Introduction: The Trope of the Picture Book

> I visited her Mistress, and found by conversing with the African, that she was no Imposter; I asked her if she could write on any Subject; she said Yes … I gave her your name, which she was acquainted with. She immediately wrote a rough Copy of the inclosed address & letter, which I promised to convey or deliver. I was astonish'd, and could hardly believe my own Eyes.
>
> –Thomas Wooldridge, 1772[1]

> What, then, was the experience of a man with a black skin, what *could* it be in this country? How could a Negro put pen to paper, 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? … What astonishes one most about *Invisible Man* is the apparent freedom it displays from the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country.
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> –Irving Howe, 1963[2]

This study rethinks African American literary history by asserting that the manifold inscription of vision in literature is as important to the long arc of African American literary history as the well established presence of verbal arts. Specifically, this study explores black writers' reliance on the portrayal of African American vision – tropes designating the modes and consequences of sight as well as rendering the literal practices of looking – to validate black intelligence. Since Henry Louis Gates, Jr. traced the birth of African American literature to a legacy of signification that begins with the trope of the Talking Book, scholars have principally associated black literature with vernacular speech acts. Gates's *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988) considers examples of the Talking Book trope in texts spanning from 1770 to 1815 and charts the ways African American writers signify on the trope to privilege the black voice in twentieth-century literature. By recovering and explicating this history, Gates demonstrates the centrality of reading, writing, and speaking to black literary production. African American writers dramatize verbal

literacy to substantiate black humanity, thereby challenging philosophical declarations conflating blackness with servility, immorality, and stupidity. This valuable history is indisputable, and I esteem it for the foundation it provides scholarship on the African American literary canon.

But the phenomenon of the Talking Book cannot be divorced from black writers' creation of what I term the trope of the Picture Book. For even as they verified African American intellect by displaying the power of black discourse, these writers found themselves forced to contend with a visually suffused society that defined blackness in derogatory terms. In addressing this reality, this study argues that African American writers devote as much energy to accentuating vision as proof of black mental power as to drawing on verbal tropes to revise the impoverished idea of blackness. Black writers use their texts to challenge readers who assess African American humanity through a visual lens. This study probes black writers' conversion of the multitudinous modes of vision traditionally employed to degrade African American subjectivity into meaningful methods of self-definition and national critique. To achieve this reclamation of black humanity, these writers connect vision to pedagogy. I describe their impulse to link myriad visual experiences to discrete opportunities for instruction as constituting the trope of the Picture Book. Although these textual moments do not include a literal book, this study argues that they underscore the central role vision plays in the African American literary tradition.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, black writers declare themselves seeing subjects, and the vision they exhibit proclaims them both gifted instructors and exceptional students. This assertion of what Nicholas Mirzoeff describes as "the right to look" reclaims the authority denied African Americans by the history of chattel slavery.[3] Across genres and time, they exhibit a wide range of visual knowledge that repeatedly connects African Americans to traditional sites of education and emerging institutions of cultural instruction. In fact, the initial questions that inspired this study lit upon the consistent nexus of visual acts and teaching paradigms. Why does Phillis Wheatley insist on modeling her religious vision to students at Cambridge University? Why do Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois appeal to visual descriptions of ambition to validate their educational philosophies, ideas they portray in their writing as well as their carefully collected photographs? How do we explain Harlem Renaissance women writers' obsession with presenting black female speakers forced to adopt a pedagogical posture to instruct new observational practices of plastic art and black folk culture? What do we make of Melvin Tolson's

abiding interest in the museum and Ralph Ellison's fascination with objects of art? Why do both men display a commitment to crafting characters who learn through analyzing visual art? In aiming to answer these questions, this study commences with the conclusion that black writers signify on visual practices in their literature to challenge the visual terms on which African Americans are excluded from full national belonging and artistic appreciation.

By codifying these practices as the trope of the Picture Book, I intentionally play on Western societies' reliance on pictures to define African Americans. Prior to large numbers of African slaves and black freeman inhabiting the United States, European explorers used visual description and images to establish narratives of black exoticism and savagery. Jennifer Morgan recounts the language white male planters and travelers employed from 1500 to 1770 to institute ideas of black monstrosity. She explains that "these meanings were inscribed well before the establishment of England's colonial American plantations."[4] As publication opportunities flourished and illustrated travel narratives grew more popular, images of naked African women and men proliferated. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the expanding U.S. reading population eagerly looked to newspapers, magazines, and almanacs for images of blackness that confirmed the uncivilized, bestial status of African Americans.

In recognition of the power of these widespread images, black writers emphasize African American vision as a sly indictment of the special instruction needed by readers trained to interpret child-friendly pictures rather than words. If the term "picture book" primarily describes children's books that depend on illustrations to connote meaning, the trope of the Picture Book teasingly offers readers assistance with their interpretive work. Black writers highlight their character's visual engagement with the world, their ironic ability to make sense of the many images, art objects, and social exchanges organized around race that strive to define black character. In fact, African American adapters of the trope of the Picture Book acknowledge readers' desire to impose preconceived images of blackness onto literary speakers who appear solely via words even as they refuse this craving by portraying black Americans as seeing subjects as opposed to helpless objects. So although the figure of a book with pictures depicting black Americans does not constitute a major plot element in African American novels, stories, and poems, black characters forced to confront a society organized around visual definition and comprehension occupies a central position in black literature preceding the Black Arts Movement.

Contesting Willful Blindness

For nearly two hundred years, African American writers from Phillis Wheatley to Ralph Ellison faced the reality of readers interpreting their work through the veil of race. As the opening epigraph reveals, even though Thomas Wooldridge vouches for Wheatley's authenticity as a black woman capable of thinking and writing, he admits being "astonish'd" at the *sight* of her performing these tasks. One year later, when she published her slender volume of poems, the first book length publication by an African American, she not only needed a letter from her master to assure readers that a black woman had indeed written the verses, her volume also required a second letter "To the PUBLICK" signed by eighteen white men of Boston before her publisher felt comfortable presenting Wheatley's work as her own. Such authenticating documents became a mainstay of slave narratives and antebellum texts published by black writers, necessary testimony for white readers incapable of conceiving of literate and artistic African Americans.[5] What interests me most about this tradition of authentication is not that it was needed, but that it performed a particular type of work. It bridged the gap between how a white, male literate public understood the intellectual abilities of African Americans and the alternative, antithetical portrait Wheatley claimed for herself and her race through her poetry. In essence, the eighteen signatures carved out space for a black woman to teach readers to look beyond her skin color and confront her artistry.

In contrast to eighteenth-century white men who either marveled at the sight of black individuals performing impressive intellect, or required additional proof to validate such feats, the second epigraph shows Irving Howe questioning whether black literature reflects the realities of black life if it fails to focus on black suffering. Howe refuses to consider the possibility that Ellison, or any man defined by the appearance of "black skin" in the middle of the twentieth century, might craft fiction without being overwhelmed by the experience of racism. Howe's "astonish[ment]" at *Invisible Man* signals his skeptical view of Ellison's novel as a plausible barometer of modern black experience. Ellison, responding to Howe's willful blindness, claims that when a white liberal critic "looks at a Negro he sees not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell."[6] He proceeds to accuse Howe of substituting false pictures of African American life in a bid to protect conventional stereotypes. Ellison explains: "Prefabricated Negroes are sketched on sheets of paper and superimposed on the Negro community; then when someone thrusts his head through the page and

yells, 'Watch out there, Jack, there're people living under here,' they are shocked and indignant."[7] Even well-intentioned white readers, Ellison charges, cling to false images of blackness in the interest of perpetuating stereotypes they deem part and parcel of African American life.

The inability to consider black literature beyond their preconceived notions of blackness causes Wooldridge and Howe to misunderstand and misread the literary art of Wheatley and Ellison. This study contends that although these examples relate to specific literary figures, such interpretive misrecognition stems from a long history of criticism that considers how visual pictures are created in non-visual texts. Mirzoeff explains that to "visualize" acknowledges our tendency "to picture … existence," to form pictures from mediums "that are not in themselves visual."[8] In recognition of their readers' insistent visualizing tendencies, black writers forthrightly assign their literary texts – works typically lacking pictorial illustration – the task of portraying African American critical looking, an activity their general audience cannot envisage. These writers understand that for most readers, their attempt to assign new meaning to blackness by focusing on black sight is superfluous. After all, black skin denotes what readers want it to connote. According to W. J. T. Mitchell: "The assumption is that 'blackness' is a transparently readable sign of racial identity, a perfectly sutured imagetext. Race is what can be *seen*"; by contrast, "[w]hiteness … is invisible, unmarked … but is equated with a normative subjectivity and humanity from which 'race' is a visible deviation."[9] Black writers resist such reasoning from their earliest publications. Accordingly, *Visualizing Blackness* argues that rather than ignoring the challenge of most readers' interpretive postures, black writers tackle misapprehension directly by using their texts to "visualize" blackness: to dramatize the act and power of black vision in place of traditional images of racial degradation. Thus, this study ponders how the black literary tradition has been shaped by a commitment to defining black humanity by attending to visual practices even when blackness is not itself pictorially rendered within the pages of a work.

This study casts a critical eye across 200 years of African American literary production to recount black writers' most prevalent responses to readers' penchant for misreading blackness. In focusing on modes of vision in Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Anne Spencer, Angelina Grimké, Gwendolyn Bennett, Nella Larsen, Maude Irwin Owens, Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Melvin Tolson, and Ralph Ellison, *Visualizing Blackness* interrogates U.S. literary history from slavery through segregation, tracing

the thread of visual knowing and learning as it unravels across time. As illuminated in the opening epigraph, Wheatley not only holds the distinction of being the first African American writer to publish a book, but she also bore the chore of being incessantly discussed as a visual testament to black intellectual capacity. Her dependence on her verse to respond to this objectification makes her a necessary starting point for this study. And although Tolson and Ellison craft their final works after the era of segregation proper, their literary projects reflect an enduring commitment to examining a pre-1960s U.S. landscape. Accordingly, their texts provide a fitting conclusion for my survey. Studying this long interval – the pre-abolition era through the pre-Black Arts years – and the specific modes and methods of vision embraced by writers, underscores *how* and *why* this historical period produces writers dedicated to connecting visuality to pedagogy in African American literature.

Mitchell defines visuality as "practices of seeing the world and especially of seeing other people," and Martin Jay explains it as "the distinct historical manifestations of visual experience in all its possible modes."[10] Both definitions underscore the social nature of vision. From the late eighteenth until the middle of the twentieth century, black writers' investment in visuality shows them decrying the error of a national vision dedicated to promulgating naïve or false conceptions of racial identity so as to validate white authority. Black writers concede what Michele Wallace declares an undeniable truth: "How one is seen (as black) and, therefore, what one sees (in a white world) is always already crucial to one's existence as an Afro-American. … However, not being seen by those who don't want to see you … often leads … to the interpretation that you are unable to see."[11] Consequently, African American writers craft texts around figures who perform their ability to see in ways that instruct readers by dramatizing both pedagogical prowess and a special aptitude as students.

For black writers who come of age before the Black Arts Movement, the work of demonstrating the ability to teach and learn from sight assumes a markedly different cast from writers shaped by the cultural reality of the late 1960s and beyond. As Lawrence Jackson reveals in his magisterial *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934–1960* (2010), the cultural sensibility defining writers immediately preceding the Black Arts Movement reflects the singular experience of segregation. Kenneth Warren goes so far as to distinguish black literature of the segregation era as constituting the only works that might legitimately be described as African American literature.[12] Both Jackson and Warren emphasize black writers' investment in defensive identity

formation during the years preceding the civil rights movement to draw stark differences between African Americans publishing before 1960 and those who hit the literary scene later.

My study, however, considers two key pre-integration historical moments that highlight black writers' concentrated fight against readers' willful blindness: the slavery years through the early Harlem Renaissance and the later years of the New Negro Movement through what might be described as the pre-Black Arts Movement. Slavery and segregation, two periods of U.S. history during which African Americans were legally denied equal rights, uniquely impact black ideas regarding visuality. This division tracks black writers' evolution from approaching visuality as a means to define African Americans' superior moral vision to examining the ways black vision comes to denote a modern crisis of cultural identity. The literature of both eras, although by no means uniform, affirms the persistent link writers forge between their representation of black vision and pedagogy. To establish this connection, writers invariably focus on traditional pieces of art and conventional observational practices. Conversely, many African American artists who begin publishing during and beyond the Black Arts years demonstrate a willingness to engage abstract art objects and present more experimental portrayals of looking. Their continued reliance on vision and visual art, though moving in new directions, represents a continuum with earlier African American literature. Works from Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) to John Edgar Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983) to Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003) reveal black writers focusing on vision and visual objects in extremely unconventional ways. Reed's art-nappers, Wideman's abstract painters, and Jones's revisionist tapestry access new territory that builds on the foundational period I analyze even as their work reflects the reality of a post-1960s literary sensibility. This creative philosophy marks a changing of the guard that represents fertile ground for additional scholarship. This study lays the groundwork for such research as I elucidate the appeal and use of vision in shaping the inception of the African American literary canon and explain the significance of its role in moving the tradition forward.

Faith in Vision over Objects

In contrast to scholarship contending that black writers focus on the black voice to distract readers from concentrating on black appearance, I spotlight the central positioning of the trope of the Picture Book,

the literary move to foreground sight. Thus, this study parts ways with the long focus on verbal culture as well as with the rich and expanding field of sound studies. My synoptic analysis distills the significance of black writers' investment in establishing African American command over visually acquired knowledge and linking such mastery to an argument for black humanity. By defining black character in terms of African Americans' ability to discern moral, national, and cultural truths – all portrayed in terms overwrought with the language of vision – these writers encourage readers to confront how aesthetic notions of racial difference impact interpretations of black identity. Labeling their literature as invested in "aesthetics" draws attention to their participation in debates linking humanity to appearance and identifying sight as a sense connoting freedom, moral authority, and artistic capacity. Mary Lou Emery, trenchantly tracing a parallel phenomenon in the work of twentieth-century Caribbean writers and artists, returns to David Hume's essay "On National Characters" to argue that his "judgment of black people as inferior" is "crucial to an empiricist philosophy in which sight is privileged as a sensory basis for knowledge of reality."[13] She proceeds to contend that Caribbean artists acknowledge this reality and therefore engage vision forthrightly as the means by which the modern subject possessing knowledge of the world is established. African American writers similarly respond to philosophers who unabashedly declare black skin visually, or "aesthetically," displeasing by revealing the depravity of such superficial claims.[14] As black writers question the consequences of such an immoral gauge of humanity, they convert a philosophical discussion into an ethical one and creatively explore the costs of these perspectives through their literature.

This decision to educate readers on the dangers of allowing aesthetics to frame discussions of morality and citizenship shapes black writing from its beginning. Ivy Wilson profitably ponders African Americans' consideration of aesthetics in nineteenth-century art that manipulates visuality to represent national belonging. Departing from a strictly Kantian sense of aesthetics concerned with formalist evaluations and preoccupied with pleasure, Wilson examines black writers' investment in connecting art to formal politics. To this end, he focuses on moments of "mimesis and representation" in texts seeking to size up the shadowy political position of African Americans.[15] Wilson's excellent work refines black writers' appeal to visuality as they challenge their liminal political position, and his research offers a provocative exploration of the ways aesthetic concerns intersect with discussions of civic inclusion. Thus, Wilson provides a useful point

of departure as I trace the link between vision and representations of black intellect in literature to argue that African American writers have long depended on visuality to trouble traditional discussions of black humanity and national character.

My focus on the multiple ways black writers emphasize vision as a pedagogical tool works against a notion of black sight as monolithic.[16] But even in its variation, the portrayal of vision in black literature of the period I study largely reflects an Enlightenment faith in sight as opposed to subscribing to the anti-ocularism popularized by French theorists of the twentieth century.[17] In the many texts that emphasize the act of looking, black writers celebrate the ways visual perception informs African American character. Even as they acknowledge the dangerous underside of the ocularcentrism of Western culture – that is, the privileging of vision over other senses central to black cultural existence, such as sound – African American writers retain a belief in the ability to enlighten themselves, and their potentially wayward readers, by developing, executing, and preserving the capacity to interpret the world visually. Thus, I do not appeal to Freudian and Lacanian philosophy to argue that a tyrannically visual society built on racially blinkered cues has damaged black psychology. Instead, I contend that black writers remain committed to a kind of Cartesian perspectivalism, a belief in their natural ability to deploy vision to articulate their most profound revelations. In other words, black writers retain a "visually privileged order of knowledge."[18] *Visualizing Blackness* takes as its central project the discovery of how pre-Black Arts African American writers consistently seek to exhibit the achievement of such visually acquired wisdom.

By focusing on the ways writers portray black Americans interpreting what they see, as opposed to concentrating on deciphering visual objects described in their texts, this study shifts my analysis away from the approaches taken by scholarly works with a similar emphasis on visualization. For instance, David Brody's *Visualizing American Empire* (2010) concentrates on photographs, arts magazines, maps, parades, and world fairs to establish how American visualizing practices between 1898 and 1913 contributed to U.S. colonial expansion in the Philippines. Similarly, Melissa Dabakis's *Visualizing Labor in American Sculpture* (1999) explores the ways sculptural expression from 1880 to 1935 captures the complicated nature of U.S. labor formation. For both Brody and Dabakis, the work of "visualizing" depends almost exclusively on material objects, specific tangible artifacts, and visual mediums that tease out complicated notions of national identity.

My project, however, primarily analyzes how writers craft and signify on scenes that dramatize African American analyses of what they see without a consistent emphasis on the objects of such vision. Although African American writers exhibit a high awareness of the ways material culture defines race and racial understanding at particular historical moments, and sometimes draw directly from this backdrop, there is less focus on art objects per se, and more emphasis on the visual exchanges that generate, challenge, or alter accepted meanings of race. This is particularly true in the early literature I examine. Texts produced after the Harlem Renaissance devote more energy to art objects, but these exchanges prioritize the originality of black visual evaluation over particular objects. Whether they craft scenes depicting religious experience, creative production, educational philosophy, or the acquisition of intellectual knowledge, black writers underscore African Americans' dependence on sight to form independent, authoritative interpretations of U.S. society.

And even as this study refrains from entering physiological discussions of vision or pursuing the history of modern optics, it offers an extended consideration of the traditions of visual production that dominate black literature. The trope of the Picture Book, in drawing together various modes of visual knowing, unveils the enduring commitment that characterizes black writers' turn to vision. Wheatley challenges Cambridge students to execute spiritual and physical vision, imploring, "[s]ee [Jesus] with hands outstretch upon the cross," so they might share the undefiled Christian vision of an "*Ethiop*"; Douglass entreats readers to share the moral indignation he feels upon "witness[ing]" the "horrible exhibition" of his Aunt's beating; Washington discloses that the "first sight of the large … school building" of Hampton gave him "new life" as he impresses the importance of black education on his audience; Anne Spencer directs readers to view *The Good Darky* statue with consternation, insisting, "[g]o, see it, read it, with whatever heart you have left"; Hurston conveys Janie's museum visitor disposition by stressing her inclination for seeking designated sites of observation such as the "front gate" which she leans over to "gaze up and down the road." The sheer magnitude of scenes in which African Americans foreground sight to formulate autonomous explanations of the U.S. – construals that they suggest their audience would do well to adopt – highlights the crucial role black vision plays in defining black identity and insisting on its centrality to understanding American character.

As a result of moving my emphasis away from an abiding concern with material objects to consider African American visualizing practices more