

**“In the Light Bulb Room”
A Nomination for the 2018 Schwartz Prize
Submitted by Oklahoma Humanities**

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Invisible Man*

Program Description

“In the Light Bulb Room” is a community conversation program based in the writings of eminent Oklahoma author Ralph Ellison. With support from Oklahoma Humanities, the Ralph Ellison Foundation showcased “In the Light Bulb Room” at four statewide venues. The program takes its name from the National Book Award-winning *Invisible Man*. The narrator, confronted by racism and disillusionment, retreats to a basement bunker that he outfits with 1369 lights. Like the narrator, who seeks to illuminate and understand the challenges he encounters as a black man, the program encouraged a diverse audience to address the difficult topic of race relations, bring it out of the shadows, and gain new perspectives within their communities.

Introduction

Oklahoma Humanities nominates “In the Light Bulb Room” for the 2018 Schwartz Prize. “In the Light Bulb Room” programs were funded through the NEH initiative “Humanities and the Legacy of Race and Ethnicity in America.” Oklahoma Humanities received \$15,000 from NEH, which was paid to the Ralph Ellison Foundation (a nonprofit organization), under contract, to administer four public programs in 2017.

The council’s aims in undertaking the project were to comply with the NEH mandate to address current race relations with rich humanities context. The program was exemplary in achieving the NEH’s desire for vigorous, consequential public discussion of the persistent social, economic, cultural, and racial issues that divide our communities. The council also wished to build on the Foundation’s superb track record of hosting community conversations on social issues, including race relations, and to expand the program beyond Oklahoma City, where previous programs had taken place. The need for safe forums where Oklahomans can learn about the history of race relations in our state and share their own experiences is vital. Oklahoma is not immune to bigotry and racial violence and Oklahoma Humanities’ goals were to provide a vehicle for community members to come together and further their understanding of racial tensions and possible ways to ameliorate them.

The Ralph Ellison Foundation was uniquely positioned to address race relations because of their mission to promote Ralph Ellison’s legacy. Born in Oklahoma City in 1913, Ellison was exposed to a thriving jazz scene. Living in the “Deep Deuce” district, he knew the likes of Charlie Christian and Jimmy Rushing and was a musician himself. It wasn’t until his enrollment at Tuskegee University that writing became his passion. He eventually moved to New York City to pursue his career and in 1952 received the National Book Award for *Invisible Man*.

“In the Light Bulb Room” takes its name from *Invisible Man*. The narrator, confronted by racism and disillusionment, retreats to a basement bunker that he outfits with 1369 light bulbs. There he sought to illuminate and understand the challenges he encountered as a black man in the society in which he lived. The Foundation has successfully branded this program using the light bulb metaphor not as a zone of isolation but as a place for conversation and exploration.

Using the texts of Ellison as a basis for each discussion, the conversations were directed toward understanding current race relations in the state. The programs took place in Oklahoma City, Stillwater, Norman, and Tulsa. The Foundation had already found success in attracting diverse audiences to its “In the Light Bulb Room” programs in Oklahoma City and has a reputation for offering nonpartisan, neutral content without advocacy. The statewide conversations focused on the racial tensions found in each specific host site city, starting with the common ground of Ellison’s writings and life experiences. This tie to literature served as a touchpoint for discussions resulting in exemplary public humanities programs. Texts excerpts were provided to audience members via download from the Foundation’s website and as printouts at the venue. Scholars led discussions and Ralph Ellison Foundation Executive Director Michael Owens acted as facilitator. Partnerships included the Paramount Theater in Oklahoma City, the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, and the Greenwood Cultural Center in Tulsa.

The topics of discussion were as varied as the audience members’ interests and concerns. In Tulsa, the deliberate public erasure of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre from public memory and the ensuing decades of discrimination was the focus. In Oklahoma City, participants discussed the first state constitutional amendment, Senate Bill One, which forbade blacks from using public transportation. In Norman, conversation centered on contemporary issues, such as Confederate monuments and streets named for KKK members. In Stillwater, racial divides experienced by Oklahoma State University students were examined. Ellison’s essays “Harlem is Nowhere” (1964) and “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks” (1970) served as the anchor through which audiences could discuss the ties of past and present human experience at the root of all these distinct issues.

Involvement of new audiences

Among the new audiences were city officials, high school and college students, nonprofit directors, community leaders, and interested citizens. The most compelling attributes of this audience were its diversity, a unique experience for many attendees. Also new to this program was the geographical representation of the four communities. Although the Foundation is a statewide nonprofit, its programs have largely focused on Oklahoma City, though its goal is to reach a broader audience. This series of programs accomplished that goal.

Innovative merge of public and academic programs

The program modeled how powerful the academic humanities can be in understanding current public issues. Many university faculty members served as panelists and included experts in Ralph Ellison’s life and writings, Africana studies, and those who work to improve diversity within the academy. Community panelists included public servants, elected officials, and public school teachers. These decision makers partnered with humanities scholars to provide content that equipped audience members to make informed decisions and understand new perspectives.

By far, the most important reason for including both academic and public panelists was to build credibility, establish rich and deep humanities ideas while synthesizing the scholarship for the general public. This goal was achieved, evidenced by the thoughtful comments and questions that resulted at each venue [see Audience Evaluations below].

The choice of venues deliberately melded academic and public aspects of the programs. Session one took place in downtown Oklahoma City’s popular Film Row, a district alive with historic building renewal and a major hub for community activity, including museums, event space, and restaurants. Session two used the Greenwood Cultural Center, whose mission preserves African-American heritage amid the

legacy of place, located in Tulsa's former Black Wall Street district where the 1921 Race Massacre occurred. Session three took advantage of the open and welcoming academic atmosphere of Oklahoma State University's Student Union, where students are drawn to dining and activities and the Stillwater community attends OSU Allied Arts performances. The closing program was held at The Mercury Events Center, a space that draws audiences from not only Norman and The University of Oklahoma campus but also the neighboring suburbs of Moore, Noble, and South Oklahoma City.

Public impact

Audience numbers were large enough to satisfy the program's objective to be accessible to the public while small enough to encourage true interactive discussion. The following data show audience demographics, participating scholars, discussion topics, links to news reports, and, most important, attendee evaluations, which reveal their personal insights and the deep public impact of programs.

Program 1

Date: February 16, 2017

Location: The Paramount Room, Oklahoma City

Topic: "Senate Bill One and the Real Black Oklahoma History"

Panelists: Poet and educator Quraysh Ali Lansana, Oklahoma Assistant Attorney General George Burnett, and President of the Oklahoma NAACP Garland Pruitt

Number of attendees: approx. 45 by head count

[Linked article in *The Oklahoman*, 2/16/17](#)

Audience evaluations:

"I believe it allowed many members of the Oklahoma community to unify and discuss race absent of social rejection and/or extreme bias. Racism and other forms of discrimination are usually difficult subjects to openly discuss and evaluate in Oklahoma, thus it is vital that we use forums such as these to openly address and confront the state's history with racism. The panelists were amazing and I appreciated their diverse career experiences—law, education, and advocacy. The moderators were also great at keeping the group discussion on-topic and were mindful of time constraints."

"Much needed dialogue. Keep them coming. This is much needed."

"It inspired and propelled me further to speak up to help impact my community and family. Thank you for hosting this forum! I have never felt such unity, respect, and honesty about real issues as I did from everyone in attendance."

"It encouraged me to continue to advocate for others as a 'white person of privilege.' It was a good, decently well-rounded talk in which I felt my voice was not discouraged."

Program 2

Date: July 13, 2017

Location: Greenwood Cultural Center, Tulsa

Topic: "Racial and Cultural Inclusion: What Do We Want and How Do We Want It?"

Panelists: Jonathan Townsend, candidate for the District 73 congressional seat in the Oklahoma House of Representatives, and Tulsa educators Jasmine Johnson, Philip Johnson, and Kenesha Daniels

Number of attendees: 75 by head count

[Linked article in the *Tulsa World*, 7/03/17](#)

Audience Evaluations:

“It brought us together and gave us some education and inspiration. I think it provided a great forum for discussion, and it made me not only want to do more research but made me think about the personal changes I can make to promote positive changes in the Tulsa community.”

“As a temporary resident, I’m always interested to learn about race relations in Tulsa and the legacy of the race massacre, oil money, economic development and disinvestment in North Tulsa. Thank you for this event. Please have more!”

“It was great to see a diverse cross-section of Tulsa come together for a difficult conversation.”

“Opening dialogue is the first step in working towards applicable solutions for our community. This was a wonderful program. I would love to see more like it here in Tulsa. It was very insightful.”

“It opened people’s eyes to an awareness of issues in Tulsa—specifically, economic needs for businesses in North Tulsa.”

“This conversation brought people together to discuss issues within the community and to seek solutions. At the very least, it provided education and new perspectives. I hope it provided even more than that. I gained a marvelous education from this conversation that I didn’t expect walking in. I would have happily stayed for hours longer.”

Program 3

Date: September 19, 2017

Location: Oklahoma State University Student Union (French Lounge), Stillwater

Topic: “Is ‘Diversity’ Enough? Strategies for Inclusion on Campus and Beyond”

Panelists: History lecturer Dr. Amy Carreiro, OSU Professor Emeritus Dr. Earl Mitchell, and Dr. Shaila Mehra, Director of OSU’s Center of Africana Studies

Number of attendees: approx. 85 by head count

Linked articles in the [Stillwater Free Press](#) and the [O’Colly](#)

Audience Evaluations:

“Today’s program provided exposure to more information about Ralph Ellison’s life, thoughts, experiences, and revelation surrounding daily, ongoing misperceptions surrounding race. The experienced moderator helped keep the conversation moving. The panelists were very professional yet down-to-earth and engaging. The event held my attention through the evening and was an overall good start to a discussion that needs to continue.”

“We benefitted from an opportunity to gain a multi-faceted perspective via various experts about Ellison. The panelists and hosts’ knowledge, experience, and interaction with the audience were exceptional! Hopefully, this event will stimulate more conversations with the people around me.”

“The conversation around how race and diversity affects Stillwater and OSU was incredible. It would be great if the Ralph Ellison Foundation was able to somehow be actively involved with overcoming the barrier between different races and cultures here in Stillwater.”

“It provided a safe place for people to be able to understand the complexities of systematic racism. This was exceptional. I loved that people were asked to read and do more. The panel members were excellent and the questions asked were great.”

“Identifying as a white liberal, I appreciated experiencing Ellison’s annoyance with the white liberal community and the panelists’ discussion of how white liberals can empower the black community instead of speaking for it. Really great! I want to see more!”

“The session generated discussion, provided food for thought, and distributed materials that will continue to impact our community. Excellent work! Please keep this going!

Program 4

Date: October 26, 2017

Location: The Mercury Events Center, Norman

Topic: “The Pace of Change: History and Race Relations in a College Town”

Panelists: Dr. Shannon Bert, Associate Professor at OU; City of Norman Council member Breea Clark; and Dr. Dorscine Spigner-Littles, Professor Emeritus at OU

Number of attendees: 25 by head count

Mentioned in [linked article in the Norman Transcript, 10/25/17](#)

Audience Evaluations:

“I was happy to see people from separate backgrounds willing to speak on tough issues.”

“I really enjoyed hearing from experts as well as the community members in attendance. Thank you for having this!”

“We need another one.”

Audience Demographics

Gender

Male:30%

Female:70%

Age

Under 18:0%

18-30:33%

31-60:47%

Over 60:20%

Ethnicity*

African American:26%

Asian: 2.3%

Caucasian:59%

Hispanic: 4.5%

Native American: 8%

Other: 2.3%

*A small number of respondents checked multiple boxes for ethnicity

Education Level

High School/GED:1%

Some college:17%

College graduate:30%

Post-graduate:52%

Household Income

Under \$25K29.2%

\$25-50K19.5%

\$50-75K20.7%

Over \$75K30.5%

Demonstrated Sustainability

According to the Ralph Ellison Foundation, the most satisfying achievement of “In the Light Bulb Room” was in conducting vibrant, widely inclusive conversations about race and society that bridged demographic divides that far too often keep Oklahomans apart. The exhilaration, enthusiasm, and even relief expressed by participants—about “initiating dialogue,” “stimulating conversation,” “learning new perspectives,” “bringing people together,” and “addressing difficult issues honestly,”—indicate a significant hunger for the Foundation’s brand of high-level, Ellison-influenced discussion.

In fact, the most consistent feedback received across sessions in each of the communities visited was the simple imperative to “keep doing this,” because such work was viewed as “sorely needed” and “vital.” Especially within today’s fractured political climate, the experience of assembling an ethnically diverse group to practice honest, respectful conversation on challenging subjects has underlined for the Foundation the importance of building community in its most fundamental sense. Since these programs took place in 2017 the Foundation has been contacted by the Mayor of Tulsa to use the Light Bulb program principles to train individuals in Tulsa to facilitate difficult conversations. The city is launching a reconciliation project and the Foundation is expected to play a major role in its development.

Generally, the partnership between Oklahoma Humanities and the Ralph Ellison Foundation through this project has given the Foundation wide statewide recognition, initiating requests to bring the program back to Tulsa, Stillwater, and Norman. Both organizations—Oklahoma Humanities and the Foundation—have greater name recognition among the state’s cultural organizations, key to our shared goals to expand programs throughout the state.

Conclusion

The content and structure of individual sessions, the range and dynamism of discussions that occurred there, and the enthusiastic response of our participating audiences attest to a successful program. Additionally, the selection of panel members for each session insured a broad range of disciplinary perspectives including law, history, poetry, literature, politics, urban planning, entrepreneurship, activism, and human relations.

Each of the four sessions examined a particular topic that centered discussion within a humanities context and provided a springboard for the diverse range of issues our audience wanted to discuss. Sometimes these topics were explicitly historical, such as the Oklahoma City session’s focus on Senate Bill One—the first order of business of the Oklahoma Legislature that effectively introduced Jim Crow

laws to the new state—or the Norman session’s concern with how the community’s history as a “sundown town” might be examined to affect change in the city’s politics today.

Topics at the Stillwater and Tulsa sessions took a sociocultural slant, concentrating on the rhetoric of separation, assimilation, inclusion, and diversity. Questions raised about socioeconomic issues in North Tulsa—especially considering the historical legacy of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921—and the meaningful inclusion of people of color within university life in Stillwater addressed local histories in rich, multidisciplinary ways that made them relevant to attendees’ daily lives. This multidisciplinary fluidity characterized all *Light Bulb Room* sessions, drawing upon the literary legacy of Ralph Ellison’s essays and his exploration of African-American experience through different modes of investigation, from psychological reflection (“Harlem is Nowhere”) to historical criticism (“What America Would Be Like Without Blacks”). [see links below]

The program exceeded Oklahoma Humanities’ expectations in fulfilling the NEH mandate to provide public programming based on the scholarly examination of current race relations. It also fulfilled Oklahoma Humanities’ mission to help Oklahomans to learn about the human experience, understand new perspectives, and participate knowledgeably in civic life. Most importantly, it afforded Oklahomans a rare chance to come together within a safe forum—facilitated by an expert project director and informed by academic and civic leaders—to discuss an important topic of great concern.

About the Ralph Ellison Foundation:

Founded in Oklahoma City upon the conclusion of the Ralph Ellison Centennial Celebration in 2014, the Ralph Ellison Foundation is committed to highlighting the accomplishments of the acclaimed author and to empowering the lives of others through his legacy in the areas of literacy, music, and the arts.

To accomplish these goals, the Foundation has focused recently on projects to engage both children and adults, such as creating curricula based on Ellison’s work for schools, conducting reading clinics and writing workshops, hosting community discussion forums and artistic events, as well as sponsoring an annual gala celebration in Ellison’s honor. As we do our work, we strive to partner with other organizations on the local, state, and national levels to promote the kinds of cultural awareness and cooperation that bridge ethnic and demographic divides.

The Foundation also envisions long-term goals of establishing a multicultural center in Oklahoma City, establishing an annual Ralph Ellison Festival, as well as honoring Ellison with a birthplace marker and statue. We plan to develop additional initiatives to help raise the profile of Oklahoma’s most significant literary contribution to the world and to further good works in his name in the areas of education, community development, artistic programming, and the pursuit of positive social change.

Link to the Ralph Ellison Foundation’s “In the Light Bulb Room” webpage:

<http://ralphellisonfoundation.org/inthelightbulbroom/>

About the Project Director:

MICHAEL ERIC OWENS was the Manager of Library Operations at the prestigious Ralph Ellison Library in Oklahoma City and an Adjunct Professor of African-American Studies at Northcentral University. He is also a distinguished scholar, writer, speaker, and activist who has used his voice and literary passion to illuminate the untold stories of Black America.

Born and raised in the inner city of Milwaukee, Michael Owens experienced firsthand the many challenges facing minorities today. Following a successful career in the United States Navy where he achieved Sailor of the Year honors, he attended the University of Wisconsin-Parkside earning degrees in History and Political Science, as well as the Outstanding Graduate Award. He received his Master of Library & Information Science from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Throughout his career, Michael has received countless awards and is a proud member of the National Scholars Honor Society. In 2005, he was invited to serve as a delegate to the National Foreign Affairs Conference on Africa. He has written extensively on the obstacles to achieving racial reconciliation and equality. Michael has appeared on such programs as OKC Metro and the Fox Morning Show. He has also done multiple national radio interviews. His latest literary work is titled YES, I AM, WHO I AM: A New Philosophy of Black Identity. Professor of History Laura Gellott sums up this recent work thusly: Owens' book "is the result of much reading, research, and deep reflection. Part history, part memoir, part meditation, it is ultimately a hope filled summons to Blacks to embrace and claim their full identity as Americans. Michael Owens' critique of 'African American' as identity is sure to provoke, and to raise further questions as the reader follows Owens' journey of discovery towards a usable Black identity for contemporary America."

Links to Ellison articles used in programs:

<https://harpers.org/archive/2014/08/harlem-is-nowhere-2/>

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-america-would-be-like-without-blacks/>

Links to scholar/presenter bios:

Quraysh Ali Lansana: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/quraysh-ali-lansana>

Garland Pruitt: <http://una-okc.blogspot.com/2016/11/garland-pruitt.html>

Jonathan Townsend: <http://www.tulsatoday.com/2015/04/10/jonathan-townsend-campaigns-for-district-73/>

Dr. Amy Carreiro: <https://history.okstate.edu/people-category/faculty-category/34-carreiro-amy>

Dr. Shannon Bert: <http://www.ou.edu/cas/humanrelations/our-people/faculty/shannon-bert>

Breea Clark: <http://www.normanok.gov/content/city-council-ward-6>