

**English 741-Seminar in American Studies
Ralph Ellison and His Influence(s)**

Dr. Michael Germana

Fall 2020

4:00-6:50 M in G18 Colson Hall

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In lieu of office hours, one-on-one meetings will be conducted via Zoom.
Email me to set up an appointment.



Shawn Walker, "The Invisible Man Series: Dedicated to Ralph Ellison" 1990s. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Course Description:

This course traces Ralph Ellison's literary career from its early beginnings in leftist periodicals like *New Masses* to its end in 1994 when Ellison died, leaving behind a sprawling unfinished novel that took until 2010 to cobble together and publish. Along the way we will read:

- Ellison's masterpiece *Invisible Man*, which won the National Book Award for fiction in 1953
- A collection of short stories spanning the author's career
- Portions of two volumes of critical essays Ellison published from the early 1960s to the mid 1980s
- A selection of Ellison's incisive music reviews and personal correspondence

- Ellison’s posthumously published unfinished second novel *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, which he began composing in the early 50s but never completed, and
- A cross-section of current scholarship in Ellison Studies

Providing counterpoint will be additional selections written by Ellison’s influences and interlocutors, from Richard Wright, who gave Ellison his first writing gig, to Percival Everett, one of an ever-growing number of contemporary novelists who have brought Ellison’s literary themes into the twenty-first century.

Every student enrolled in this course will complete five “*précis and response*” papers of approximately 1500 words in response to self-selected essays by Ellison scholars, lead one class discussion, and research and write an original 20-25-page seminar paper on a topic germane to Ellison Studies.

Course Librarian:

Lynne Stahl
 Downtown Campus Library 1004-I
 Lynne.Stahl@mail.wvu.edu
 (304) 293-5440

Required Texts:

Books:

Available at the WVU Bookstore:

- John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*
- John F. Callahan, ed., *Flying Home and Other Stories*
- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
- Ralph Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting...*
- Percival Everett, *Erasure*

All other materials will be distributed via eReserves. The lone exception is Saidiya Hartman’s “The End of White Supremacy, An American Romance,” to which I’ve posted a link in the course calendar.

To access eReserves, follow these steps:

- 1) Visit the University Libraries eReserves page at <https://reserves.lib.wvu.edu>
- 2) Log in using your MyID username and password
- 3) Select our course from the list
- 4) Select the assigned reading

Course Objectives:

- To explore the primary influences, formal characteristics, major themes, and socio-cultural significance of Ralph Ellison's fiction
- To practice finding, evaluating, incorporating, and responding critically to scholarly sources on the life and work of Ralph Ellison
- To become familiar with the argumentative threads that shape Ralph Ellison Studies
- To construct incisive arguments about Ellison's writing that engage with this critical discourse, and to respond creatively to Ellison's imaginative work in a way that is informed by this criticism
- To develop a research project informed by current scholarship in Ralph Ellison Studies
- To construct a complex, multi-layered thesis about Ralph Ellison's fiction, criticism, photography, or some combination thereof that develops over the course of 20-25 pages

Assignments:

Discussion Leading:

In each of the nine class meetings beginning September 14 and ending November 9, one member of the class will lead discussion of the text(s) assigned for the day. Your goal as discussion leader is to pose questions and/or problems that help define the critical contours of the texts under examination. You can introduce any pertinent examples into the discussion—there is no formula to follow. Each student will lead discussion for one half of that day's class meeting.

Précis-and-Response Papers:

You will also complete five brief précis-and-response papers (~1500 words) during the first half of the semester (there are six assigned, but you only have to turn in five—the one you skip is up to you). All five papers will be informally graded using a “+” or “-” system with comments provided.

To complete each of these papers, you will need to independently research, locate, read, summarize, and analyze a single work of peer-reviewed scholarship on a topic pertaining to the material we will be covering on the day it is due. The only secondary sources you may not use are those already assigned for the day, if any.

Each of your précis-and-response papers should begin with a lucid characterization and summary of the argument made by the scholar(s) whose work you chose to examine. This précis must then be followed by a critical response from you that engages with and responds to this argument. The response is the place to stretch your own critical legs and pose venturesome questions that can generate class discussion and, in many cases, promote continuing research on your seminar paper topic. In your response, the goal is to *demonstrate* how the scholarly source influences *your* interpretation of the primary text(s). Finally, you must provide a bibliographic citation of the article you found in either MLA or Chicago format.

Possible themes your précis-and-response papers might explore include but are by no means limited to:

Ellison and History:

In “An Extravagance of Laughter,” Ellison makes reference to “the time warp of history, that man-made ‘fourth dimension’ which always confounds our American grasp of ‘real’ or *actual* time or duration” (621). Ellison’s views of history and historians have long been the subject of scholarly inquiry. For example, in his excellent essay “Chaos, Complexity, and Possibility: The Historical Frequencies of Ralph Waldo Ellison” (which we’ll be discussing on November 16), John F. Callahan argues that, in Ellison’s view, “time and chronology offer cover to the historian” who “impos[es] too false an order on American life” (130). What is history to Ralph Ellison? Many critics like Marc C. Conner and Lucas Morel have pondered this question. You may find them excellent conversation partners as you pursue your own answer to this question.

Ellison and the Visual Arts:

As the title of his masterpiece *Invisible Man* suggests, Ellison was preoccupied with the politics of vision and the ways visual culture helps reiterate social structures. In her essay “The Visual Art of *Invisible Man*: Ellison’s Portrait of Blackness” (*American Literature* 81.4 (2009)), Lena Hill explores how Ellison, through his many references to painting and portraiture in *Invisible Man*, sought a painterly means to “escape a legacy of visual derogation” (791). Her more recent essay in Conner and Morel’s *The New Territory: Ralph Ellison and the Twenty-First Century* is equally keen, reading Ellison’s allusions to classical paintings in *Three Days Before the Shooting*... as integral parts of the unfinished novel’s themes. We’ll be reading the former, but not the latter, if you are interested in writing about it. Ellison’s ekphrastic references to visual media go beyond the painterly, encompassing photography, cinema, and even stereoscopic technologies. Sara Blair’s essay “Photography and the Origins of Invisibility,” which we’ll also be reading this semester, brings Ellison’s photography and his fiction-writing into conversation in ways that Ellison scholars are still exploring. See, for example, my chapter on Ellison’s Polaroid photographs in *Ralph Ellison, Temporal Technologist*.

Ellison and the Sonic Arts:

Just as Hill, Blair, and others have examined Ellison’s interrogation of visual culture, so too has Alexander G. Weheliye investigated Ellison’s understanding of sound and its role in the development of new forms of American identity. In his essay “‘I Am I Be’: The Subject of Sonic Afro-modernity,” Weheliye outlines the particular significance of the phonograph for Black American artists, who found in sound recording technologies a means to disarticulate Black culture from the Black body—the sound from the source. Herman Beavers extends Weheliye’s argument by using recent developments in sound studies to interrogate Ellison’s use of the “acousmatic” voice, or the voice that can be heard but whose source cannot be located. You might consider how these ideas about sound provide a subtext for key scenes within Ellison’s fiction, like when the narrator-protagonist of *Invisible Man* sits in his “hole” and listens to a phonographic recording of Louis Armstrong while musing upon his invisibility, or when reporter Welborn McIntyre relies upon a tape recording of Lee Willie Minifees burning his Cadillac on Senator Sunraider’s lawn to “objectively” reconstruct the scene in *Three Days Before the Shooting*... You’ll just have to find a secondary source besides these essays by Weheliye and Beavers, which we’ll be discussing during our November 2 class meeting.

Ellison and the Politics of Biography:

Two exhaustive biographies have been written about Ralph Ellison. Lawrence Jackson's *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* portrays Ellison as an intellectual and an artist who transformed the traditions from which his artistic vision emerged. By contrast, Arnold Rampersad's *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*, published five years later, paints a portrait of a failed artist, a man who could not live up to his own expectations, who was generally an elitist snob who preferred smoking cigars at the Century Club to working on his ultimately unfinished novel, and who shed a tear of regret (for himself, presumably) as he passed away on April 16, 1994. How can such radically different portraits of the same man be drawn by two biographers examining the same subject and working with the same archive at virtually the same time? We will touch on these biographies in our November 23 class meeting, but a more exhaustive analysis could be the subject of a seminar paper.

Ellison's Post-Invisible Man Career:

Integral to the debate over which of Ellison's two biographers is truer to the man and his literary legacy is a discussion about Ellison's career following the publication of *Invisible Man*. How, ask critics and admirers alike, could Ellison win the National Book Award in 1953 for his first novel and then spend forty years laboring on a second novel without ever publishing it? Two recent book-length studies examine Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* career to draw new conclusions about the author's later work: Adam Bradley's *Ralph Ellison in Progress* (2010), and Timothy Parrish's *Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America* (2012). Of especial interest to you might be Bradley's observations about Ellison's adoption of the personal computer (he owned one of the first PCs, the Osborne 1, before purchasing an IBM PC) and Parrish's consideration that Ellison was writing a text—an epic—that never *could* be finished, i.e., that was intentionally unfinishable. Either of these sources would be excellent choices for your précis-and-response papers.

Ellison and the Political Left:

Ellison began his literary career writing book reviews for his mentor, fellow author, and one-time Communist Party member Richard Wright (who eventually denounced the Party midway through WWII). He went on to publish in Leftist periodicals like *New Masses* and associated himself with the authors who published in them. However, while Ellison may have publicly toed the Party line in his dogmatic reviews and agitprop fiction, privately he felt an increasing ambivalence toward and later outright disdain for Communist ideology and its adherents—a perspective that is perhaps most clearly articulated by Ellison's send-up of the Communist Party in *Invisible Man*. Barbara Foley traces Ellison's early career and fraught relationship with the Left in her recent book, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (2010). Foley is not kind to Ellison, treating his shift away from political radicalism and toward a broader democratic individualism as a sell-out; you may have a very different opinion.

Accordingly, you may want to find a counterargument to Foley, whose book we'll be looking at in excerpted form on November 23.

Seminar Paper:

As the culmination of your work for the semester, your seminar paper will be an expertly argued and exhaustively researched essay of 20-25 pages. The seminar paper should display mastery of the text(s) being engaged and the criticism that surrounds it while offering an original interpretation of a topic related to Ralph Ellison Studies. You may choose to expand one or more

of your précis-and-response papers or develop an idea independent of your previous work for the course, but you may not resubmit an essay originally written for another class, conference, or journal. Aside from these requirements, the topic, methodology, and objective of the seminar paper are all open. I strongly encourage you to discuss your plans for your paper with me as they evolve. A prospectus of your paper topic (1-2 paragraphs, maximum) is due on November 23. Seminar paper drafts will be peer-critiqued during our November 30 class meeting. The final draft of the seminar paper is due on Monday of Exam Week. It must be submitted to Google Docs and shared with me no later than 4pm on December 7.

NB: All written assignments must be turned in via Google Docs. Just upload your papers and then invite me to edit them. My Google handle is the same as my WVU email: Michael.Germana@mail.wvu.edu. I will append my comments to your papers so you can get immediate feedback.

Attendance and Participation Policy, COVID-19 Edition:

Participation in a graduate seminar is absolutely critical. Accordingly, participation counts for 50% of your final grade (this figure includes your class discussion leading and précis-and-response papers along with your weekly contributions to our class meetings).

This being said, you may participate in person or remotely via Zoom—it's up to you, depending on your needs. I will send a Zoom invitation to everyone enrolled in the class in advance of each class meeting. That way, on class days, you may come to our classroom to meet face-to-face, or you may join the class remotely via Zoom. I will bring my computer with me to every class, and I suggest you do the same so that persons participating remotely get to interact with everyone in the class.

Should WVU end up closing the campus before the semester has concluded, we will just eliminate the option of meeting face-to-face and meet synchronously via Zoom each week during the scheduled meeting time.

As we navigate the uncertainties of the semester together, rest assured I will give extensions whenever possible so that everyone can complete the course. Just ask me if you need more time to complete an assignment due to illness, the need to care for a loved one, etc. You don't need to provide a reason, but you do need to let me know ahead of time if you'll be needing an extension.

An important caveat: in order to receive a passing grade for the course, you must complete every assignment.

Grade Breakdown:

Seminar Paper: 50%

Participation (including discussion leading, précis-and-response papers, etc.): 50%

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is the (mis)representation of someone else's work as your own. It may be direct (e.g., not documenting a quoted source) or indirect (paraphrasing ideas, thoughts, etc. without due credit). In either case, neglecting to acknowledge sources for outside material is a serious offence and may result in failure for the assignment and possibly the course. Please see me if you are not sure about how to use or acknowledge certain materials.

Intellectual Property Statement:

All course materials, including lectures, class notes, quizzes, exams, handouts, presentations, and other materials provided to students for this course are protected intellectual property. As such, the unauthorized purchase or sale of these materials may result in disciplinary sanctions under the Campus Student Code.

Academic Integrity Statement:

The integrity of the classes offered by any academic institution solidifies the foundation of its mission and cannot be sacrificed to expediency, ignorance, or blatant fraud. Therefore, I will enforce rigorous standards of academic integrity in all aspects and assignments of this course. For the detailed policy of West Virginia University regarding the definitions of acts considered to fall under academic dishonesty and possible ensuing sanctions, please see the Student Conduct Code at <http://studentlife.wvu.edu/studentconductcode.html>. Should you have any questions about possibly improper research citations or references, or any other activity that may be interpreted as an attempt at academic dishonesty, please see me *before* the assignment is due to discuss the matter.

Inclusivity Statement:

The West Virginia University community is committed to creating and fostering a positive learning and working environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and inclusion.

If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Accessibility Services (293-6700). For more information on West Virginia University's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, please see <http://diversity.wvu.edu>.

COVID-19 Statement:

WVU is committed to maintaining a safe learning environment for all students, faculty, and staff. Should campus operations change because of health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible that this course will move to a fully online delivery format. If that occurs, students will be advised of technical and/or equipment requirements, including remote proctoring software.

In a face-to-face environment, our commitment to safety requires students, staff, and instructors to observe the social distancing and personal protective equipment (PPE) guidelines set by the University at all times. While in class, students will sit in assigned seats when applicable and wear the required PPE. Should a student forget to bring required PPE, PPE will be available in the building for students to acquire. Students who fail to comply will be dismissed from the classroom for the class period and may be referred to the Office of Student Conduct for further sanctions.

If a student becomes sick or is required to quarantine during the semester, they should notify the instructor. The student should work with the instructor to develop a plan to receive the necessary course content, activities, and assessments to complete the course learning outcomes.

Additional Resources:

The Eberly Writing Studio in G02 Colson Hall is committed to helping students become better writers. For more information about the Writing Studio, including its hours, how to make appointments, and additional resources, visit their webpage at <http://speakwrite.wvu.edu/students>. You can also follow them on Twitter @SWStudioG02

Contact Information:

If you have questions about the course or concerns you would like to share privately with me, please contact me via email at Michael.Germana@mail.wvu.edu. You may also message me through Twitter at your convenience.

Calendar:

August 31:

Introduction/s:

- “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks” (*Collected Essays*)
- “The Little Man at Chehaw Station” (*Collected Essays*)
- Bibliography of the Ralph Ellison Collection at the Library of Congress
- Zoom visit by Lynne Stahl (in class)

September 7:

Labor Day – Class Does Not Meet

September 14:

Early Influences:

- Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground* (ebook is available at WVU Libraries; also available online via Project Gutenberg)
- Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” + “The Man Who Lived Underground”
- Kenneth Burke, “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’”
- “A Congress Jim Crow Didn’t Attend” (*Collected Essays*)
- “Harlem is Nowhere” (*Collected Essays*)
- Letters to Ida Bell (August 30, 1937), Joe Lazenberry (April 18/25, 1939), Richard Wright (November 3, 1941), and Kenneth Burke (November 23, 1945)

Class discussion leader: Yu Uchida

Assignment due: précis-and-response paper one

September 21:

Invisible Man:

- *Invisible Man*, Prologue-Chapter 13

Class discussion leader: Melissa Roberson

Assignment due: précis-and-response paper two

September 28:

Invisible Man, continued:

- *Invisible Man*, Chapter 14-Epilogue
- “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion” (*Collected Essays*)
- Letters to Morteza Sprague (May 19, 1954), Albert Murray (March 16, 1956), Stanley Edgar Hyman (May 27, 1957), Albert Murray (June 2, 1957), and Albert Murray (Feb 6, 1958)
- Saidiya Hartman, “The End of White Supremacy, An American Romance” (<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/the-end-of-white-supremacy-an-american-romance/>)

Class discussion leader: Wenyu Kong

Assignment due: précis-and-response paper three

October 5:

Ellison’s Short Fiction and Literary Criticism:

- *Flying Home and Other Stories*
- “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” (*Collected Essays*)
- “Indivisible Man” (*Collected Essays*)
- “The World and the Jug” (*Collected Essays*)

Class discussion leader: Michael Vozniak

Assignment due: précis-and-response paper four

October 12:

Three Days Before the Shooting...:

- *Three Days Before the Shooting...:*, Prologue + Book I

Class discussion leader: Patrick Orsagos

Assignment due: précis-and-response paper five

October 19:

Three Days Before the Shooting..., continued:

- *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, Book II + “Bliss’s Birth”

Class discussion leader: Alexis Walker

Assignment due: précis-and-response paper six

October 26:

Twenty-First Century Ellison:

- Percival Everett, *Erasure*
- Derek C. Maus, “New Transmissions on the Lower Frequencies: Echoes of Ellison in Twenty-First Century Fiction”
- Terrance Hayes, “How to Draw an Invisible Man” (in class)

Class discussion leader: Veronica Rine

November 2:

Sonic Ellison:

- Alexander G. Weheliye, “‘I Am I Be’: The Subject of Sonic Afro-modernity”
- Herman Beavers, “The Noisy Lostness: Oppositionality and Acousmatic Subjectivity in *Invisible Man*”
- Steve Pinkerton, “Ralph Ellison’s Righteous Riffs: Jazz, Democracy, and the Sacred”
- “Living With Music” (*Collected Essays*)
- “The Golden Age, Time Past” (*Collected Essays*)
- “Richard Wright’s Blues” (*Collected Essays*)
- Letter to Albert Murray (September 28, 1958)
- NET film “Jazz: The Experimenters” (in class)
- Zoom visit by Paul Devlin (in class)

Class discussion leader: Thayna Bergamini

November 9:

Visual Ellison:

- Sara Blair, “Photography and the Origins of Invisibility”
- Lena Hill, “The Visual Art of *Invisible Man*: Ellison’s Portrait of Blackness”
- “The Art of Romare Bearden” (*Collected Essays*)
- Letter to Stanley Edgar Hyman (May 29, 1970)
- Zoom visit by Lena Hill (in class)

Class discussion leader: David Laub

November 16:

Temporal and Historical Ellison:

- John F. Callahan, “Chaos, Complexity, and Possibility: The Historical Frequencies of Ralph Waldo Ellison”
- Lisa Yaszek, “An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*”
- Andrew Radford, “Ralph Ellison and Improvised History”

- Michael Germana, “Time, History, and Becoming in *Invisible Man*”

November 23:

Ellison and the Politics of Biography:

- Excerpt from Lawrence Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*
- Excerpt from Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*
- Excerpt from Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*
- “Out of the Hospital and Under the Bar”

Assignment due: seminar paper prospectus

November 30:

Seminar paper workshop—**complete draft of seminar paper due** + course evaluations administered

Seminar paper is due by 4pm on Monday, December 7 (the first day of Exam Week).