion of culture as assemblage and style is a “beneficial and peaceable rather than militant concept [that] has become rare in modernity.”

The fact that cultures are made and sustained by ongoing acts of cosmopolitan thievery, as the black minister and thinker Alexander Crummell noted in the late nineteenth century, has always been a scandal in a culture of romantic individualism with its passion for personal authenticity and genuineness. Emerson, the supposed prophet of that culture but more accurately its subtlest critic, said “every man is a quotation from all his ancestors” and “every house is a quotation out of all forests and mines and stone-quarries” (Emerson 319). And he goes on in the same essay, “Quotation and Originality,” to quote Goethe’s remark: “What would remain to me if this art of appropriation were derogatory to genius?” (329). This Emerson,
who finds “flowing [is] the secret of things,” and who says “there is no pure originality,” groups with Ellison and with Crummell and with Henry James. In 1867 the novelist noted that “to be an American is a great preparation for culture . . . we can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically etc.) claim our property wherever we find it.” Together this appropriately motley crew forms a counter tradition of cosmopolitan, anti-romantic cultural theory whose motto might be borrowed from Ellison’s remark that “it is very difficult in this country to find a pure situation. Usually when you find some assertion of purity, you are dealing with historical, if not cultural ignorance” (443).

He said this in a tribute essay on Alain Locke, the black philosopher and “cultural mid-wife” to the Harlem Renaissance, a self-described cosmopolitan whose iconoclastic theories of the relation of race and culture powerfully influenced Ellison and his friend the critic and novelist Albert Murray. For Locke, cosmopolitanism means, above all, that “culture has no color.” Nor do individuals, groups or nations possess “special proprietary rights” to culture. To end “the vicious practice” of exclusionary ownership of “various forms of culture” would be to abandon a practice that undergirds imperialism and that “has been responsible for the tragedies of history.” Deracializing culture leaves us free to “face the natural fact of the limitless interchangeableness of culture goods” (203). Locke’s vision tallies with a better known one – the “kingdom of culture” – a realm beyond the reach of Jim Crow segregation, entrance to which, says W. E. B. Du Bois in The Souls of Black Folk (1903), is the goal of black striving.

In his essay on Locke, Ellison understands the very notion of “human enterprise” as conditioned by the fact that “we live one upon the other; we follow, we climb upon the shoulders of those who have gone before” (Collected Essays 446). This acute sense of embeddedness issues not in a melancholy recognition of belatedness but rather inspires the playful spirit of appropriation and reinvention, a rifing that Invisible Man achieves in regards to Hawthorne, Melville, Stephen Crane, Booker T. Washington, James Weldon Johnson, Frederick Douglass, among others. These figures remain not static touchstones but become fluid, metamorphic presences. In short, Invisible Man puts in practice its author’s theory of cultural renewal.

Arguably, the virtuoso performance of appropriation in the novel is Ellison’s turning of “Emerson” into a figure of protean significances in excess of received wisdom. In naming two characters “Emerson,” one a wealthy pillar of the establishment, the other his angry, deviant offspring, Ellison sets the canonical figure of sovereign selfhood spinning, as it collides with its subversive kin. The tensions generated by the two “Emersons” – one stolidly familiar, the other secretly “flowing” – not only testify to the wit and audacity
of Ellison’s reworking of a crucial precursor, but also constitute one of the most searching acts of cultural criticism to be found within a novel. By taking Ellison at his joking and strenuous word, The Cambridge Companion aims to bring forward a fuller sense of the breadth and depth and vibrancy of Ellison’s cultural witnessing, artistic making, and “freewheeling appropriations.”

Notes

2. Until Lawrence Jackson’s research Ellison’s date of birth was listed as 1914. I have corrected it to 1913. See Chapter One of this volume.