

security or dangers (9) and expanding consciousness or encapsulation (10). The fear of cultural uniformity is e.g. contradicted by the diversification of the Levittowns according to individual taste, and “MacDonaldization” is tempered by multiculturalism. Whether we will have sustainable abundance or ecological disaster on our hands is within our power to decide. “Ultimately, the world’s carrying capacity is not a scientific fact but a social construction. Nature is not outside us, and it does not have fixed limits. Rather its limits are our own (p. 108).” There is, as Nye reminds us in his last chapter (11), “Not just one future.”

Like David Nye’s other books, *Technology Matters* is written in a clear and lucid style wonderfully free of any of the dense jargon and tribal language that, in this reviewer’s opinion, mar so much of contemporary writing in cultural studies, particularly in gender, identity and “body” studies. *Technology Matters* ought to be recommended reading for decision makers in government or corporate organizations, managers, politicians, economists, market analysts, environmentalists and social planners. And it ought to be read by a worldwide audience of concerned and committed citizens who can influence technological applications, market mechanisms and politics. It is especially important today to understand technology in order to effectively combat global warming and reduce the emission of greenhouse gases. That the book will also be published in French and German translation is good news. Hopefully this will give it an even wider readership.

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Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. 657 pages; ISBN: 9780375408274 hardcover; \$35.00.

Stanford University professor Arnold Rampersad – who authored the definitive biographies of Langston Hughes and Jackie Robinson and collaborated with Arthur Ashe on his memoir, *Days of Grace* – has done it again: he has written another thoroughly researched volume that leaves us to admire both his meticulous scholarship and his compelling prose. An instant classic in American literary biography upon publication, Rampersad’s most recent book sheds light on the artistic intelligence and psychological complexity of Ralph Ellison, who rocketed into fame with *Invisible Man* in the early 1950s and later excelled in the genre of the essay (and, to some extent, in the short story), but who also notoriously spent several decades wrestling with his second novel – a perpetual work-in-progress that was finally published posthumously in 1999, in heavily edited and condensed form, under the title *Juneteenth*. As Rampersad clearly knows, most scholars who will read this biography will be looking for an answer to one burning question: what was it exactly that so tragically immobilized Ellison as an artist after *Invisible Man*? Rather than being crystallized in one key sentence, the answer unfolds gradually, as befits a biography of more than 650 pages.

Ellison, as Rampersad convincingly shows, was nothing if not a proud man who felt he had to excel in whatever he did – and with his second Great American Novel

he set his standards so high that they proved impossible to reach. The biography's early chapters, portraying Ellison's childhood and the relatives and acquaintances who loomed large in his early life, shed light on some possible early roots of the "Ellison pride, which would both empower and hobble Ralph" (7). We learn, for example, about Ralph's paternal grandfather, Alfred Ellison, the family patriarch – an epitome of black dignity who was born a slave but grew up to be a leader among the African Americans of post-Emancipation Abbeville, South Carolina. Then again, Rampersad also unfolds a series of events that hurt Ralph's "Ellison pride" from early on, mostly incidents arising from the poverty that ravaged the family after Ralph's father, Lewis Ellison, died at the age of thirty-nine when the future author was only three years old and his brother Herbert just an infant. The genesis of Ralph's complex adult personality had much to do with the early loss of his father and the resulting loss of financial and emotional security that forced him to watch his mother Ida struggle, with only modest success, to make ends meet in Jim Crow Oklahoma.

In addition to the pride that contributed, in complex ways, to his writer's block from the mid-1950s onward, the 1953 National Book Award that Ellison won for *Invisible Man* was, paradoxically, another factor that made the writing of a second novel a difficult enterprise. In the prize's wake, a cascade of honors started pouring in and gradually changed Ellison's way of life, as Rampersad demonstrates, from that of a literary author to that of a literary celebrity. While the various tributes opened the doors to the white-dominated cultural, literary, and academic circles to which Ellison longed to belong, finding time to write became increasingly hard. Yet write Ellison would, even frantically at times, but his ideas for a second novel kept sprawling out rather than coming together.

One reason why weaving the various fibers of the canvas of his literary imagination into a coherent whole became so difficult for Ellison was, according to this biography, his fixation with myth and symbol – an aspect of artistic innovation that mainly was a strength in *Invisible Man* but, containing the risk of an overemphasis on predetermined and formulaic patterns, turned into an obstacle as Ellison ever more obsessively sought to perfect his craft through his second novel. In his perpetual work-in-progress, Ellison intended to use his finely honed mastery of symbolism to resurrect a past Oklahoma and to join its multiracial history with an intense archaeology of his personal and national identity. Rampersad's summary of the spell that Oklahoma held over Ellison is perceptive: "[Ellison] saw Oklahoma as embodying some of the more mysterious forces in American culture. He believed that the region possessed or had possessed almost every element concerning power, race, and art that is essential to understanding the nation. It had Indians, whites, and blacks; treaties solemnly made and shamelessly broken; despair and hope, failure and shining success" (4–5). And in ways almost equally powerful and (potentially) mythical, Oklahoma had also been the cradle of the "Ellison pride" as well as the site of Ralph's early loss of his father that had triggered in him the rage and insecurity of an orphan even while his mother was still alive. Rampersad implies that Ellison, desiring to do with his fictionalized Oklahoma what Faulkner had done with his Yoknapatawpha, found it impossible to admit to himself that Faulkner had already brought modernist fictional-his-

toriography-cum-storytelling (in particular, the variety that oozes symbolism while focusing on the enigmas of race, pride, power, and nation) to a height that could not be easily surpassed. As Ellison gradually got lost in his memories and revisions of a restoried Oklahoma, time went on and presented new and acute challenges for American historical fiction that he was either unwilling or unable to embrace.

With the passage of time, came a new talented generation of African American writers. Rampersad repeatedly mentions Ellison's reluctance to help younger black authors as they fought for attention in the literary marketplace. Despite his fame, Ellison seldom supported his black colleagues by, for example, writing prefaces to their books (although he made some exceptions, including the foreword to Leon Forrest's first novel, edited by a persistent Toni Morrison); nor did he actively seek their company. Rampersad argues that as Ellison increasingly isolated himself from other black writers, he blocked his creativity by cutting himself off from a ground that could have vitally nurtured his growth. Ellison's interest in studying Africa, or in personally acquainting himself with African colleagues and visual artists, was equally limited; decorating his home with African art was as far as he was willing to go, Rampersad observes wryly.

Yet, intriguing as the question of a celebrated author's artistic paralysis may be, Rampersad's thorough book cannot be reduced to a detective story intent on resolving a single mystery; this biography has a number of other fascinating and painstakingly researched dimensions as well. For example, as the story of Ellison's youth and early adulthood unfolds, we encounter a number of incidents that the novelist later inserted, in fictionalized and heavily embellished form, into *Invisible Man* – such as his exposure to a powerful oration delivered by Dr. Emmett Jay Scott of Howard University in Washington Chapel at Tuskegee on Founder's Day 1936; his arrival in New York later that year, with sealed letters of recommendation written by prominent members of the Tuskegee community; his job at the A.C. Horn Paint Company on Long Island; and his experience of witnessing the Harlem riot of August 1, 1943. Also, the story of Ellison's dialogue with Marxism gains new nuances in Rampersad's treatment. Chronicling important influences and turning points, Rampersad pins down Ellison's radical leftist phase to 1937–42. On the whole, Rampersad maps out the historical contours of Ellison's life and achievement in unprecedented detail and narrates them in an engaged tone that holds the reader's interest.

A particularly noteworthy dimension of Rampersad's discussion is the attention he devotes to the life story of Fanny McConnell Buford Ellison, whom Ralph met and married after divorcing his first wife, Rosa Poindexter. The intelligent and self-sacrificing Fanny – her husband's secretary, personal assistant, and homemaker – was the woman behind Ralph's success. Although the marriage was long-lived, lasting from August 1946 to Ralph's death in April 1994, it was not without its tensions, which at times almost brought the union to a breaking point. Rampersad not only unveils the extra-marital affair that Ralph had while on a fellowship in Rome, but also discloses how the couple's involuntary childlessness became for Fanny a tragic source of guilt that Ralph ruthlessly used to his psychological advantage. Yet, the two needed each other and managed to revive and renew their companionship even after serious marital crises.

Obviously, Rampersad does not uncritically adore Ellison; in fact, some reviewers have accused him of leaning rather far in the opposite direction. However, while he may resist hero worship, Rampersad does not make a project out of lampooning the fêted author. He may seem to unnecessarily reiterate some criticisms – repeatedly highlighting, for example, Ellison’s vulnerability to white flattery and his reluctance to help younger black writers – but in a lengthy and chronologically sequenced biography such as this one, revisiting key issues is unavoidable if trajectories are to be established and patterns identified. In fact, Rampersad explicitly affirms that one crucial reason why he accepted the daunting task of being Ellison’s biographer in the first place was that he had “always admired Ellison’s work” (625). He acknowledges, as a matter of course, the inarguable and unique place of *Invisible Man* in the American literary canon and ranks *Shadow and Act* (1964) second among all single-authored African American essay collections, finding Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* its only superior. Rampersad’s Ellison is a tragic, complex, and unhappy figure, but far from a failure as a writer.

Before Rampersad started his project, he approached both Fanny Ellison (who has since died) and John F. Callahan, the executor of Ralph Ellison’s literary estate, and received unlimited access to the late author’s papers. Consequently, Rampersad’s book contains a plethora of minutiae, but his prose does not get bogged down in the wealth of historical detail. Any patient reader will be rewarded by a portrait of Ellison that, rather than cheaply going for the spectacular, is carefully carved from historical evidence. In a blurb on the hard cover edition’s dust jacket, Cornel West declares that “all serious scholarship on Ellison” must, from now on, “begin” with Rampersad’s book. Literary critics may have their quibbles with the concept of an appropriate starting point or beginning, but West’s statement holds: for a self-respecting Ellison scholar, ignoring this book is not an option.

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J. Brooks Bouson, *Jamaica Kincaid: Writing Memory, Writing Back to the Mother*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005. 242 pages; ISBN-13: 978-0791465233 hardcover (978-0791465240 paperback); \$65.00 (\$21.95).

The Antiguan-born novelist and essayist Jamaica Kincaid is a contemporary U.S.-based author whose texts portray black diasporic identity formation, resisting any uncritical idealization of either the author’s birthplace or a mythical “America.” Her 1990 novel *Lucy*, an ostensibly straightforward but symbolically complex first-person narrative, is a case in point: the story of a West Indian au pair in the United States (a late-twentieth-century variation on the familiar American trope of the black nanny/maid), *Lucy* depicts a first-generation immigrant’s perpetual sense of in-betweenness as a source of both fresh psychological insight and chronic emotional pain.

The most recent book by Loyola University professor J. Brooks Bouson, the author of *Quiet As It’s Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*