

Introduction

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I

This book is an attempt to situate Ralph Ellison's dynamic life and work within their appropriate contexts. Ellison (1913–1994) is best known as the author of *Invisible Man* (1952), one of the most frequently taught and debated novels of the past sixty years. Through his essays he has become an influential theorist of culture and identity. Scholars have been unraveling the many mysteries of the sprawling novel that he worked on from the 1950s through 1994, called “the Hickman Novel” in this book, according to emerging convention. His short stories, most of them highly teachable, continue to attract attention. The publication of *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison* in late 2019 was greeted by American media as a major literary event.

Ellison's work is as relevant as ever in the early 2020s, offering ways to think through complicated questions of identity, exploitation and manipulation through rhetoric and media, and questions about what it means to live and create in a democratic society and culture. Ellison's work can immediately suggest to students the expansive historical contexts of these topics, but the work itself then demands to be contextualized. Often it is within such contextualization that Ellison's immediate and sometimes startling relevance dawns upon students.

Ralph Ellison in Context collates and produces knowledge. It looks to the past and the future. Some of these essays will start new conversations, while others round out or sum up longstanding ones. Ellison studies is a busy, crowded, bustling field. Perhaps it can be thought of as a massive, sprawling structure, to which levels and additions are always being added. *Ralph Ellison in Context* will be at the top of the structure for a time, affording hitherto unseen perspectives, until someone builds upon it and adds new vantage points. This book is an étage constructed atop still-indispensable essay collections such as *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*

(1987), *A Historical Guide to Ralph Ellison* (2004), *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison* (2005), and *The New Territory: Ralph Ellison and the Twenty-First Century* (2016). It is also constructed atop biographies by Lawrence Jackson (2002) and Arnold Rampersad (2007), several special issues of scholarly journals, John F. Callahan's introductions and prefaces to Ellison's texts, dozens of monographs and chapters, and hundreds of articles. *Ralph Ellison in Context* elaborates upon and extends a wide and deep critical and biographical tradition.

II

It is widely understood that context implies and enhances truth. The phrases "out of context" and "taken out of context" have negative connotations and rightly so. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, context derives from the Latin *contextus*, meaning "connection," which is "the participial stem of *contexere* to weave together, connect."¹ *Ralph Ellison in Context* represents a weaving of many threads. But context as a concept cannot be taken for granted. The historian Peter Burke, in the course of a wide-ranging survey of the intellectual history of the concept of context across numerous disciplines, writes of the term's slipperiness:

The term *context*, like the related term *situation*, is not as clear as it may look. As we have seen, the concept of context is one that has been defined precisely or vaguely, narrowly or broadly, and employed in both a flexible and a rigid manner. In this respect, it resembles the concept of culture. . . . Context is often regarded as local, but the idea of a "global context" is also in circulation. It might well be asked, What is not context?²

Later on in his essay, Burke adds that context "is best used to refer to phenomena that are not in focus at a given moment: especially, perhaps, those that are just out of focus."³ With Burke's perspective in mind, each chapter in this book can be thought of as a lens that brings an Ellisonian context into sharp focus.

"Even an exceptional person lives and acts in a context, or, better, several contexts," writes the historian Carlo Ginzburg in a preface to a classic study in which he builds context around the trials and tribulations of a sixteenth century heretic.⁴ The attainment of stature, whether global, national, or in a particular field, often comes at the expense of context. Context and its opposite – *legend* – are locked in perpetual battle. The construction of context around people whose fame has transcended and continues to transcend their context(s) becomes a service and a challenge. This is

particularly true in Ellison's case. Ellison was an exceptional person, as complex an artist as one could find, and as of 2021, one of the twentieth century's most enduring figures. The weave of his life, work, and thought is especially dense and taut. As he was larger than life, so to speak, and whatever magic and charisma dwelled in his personality reverberates through his words, context has a way of falling away from discussions of him, often making him look better or worse than he was. Context helps to restore his complexity for better or worse.

Despite longstanding and valuable mantras such as "always historicize," contexts can have a way of drifting out of focus. And yet contextlessness itself has institutional currency. Contextless (formalist) reading, developed in the early twentieth century and later calibrated to bring the study of literature to the allegedly contextless masses of the United States in the mid-twentieth century, is still part of the training of incipient critics. It maintains a simmering prestige over a low flame, which every so often gets raised to a rolling boil. The performance of a close reading without context can be a valuable exercise for students, as well as a measure of potential and cleverness suggestive of future critical agility. Undoubtedly it is useful. But even though one can read and teach any text without context, it does not stand to reason that one ought to, assuming that context is available, along with time and resources. The positivism underpinning contextless reading puts a lot of faith in the reader's personal resources and tends to assume too much about what the text can disclose on its own.

Most critics today of course employ formalist and contextual approaches together in an organic/pragmatic manner in order to accomplish what a critical approach to a text appears to necessitate. A critic's toolbox can contain high theory and weak theory, symptomatic reading and elements of postcritique, or various historicist, formalist, or comparative modes necessary to explicate the text in question. Formidable studies such as Michaela Bronstein's *Out of Context: The Uses of Modernist Fiction* serve as a reminder that context too can be reductive and need not be the last word.⁵ Context can be a tool for formalist readings while careful close readings attuned to the limits of close reading can open a wide world of hitherto unappreciated context, as in the following example from Barbara Foley.

Context is particularly important when studying Ellison's work per se because he was a relentless reviser of his own work, which leads to certain elements being paradoxically buried on the surface as it were, or perhaps stranded on the surface without context. *Invisible Man* is a palimpsest which at times allows for glimpses of its previous iterations. Foley has

cogently critiqued “surface reading,” a sophisticated recent form of contextless reading, with a dramatic Ellisonian example:

If the critic truly wishes to restore to the author a role in determining how his/her text is to be read, it seems to me, the critic should supply not restatement and summary, but instead as much information about the author – family background, emotional life, as well as insertion into contemporaneous debates – as is deemed necessary for an appreciation of how the text came into existence. My work on Ellison and Toomer has shown me the usefulness – indeed, the necessity – of reading texts as palimpsests in which one surface continually gives way to another and another. If we wish to know why the protagonist of *Invisible Man* is said to have been “dedicated and set aside,” we need to be aware not only of his predecessor in LeRoy but also of Ellison’s reasons for creating, and then abandoning, his left-wing mariner – reasons that encompass not just the particulars of Ellison’s life but also the larger historical forces and developments that shaped his decisions, both literary and political. Staying on the surface of the text makes it impossible to account for those provocative quotation marks; we need to know what they conceal.⁶

Provocative indeed, for the published text offers no hermeneutical traction for the baffling quotation marks; there is not any apparent reason for them to be there that the close reader could possibly discern. The phrase “dedicated and set aside” appears three times in the novel, first in quotation marks (IM, 353) and then not (533, 579).⁷ The quotation marks are a window into a very different version of *Invisible Man*, still extant in the Ralph Ellison Papers in the Library of Congress. Foley, in her book *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man* (the most cited nonbiographical scholarly work in this volume; see abbreviations for citation), notes that in an earlier draft, another character says that LeRoy (a murdered intellectual, engineer, and union leader, whose journal the Invisible Man finds and reads) had been “dedicated and set aside” (Foley, 222). LeRoy did not make it into the final version of the novel (see Chapters 5 and 10 in this volume and Foley, 222–37, for a comprehensive account). The transposition of “dedicated and set aside” from LeRoy onto Invisible, who in the published text repeats the enigmatic phrase to a reader who can only wonder at its ramifications, can only be fully understood by apprehending its emergence from a variety of contexts: Ellison’s political shift from left to center in the 1940s, his years in the United States merchant marine, and his anthropological interest in the concept of sacrifice and its literary possibilities. The concept is peppered throughout his work and one might say foundational to it, as most of his fiction and some

major essays require grappling with it and with his understanding of it. This has nothing to do with seeking an author's intentions but rather with ascertaining the plausible meanings of the words on the page. One must consult the drafts of *Invisible Man* in tandem with work on Ellison's intellectual engagement with the Cambridge Ritualists, also known as the Cambridge School of Anthropology (see Foley, as well as Patrice Rankine's *Ulysses in Black*,⁸ and Bryan Crable's recent work,⁹ including Chapter 24 in this book).

For the first fifty years or so of the novel's existence, the drafts that Foley summarized in 2010 for the public were unavailable for anyone to read. Millions of readers probably developed a fair enough idea of what Ellison was up to and what *Invisible* was riffing about without such context, but it does not stand to reason that one should continue to proceed without knowing once the context becomes available. This is one example among dozens.

Another example would be Ellison's short stories, easily comprehensible to high school students and undergraduates without context, but so much knottier and more complex when considered in light of his contemporaneous Marxist training and commitments during the composition of many of them. Certain statements and phrases in some of them have theoretical undercurrents that one need not know anything about in order to appreciate the stories on numerous levels, but context adds dimensions.

Context is also a significant *theme* of Ellison's work and was one of his paramount concerns as a public intellectual who fastidiously saved almost every scrap of paper relating to his career. Ellison had to have known that future scholars would use his vast and meticulously preserved archive to build context around his life and work. He made context a central theme of *Invisible Man*; the Brotherhood is continually shown to be missing Harlem's cultural contexts. *Invisible* implores Brother Tobitt to visit Harlem's barbershops, gin mills, juke joints, and churches, telling him "[A] whole unrecorded history is spoken then, Brother" (IM, 471). *Invisible*'s forthright exhortation, which helps to propel his split with the Brotherhood, results from exasperation with its lack of context for African American life and culture.

Context is central to Ellison's other major novelistic plot. Book I of the Hickman Novel focuses on Welborn McIntyre's search for the context of the Hickman-Sunraider relationship. In the process of trying to discover it, he revisits forgotten contexts of his own life. So many of Ellison's essays strive to explain the Oklahoma City context of his life. The search for context is everywhere in his work.

III

Part I, Geographical, Institutional and Interpersonal Contexts, provides fresh perspectives on some of the most important people and places in Ellison's life and goes into more depth on topics treated appropriately in the biographical literature but of necessity not in the granular detail a book like this offers space for, while tying these contexts to his texts as well. These chapters include "Oklahoma City and 'The Territory'" (by Tracy Floreani), "Ghosts of Tuskegee" (by Caroline Gebhard), "New York City, 1936–1946" (by Sara Rutkowski), and "Postwar New York City" (by Andrew Davenport). Each chapter offers far more than a historical or biographical overview. Floreani's chapter gives significant context for Oklahoma aspects of the Hickman Novel. Sara Marzioli's "Rome, 1955–1957" and my "The United States Merchant Marine," in particular, go considerably beyond what their titles might suggest because the contexts of the topics themselves do. The chapters on people include Ellison's literary mentor at Tuskegee, Morteza Drexel Sprague (by Matthew McKnight), Ellison's second wife (1946 until his death) and partner in his literary enterprise, Fanny McConnell Ellison (by Colleen G. Eils), and his friend and literary colleague Albert Murray (by me). These are names that Ellison's readers see often, but before this book there have not been comprehensive, discrete articles on how these crucial interlocutors figured in the context of Ellison's career. With unlimited time and space, this part could have many more chapters on other people, places, and institutions. In retrospect, I think it ought to have had a chapter on Stanley Edgar Hyman. Each chapter here supplements the existing biographical literature and will be indispensable for attaining the richest conception of the people and places that shaped Ellison's life and career.

Part II, Historical, Political, and Cultural Contexts, explores where Ellison's work and biography cross paths with some of the pressing topics of his time and his significant intermedial concerns. Ellison was an eclectic intellectual and appreciator of the arts, deeply invested in visual art and music, and a practitioner of both. He was a man of his time thoroughly versed in its political and social issues. This section includes chapters on Ellison and gender (by Meina Yates-Richard), masculinity (by E. Al-Tariq Moore), democracy (by Sterling Lecater Bland Jr.) visual art (by Lena Hill), electricity in connection with humanism (by Jennifer L. Lieberman), the blues (by Kimberly Mack), and swing music (by Steven Lewis). Each chapter is comprehensive, original, and insightful. Kevin Moore's chapter on Ellison as an anatomist of fascism is sure to spark debate and inspire

future research. Michael Germana's "Ellison's Durational View of Bebop" is an ingenious chapter that explodes conventional thinking about Ellison and bebop. Germana goes a long way toward explaining (and possibly resolves) one of the most persistently (and sometimes obtusely) misunderstood aspects of Ellison's career.

Part III, *Literary and Critical Contexts*, includes chapters on literary influences as well as chapters on other critical disciplines. I categorized Michael Borshuk's intriguing chapter on the Harlem Renaissance as a literary context, for the period's influence on Ellison's development, while Matthew Calihman's superb chapter on the Black Arts movement I categorized as a historical and cultural context for something Ellison found himself in relation to after becoming well-established. Scott Selisker offers a definitive account of sociology as an Ellisonian context. Bryan Crable's chapter on Cambridge School Anthropology, part of his forthcoming project on Ellison's intricate engagement with the work of Jane Ellison Harrison (1850–1928), takes Ellison studies in an exciting direction, made possible by Crable's painstaking reading of Ellison's marginalia. Granville Ganter's "The Soapbox Speech in Ellison's Fiction" is an eye-opening study of a context hitherto unexplored, despite its centrality to Ellison's novels, which also suggests new sources for Invisible's character in prominent soapbox orators of a previous generation. In this part there will also be found rich and compellingly argued chapters on "Literary Modernism" (by Tessa Roynon), "The Wright School" (by Stephan Kuhl), and "Postwar Literary Aesthetics" (by Jesse McCarthy). These chapters provide a solid foundation for understanding the shifting literary sands that Ellison navigated.

Barbara Foley offers a definitive overview of Ellison's early writings. How can Ellison's own writings be a context for his work in general? In a sharply bifurcated career such as Ellison's, this makes perfect sense. The same is true of his letters – until recently an oceanic shadow text. Marc Conner, who has perhaps spent more time with Ellison's letters than anyone except for John Callahan, has brilliantly read Ellison's life through them.

Part IV, *Reception and Reputation*, includes a comprehensive overview of Ellison's reception and reputation from his death in 1994 through 2020, which I co-authored with Robert Butler. (I thank Professor Butler for starting the chapter and for allowing me wide latitude with what was originally his chapter alone.) Matthew Lambert's chapter on the reception of the essays should be the first stop for anyone looking for an overview of how Ellison's nonfiction has been grappled with, applied, and weighed by

leading critics and theorists. Timothy Parrish, one of the great interpreters of Ellison's life, offers the definitive chapter on the standard biographies. Benji de la Piedra's chapter on the reception of the Hickman Novel is a service to the profession and represents an astounding synthesis of information. Olga Panova's chapter on Ellison's reception in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet States will be of interest to scholars and students around the world.

This part also contains two significant conversation-starters. Kinohi Nishikawa's chapter on the design and marketing of *Invisible Man* is the first of its kind in Ellison studies and opens up new pathways for future scholarship. J. D. Porter's chapter on Ellison and Digital Humanities will undoubtedly spark many conversations. I am thrilled that the startling results of his DH experiment will first see the light of day in this volume.

All the chapters in this book were by invitation, but in a few instances my idea for a person's chapter was not the right fit, and the person pitched another idea – a better idea in every case. I was unable to commission some chapters I wanted for the book, and there were some that I did not try to commission. Photography is an indispensable Ellisonian context, but I surmised that a chapter would inevitably draw too much on Sara Blair's pioneering work on Ellison's photography and Jean-Christophe Cloutier's groundbreaking discoveries about Ellison and Gordon Parks. I did not try to assign a chapter on Ellison and Kenneth Burke, as there are several books and articles on their connection. I tried to commission a chapter on Ellison and Saul Bellow but had no takers. As I was working on the proposal, I was also pondering the extent to which Ellison could be understood as a "New England writer" of sorts (Sunraider, after all, is a senator from a New England state), and tried to commission a chapter called "North of Manhattan," about the significance of his time in Vermont in the 1940s, at Bard College in the 1950s (that's why the hypothetical title was "North of Manhattan" and not "New England"), and on his 97-acre estate in Plainfield, Massachusetts every summer from 1967 onward. I had no takers for this one either.

Some contexts I had hoped and planned to have covered in the book are not here for a variety of reasons. Be that as it may, this book includes myriad voices and perspectives. I tried to find a mix of scholars who tend to focus on Ellison and those who do not. I also tried to find a mix of scholars at different career points and from a wide variety of institutions. The voices and perspectives of junior, mid-career, and senior scholars balance nicely.

For twenty years or so there has been a certain amount of shadow boxing between Ellison scholars of different political opinions and commitments.

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(For more on this, see Chapter 29.) This book inevitably ends up replicating some of that shadow boxing in some chapters – it is an important context for Ellison criticism – while also complicating it in others.

Ellison speaks to so many people and offers a particular life-guiding and affirming wisdom – the wisdom of a special person of unusually keen intelligence, discipline, rigor, and insight, not to mention humor, who had a bewilderingly complicated life in the twentieth century and offered one of the grandest interpretations of the American experience. As such, his work can inspire strong emotions and fierce loyalty. Even his most stringent critics recognize his astute and unusual mind and talent; as a result, lamentations about what he did not write or accomplish sometimes have more gusto than celebrations of what he did. But for many, myself included, Ellison is neither a hero nor villain per se but an endlessly fascinating thinker, writer, and historical personality. As such, I think it is possible to be inspired and enriched by some of his ideas and skeptical of or unmoved by others, to admire his fiction for some reasons and critique it for others, and so on.

IV

This book would not have been possible without Ross Posnock, a wise and generous mentor. I am grateful to Barbara Foley for significant book-related advice and encouragement. I am also grateful to Jennifer Lieberman for helpful discussions and encouragement in the book's pre-proposal stages. In fact, I invited Jenni to coedit the book with me, but she could not because of other commitments. For reading my chapter "The United States Merchant Marine," I would like to thank Barbara Foley, Jenni Lieberman, Harris Feinsod, and Joshua Smith. For reading my chapter "Albert Murray after 1962," I would like to thank Lewis P. Jones and Michael Borshuk. For reading my preface, I would like to thank Tara Roeder and Nathan Grant. Thanks to Kinohi Nishikawa for valuable, in-depth advice. Thanks to those who helped to support my Ellison scholarship in various ways prior to this book, especially Rowan Ricardo Philips, Amritjit Singh, Tracy Floreani, Matthew Calihman, Marc Conner, Tessa Roynon, and Olga Panova. Thanks to the helpful and friendly staff in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, who have helped to facilitate my research and that of so many Ellison scholars.

Andrew Davenport was a tireless research assistant who made at least twenty trips to the Library of Congress for me and a few others, scanning and photographing thousands of pages and organizing files with aplomb.

Andrew's organizational skills are remarkable, and his work ethic is second to none. Daniel Heffernan, a superb assistant to me on several previous projects and on this one, did a fine job helping out with some clerical matters.

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I enjoyed hearing about Ellison from the late Charlie Davidson, recipient of some of Ellison's best letters. The late Stanley Crouch was always keen to discuss Ellison's work, particularly the Peter Wheatstraw section of *Invisible Man* and the Jessie Rockmore section of the Hickman Novel. I will not soon forget his reverence for Ellison. The person I learned the most about Ellison from was my much-missed mentor, Albert Murray. Thanks to Rosemary Devlin, James Devlin, Maureen Tracy, and Patricia Tracy. Finally, I would like to thank Granville Ganter, who introduced me to Ellison's work in an American literature course at St. John's University in 1999.

Notes

1. "context, *n.*" OED online, December 2020. Oxford University Press, www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/40207.
2. Peter Burke, "Context in Context," *Common Knowledge* 8.1 (Winter 2002), 171.
3. *Ibid.*, 174.
4. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, ed. with a new preface, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), xiii.
5. Michaela Bronstein, *Out of Context: The Uses of Modernist Fiction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).
6. Barbara Foley, "Biography and the Political Unconscious: Ellison, Toomer, Jameson, and the Politics of Symptomatic Reading," *Biography* 36.4 (Fall 2013), 667.