

## *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<sup>1</sup>

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.

–Irving Howe, 1963<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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 visibility 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup> *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

broadly, I often uncover the generative nature of black vision. Sustained examinations of literary scenes denoting black vision substantiate the complexity of African American identity. In fact, what bell hooks describes as “black looks”<sup>19</sup> – the practice of African Americans looking at material representations of blackness or of being looked on in material objects such as photographs – I translate into “black visualizations,” literary images of African Americans viewing the world or of being generally misread. In the texts of this study, the interpretive work performed by African American literary speakers attests to their cultural independence and authority. Consequently, *Visualizing Blackness* traces the glory of black humanity primarily through the historical evolution of black writing that focuses on visual practices as opposed to the revolutionary capacity of the photograph or other visual technologies.

By principally concerning itself with narrative tropes of vision, this book examines moments of visual discernment in literature to reassess the development of the African American literary tradition according to questions of sight rather than issues of voice. And although I am not preoccupied with pictorially illustrated literature, my work often intersects with and builds on scholarship guided by this interest. After all, the study of illustrated texts and analyses of black writers’ interest in visual art and technology is certainly one way to approach questions related to the importance of visibility to literary texts. For instance, Michael Chaney and Ivy Wilson valuably examine the impact of nineteenth-century visual art, iconography, and visual apparatuses on the writing and political identity of black slaves; Anne Carroll and Martha Nadel investigate interart texts of the Harlem Renaissance to uncover the formative ways image and text shaped modern black identity; and Sara Blair, Jacqueline Goldsby, and Miriam Thaggert implement a range of approaches to probe the rich ways photography introduces new modes of seeing that influence black literature from Reconstruction through the 1970s. However, I approach the writers in this study by emphasizing the importance they place on acquiring knowledge through sight as opposed to stressing their work with visual media. Although writers’ engagement with visual art and technology invariably enters this study – indeed, photographs occupy a central position in Chapter 2 – such concerns take a back seat to my persistent examination of writers’ focus on vision. *Visualizing Blackness* reveals visibility as indispensable to the history, development, and theoretical contours of the African American literary tradition.

### Sights of Instruction

By shifting the discussion of black literature from a verbal to a visual emphasis, a different set of issues emerges in stark relief. I examine the texts in this study with the aid of two frames that distinguish forms of the Picture Book trope and concentrate on distinct historical periods. Part I, "Sights of Instruction," traces the establishment and evolution of the trope of the Picture Book from Phillis Wheatley's poetry through 1920s publications by Harlem Renaissance women. My analysis of these texts aims to clarify how moments of visual instruction offer new modes for defining African American character. For the most part, these writers enjoy an unmitigated belief in the integrity of their vision, a rectitude they trace to the moral authority garnered by their social position in the nation. Women of the Harlem Renaissance reveal the first consistent signs of doubt regarding the moral authority of African American vision – an indication of their early affinity with a modernist perspective – but even they retain an inherent awareness of the error of those who prescribe deprecating visions of blackness. In contrast to the trope of the Talking Book which is usually founded on a moment of confusion and cultural deficiency that presents black writers seeking entrance into the Western world of letters, the Picture Book commences as a trope demarcating superior knowledge and self-sufficiency.

In recognition of the seminal position held by Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), and her deliberate approach to visualizing blackness, I identify her work as inaugurating the trope of the Picture Book. Contrasting her poetry to publications by her black contemporaries clarifies both the role of her work in the formation of the African American literary canon and the basic elements of the Picture Book trope. For instance, James Gronniosaw's *A Narrative of the Most remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukausaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, As Related by Himself* (1770) and Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) provide instructive examples of the trope of the Talking Book. Comparing the place of vision in their narrative accounts of their captivity, enslavement, and conversion to Christianity provides telling differences with Wheatley's portrayal of vision in her book of verse. Gronniosaw commences the trope of the Talking Book through his careful description of his desire to read:

I was never so surprised in my whole life as when I saw the book talk to my master; for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move

his lips. – I wished it would do so to me. . . . I open'd it and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it would say something to me; but was very sorry and greatly disappointed when I found it would not speak, this thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despis'd me because I was black.<sup>20</sup>

For Gronniosaw, his failure to communicate with the book provides additional proof of the blight of physical blackness. This scene of instruction formed around the stubbornly silent book teaches him to despise his appearance and distrust his sight.

Equiano adopts Gronniosaw's point of view when he conveys his passionate desire to learn to read:

I was astonished at the wisdom of the white people in all things I saw. . . . I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent.<sup>21</sup>

Later, he admits that he “looked upon” white people “as men superior to” blacks “and therefore . . . had the stronger desire to resemble them.”<sup>22</sup> These moments vividly illustrate the components of the Talking Book trope. In each instance, the black speaker observes a white individual reading, wishes to make the book talk to him, and interprets verbal illiteracy as a marker of racial inferiority. The black man's failure to read initially appears as a failure to interpret what he sees. Both Gronniosaw and Equiano are inspired to read by their high regard for white appearance and wisdom, and they view verbal literacy as an important form of imitation. Their inability to comprehend the written word results in feelings of cultural inadequacy.

The seminal feature I identify as establishing the trope of the Picture Book – an unabashed confidence in the authority of black vision – emerges clearly in Wheatley's poems and tenders a sharp distinction with writers' invested in the trope of the Talking Book. Although scholars have long condemned Wheatley for abdicating her duty to write forcefully against slavery, more recent critics consider the subtle ways her poetry seeks to intervene in discussions of African American equality.<sup>23</sup> My readings examine the way Wheatley's attention to race and vision facilitates her revisions of common conceptions of black inferiority. She repeatedly credits her creative genius, moral righteousness, and religious constancy to her enlightened view of blackness, race relations, and Christ. As I demonstrate

in Chapter I, she alternately assumes the posture of instructor and model art student, using both roles to highlight black creative superiority and moral authority. These attributes, achieved through her visionary prowess, illuminate the goals of the trope of the Picture Book.

Many writers signify on her verse directly and adopt a similar posture of uncertainty and humility even as they shrewdly teach their readers to subscribe to their vision of U.S. society. The authors of the slave narratives profess confusion and doubt about the sights around them, echoing Wheatley's speaker in a poem such as "To Maecenas," but they clearly instruct their readers to endorse their point of view. Additionally, as these writers develop the trope of the Picture Book, they acknowledge the changing visual technologies influencing their historical context. For instance, the ex-slave narrators subtly connect the truth of their vision to the technology of the daguerreotype and extol their honest portrayals of interactions between white and black Americans as necessary contributions to the national welfare. As they structure scenes around visual instruction in their texts, they encourage their audience to embrace and trust their vision just as they are learning to trust and value emergent technologies that record the world around them. Thus, slave narrators simultaneously extol the authority of their sight even when it diverges sharply from the expectations of their audience. By presenting black subjects who see and interpret the world around them in more convincing terms than their white counterparts, these writers declare their instructional authority.

### **Lessons from the Museum**

Part II, "Lessons from the Museum," focuses on variations of one site of instruction. It contemplates the ways that museum culture pervades black literature of the twentieth century. In contrast to their predecessors who emphasize a largely uncomplicated belief in their visual authority, the late and post-Harlem Renaissance writers of this section detail their protagonist's struggle to regain an unadulterated perspective of U.S. society. The difficulty of their endeavor enacts the modern struggle to repair a fractured identity and underscores the need for sophisticated tools of visual observation. To this end, writers craft scenes of instruction that endorse, replicate, or exploit the principles of museum conduct. In fact, if the trope of the Picture Book is initially defined by the possession of special powers of insight rooted in black moral authority, as we move beyond the era defined as the "The Museum Age" – the period from 1880 to 1920 – visual tropes become heavily inflected by concepts disseminated by the museum.

Tony Bennett explains that the public museum was founded for the purpose of instructing citizens. By providing them with knowledge on how to see themselves and their place in the world, the museum embraced its role as an instructional site. Scholars have long interrogated how institutions dedicated to the display of cultural objects and visual art codify ethnic groups and instruct individuals to read racial difference, and black writers through the middle of the twentieth century demonstrate a growing interest in recreating museum culture in their texts. This insertion of museums into literature participates in what Karin Roffman describes as modern American women writers' complicated reflection on the way that demonstrating expertise in such institutions "became the means by which authority could be established" in their creative and professional lives.<sup>24</sup> In his examination of literature that engages the museum, Les Harrison explains that "the museum's practice is one of representing its objects to convey a given message; its practice is representational. The museum and the literary text then become analogous as sites where the existing power structures and power relations in society are confirmed or contested."<sup>25</sup>

Writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Melvin Tolson, and Ralph Ellison turn to the "analogous" space of the museum to stress the importance of not only learning by sight but from deliberately organized scenes. Through either staging visual experiences structured by institutional rules for acquiring knowledge, or inserting fictional museums into their work, these writers portray moments of visual discovery – and the spaces that foster such opportunities – as critical to identity formation. Because their works emerge after "The Museum Age," writers of the mid-twentieth century reap the benefit of writing for a reading public more familiar with the museum experience than their predecessors. Consequently, they confidently draw on the representative world of the museum to infuse their literary worlds with new powers of instruction.

As an institution, the museum does not recommend itself as a homogeneous site with uniform goals. Instead, African American writers appeal to particular types and notions of the museum. Their works illustrate the acquisition of knowledge through interpretations of display; portray the impact of experiences occurring in museum spaces; and depict encounters that represent the surge of museum culture beyond the museum proper. The writers I study introduce singular ideas of the museum, together with the individual histories attending each type, into their literary explorations of black experience. Their texts rely most conspicuously on the natural history museum and art museum. As I discuss in Chapter 4, the natural history museum served as the first home for anthropologists – as

well as other scientists – and shaped early discussions of race and culture. Carla Yanni explains that these institutions, where “objects were collected not only for political meaning but also for their visual power,” transform “museum vision into a ‘way of seeing’” such that “once an object rests in a museum, there is no way to view it other than as an object of visual worth.”<sup>26</sup> Her description of “museum vision” helps make sense of black writers’ reliance on a type of museum burdened with a history of objectifying ethnic minorities in troubling ways. Yanni reminds us that in the nineteenth century natural history museum context, “[I]ay consumers of science were also encouraged to learn by looking; vision was a credible way of understanding the world, especially in science museums.”<sup>27</sup>

Notwithstanding the significant role museums of natural history played in affecting ideas about race, the art museum garners the lion’s share of scholarly attention in literary study.<sup>28</sup> Scholars identify the 1793 opening of the Louvre Museum in Paris as the birth of the modern public art museum, but in the U.S., that distinction belongs to Charles Willson Peale’s Philadelphia Museum. Black writers’ investment in the art museum, an institution driven by educational goals, makes plain their drive to realign the national discussion of race from accentuating racialized objects to studying black interpretation. The turn from a focus on African American writers’ construction of visually discerning figures in the literary texts of Part I, to a concentration on black writers’ dependence on museums to instruct readers’ vision in Part II, facilitates my analysis of the consistent yet evolving appeal to visuality in pre-Black Arts literature. By approaching their work through these frames, *Visualizing Blackness* highlights black writers’ refutations of U.S. society’s misguided reliance on established pictorial notions of black humanity. The focus on the museum in Part II adds a new direction for contemplating African American literature invested in visuality. My study draws from scholars’ fine work to expand and rethink the field of African American visual-verbal scholarship and to assert that writers’ investment in visuality informs the very shape of the black literary canon. Within a sweeping historical scope, I probe multiple literary genres including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. In surveying the most persistent examples of their dependence on the trope of the Picture Book, *Visualizing Blackness* contends that African American writers become sophisticated practitioners of vision out of necessity.

Individual chapters develop the important ways writers exploit visuality. Chapters 1 and 2 consider the popular and high art visual portrayals of blackness that provide a backdrop for writers’ revisionary texts.

Chapter 1, “Witnessing Moral Authority in Pre-Abolition Literature,” examines how early African American writers showcase their visual assessment of the nation that teaches readers to revise popular conceptions of black character and recognize the visual perception of black citizens. It contrasts Scipio Moorhead’s frontispiece of Wheatley with contemporary paintings and suggests that his visual portrayal anticipates Wheatley’s celebration of sight in terms of her imagination and religious devotion, two attributes that confirm her independent moral character. Analyses of her poems confirm her consistent appeal to vision to portray her creative and spiritual authority. Turning to the nineteenth-century authors of slave narratives, the chapter probes Douglass’s and Jacobs’s relentlessly honest observations of slavery in first person narratives that parallel the work of the daguerreotype and replicate nineteenth century genre paintings that figure African Americans on the margins of U.S. citizenship. They offer their moral wholeness as an antidote to a nation fractured by a refusal to face race relations forthrightly.

The works examined in Chapter 2, “Picturing Education and Labor in Washington and Du Bois,” emphasize Booker T. Washington’s and W. E. B. Du Bois’s literary and photographic representations of the education of black workers. By considering their most canonical texts, *Up from Slavery* (1901) and *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), alongside the photographic collections they supported, I ponder the complexity of their formation of the racialized seeing subject. As educators, they carefully revise the trope of the Picture Book to depict the inspired vision of the black masses determined to succeed. Du Bois unveils the danger of denying the American Dream to young rural souls whereas Washington extols the power embodied by visions of educational institutions. Although their portrayals diverge sharply from each other as well as from images promulgated by mainstream media and literature, both men trumpet spirited cases for entrusting black Americans with contributing to the country’s progress. Washington in particular uncovers an unexpectedly progressive strategy for portraying African American education.

Chapter 3, “Gazing upon Plastic Art in the Harlem Renaissance,” refines the discussion of labor to focus specifically on the black female artist. Moving forward to the 1920s, this chapter studies how New Negro women’s poetry and fiction appeal to visual art to revise stereotypical images of black humanity. Turning to ekphrasis, the chapter argues that black women seek to “still” their work to contemplate the complexity of their modern outlook. Narrowly defined by Leo Spitzer as “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art” and more broadly described

by James Heffernan as “the verbal representation of visual representation,” ekphrasis recalls the long history behind verbal texts’ investment in visual art.<sup>29</sup> As they insert a pause in the action of their texts, they extol the potential for black female artists to impact U.S. race relations. I study the poetry of Anne Spencer, Angelina Grimké, and Gwendolyn Bennett as well as fiction by Nella Larsen, Maude Irwin Owens, and Jessie Fauset to highlight the ways women focus on visual art across genres. Together, their texts present African American female creativity as invested in radically redefining political and aesthetic ideas across the entire black community. Renaissance women writers also demonstrate an avid interest in the painted portrait. Francoise Meltzer’s analysis of the portrait suggests that because it is “‘other’ to the verbal economy of the text,” the portrait “functions as a good barometer for literature’s views of itself, on representation, and on the power of writing.”<sup>30</sup> For women of the Harlem Renaissance, depending on ekphrasis and visual portraits facilitates their visualization of black womanhood as well as their enhancement of the trope of the Picture Book.

Chapter 4, “Zora Neale Hurston: Seeing by the Rules of the Natural History Museum,” commences Part II. I begin this chapter by reviewing Hurston’s training as an anthropologist and considering the formative role the natural history museum initially played in publishing anthropological research. Using her studies with Franz Boas as a backdrop, this chapter argues that Hurston connects her written texts to the museum by championing the acquisition of knowledge through careful observation. It also suggests that she portrays her protagonists as ethnographers whose growing insight of their communities displays the importance of cultural authority achieved through sophisticated vision. After examining her early short stories to establish Hurston’s penchant for enlisting fiction to challenge scientific pronouncements of black intellectual inferiority, I analyze *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939). These novels lay bare her method for visualizing African American intelligence in ways that simultaneously recall and refute the earlier scientific fascination with measuring skulls and brains to gauge intellectual aptitude. The chapter argues that the protagonists of her mature novels assume the roles of participant-observers who adopt the tools of anthropology to learn more about their culture and themselves. As protagonists demonstrate their visual dexterity, readers are invited to assess the knowledge they collect, thereby fulfilling the expectations established by exhibits in natural history museums.

In Chapter 5, “Melvin Tolson: Gaining Modernist Perspective in the Art Gallery,” I shift my attention from the natural history museum to examine Tolson’s investment in the art museum. Concentrating on the volumes of verse that form the bookends of his career, *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits* (c. 1935) and *Harlem Gallery* (1965), I suggest that the art museum comes to represent a space for publication, a means for contemplating how avant-garde black art might reach an expanded audience. After reviewing early U.S. museum history, including the distinct development of African American public museums as well as historically black college and university museums, I argue that Tolson portrays the art museum as a site where the black critic and black artist close ranks to champion modernist art by African Americans. Signifying on the trope of the Picture Book, Tolson foregrounds the curator’s visual authority that enables his sophisticated understanding of how modern black art proves culturally relevant to diverse black audiences. Tolson draws on his career as a college professor to insist on the power of both “high” and “low” African American art to unveil the complexity of black identity.

I conclude *Visualizing Blackness* with Chapter 6, “Ralph Ellison: Understanding Black Identity beyond Museum Walls.” This chapter contends that Ellison appeals to museum culture to expose how as an institution, the museum develops rules that pervade social interactions throughout society. Building on André Malraux’s concept of a “museum without walls,” I argue that in both *Invisible Man* (1952) and his unfinished second novel which he worked on until 1993, Ellison constructs scenes according to exhibition rules or around art objects to demonstrate the need for sophisticated reading in everyday affairs, particularly those highly charged relationships between people of different races. Close readings of both *Invisible Man* and *Three Days Before the Shooting...* allow me to trace Ellison’s careful attention to theories of visual display and interpretation as he asserts the need to recognize and respect the sophisticated perspective born of black cultural experience. His success serves as a final testament to the formative role of visual aesthetics in shaping the tradition of African American literature.

As these chapters suggest, *Visualizing Blackness* is not a prolonged contemplation of whether or how painting is or is not like poetry, or how visual art objects are or are not like books. By investigating the many ways black writers stage moments of visual instruction to shape definitions of black identity, this study eschews overly neat packaging. Instead, each chapter takes up an important historical moment in African American letters and aims to recover the rich diversity of black writers’ appeal to visual

aesthetics. Put simply, *Visualizing Blackness* examines the most formative ways African American writers appeal to visibility in shaping their literary works. By following the evolution of the trope of the Picture Book, I provide a critical apparatus for analyzing a fundamental issue in the African American literary canon. This apparatus, considered within the expansive frame *Visualizing Blackness* offers, represents a starting point for other scholars to build on rather than a definitive end.