

Reevaluating *Juneteenth*: What to do with Ralph Ellison's Second Novel?

by
J.T. Cobb

A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the University Honors College

Spring 2017

Reevaluating *Juneteenth*: What to do with Ralph Ellison's Second Novel?

by
J.T. Cobb

APPROVED:

Dr. Allen Hibbard
Department of English

Dr. Maria K. Bachman
Department of English

Dr. Kathleen Therrien
Department of English
Second Reader

Dr. Philip E. Phillips, Associate
Dean, University Honors College

Acknowledgements

There are many to whom I owe a profound gratitude, both for helping in the completion of this project and getting me to the point where such an undertaking was possible. Among them...

- My family, for their overwhelming support and guidance throughout my life.
Without your encouragement and love, I doubt I would have gotten this far.
- In particular, Barbara Oakley (Nana) for the drive to write in the first place.
- Dr. Therrien, for being an excellent mentor and advisor throughout my College Career.
- Dr. Hibbard, for asking if I was still wanting to write that book on Ellison, and for impeccable guidance in bringing this project to fruition.
- The Author of my existence, for everything.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	ABSTRACT.....	v
II.	PREFACE.....	1
III.	CHAPTER I.....	5
IV.	CHAPTER II.....	18
V.	CHAPTER III.....	30
VI.	CODA.....	42
VII.	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	49

ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to situate Ralph Ellison's posthumous novel, *Juneteenth*, in a workable literary framework as a place where the transition between Modernism and Postmodernism occurs, and also explores Ellison's views on the moral responsibility of the author in a democracy. To this end, I have examined *Juneteenth* on its own and in concert with Ellison's other novel, *Invisible Man*, and works that help to examine the hybrid nature of the novel as both Modern and Postmodern, in addition to the divisive and intense criticism surrounding the work. By seeking to find a place for *Juneteenth* within a wider literary framework, I endeavor to widen the discourse around this novel that is more obscure than it deserves to be.

PREFACE

When Ralph Ellison won the 1953 National Book Award for *Invisible Man*, he was already hard at work on a novel that would dwarf his previous work in ambition, scale, and ingenuity. This multifaceted American epic was the main focus of his authorial efforts from then on, even in the face of the obstacles that ultimately halted its completion. In 1967, Ellison lost over 300 pages of manuscript revisions to a fire that engulfed the Ellisons' summer home in Plainfield, Massachusetts. After the publication and acclaim of *Invisible Man*, Ellison took up a teaching position in Rome before settling in at NYU, published prolifically as an essayist and cultural critic, and bore witness to the political and social tumult of the 1960s and 70s, a period during which he was often clashing with ideological opponents and fending off questions about when exactly his novel would be complete. Throughout all of this, Ellison continued to labor after his next novel, hinting at it enough to keep the almost mythical thing in the collective mind of the literary world.

When Ralph Ellison died in 1994, over 2,000 pages of his unfinished novel rested in his study, incomplete. In addition to the challenges previously mentioned, Ellison was a relentless perfectionist who often wrote purely the way a musician would jam. His constant tinkering with his novel shows in the accounts of literary executor John F. Callahan, who described finding multiple versions of the same scenes under different titles and occasionally with only a single word as the difference. Within the vast saga Ellison had been laboring to create, one central narrative stood out as the most complete fragment. Callahan compiled this and a few other fragments of Ellison's, publishing it under the title *Juneteenth*, the story that would have served as Book II in Ellison's

sprawling attempt at an epic. This book is obscure compared to its older brother, *Invisible Man*, and this is admittedly regrettable. *Juneteenth* yields tremendous dividends for readers and scholars who would examine it, and could feature more prominently in our literary discourse if its merits were better understood.

Because of the complex nature of the novel's narrative, It may be useful to give a brief synopsis of the novel's plot. Ellison's novel tells the tale of a travelling black preacher named Alonzo Hickman and a boy of indeterminate race named Bliss Hickman, a jazz musician who gave up his wild ways to give Bliss a better life after the role of foster father was thrust upon him, raises Bliss to be a preacher of the Word with the potential to heal the racial divides of America. While Bliss has immense talent, his perceptions of the world and their work as preachers do not always line up with those of his foster father, and he eventually abandons the African-American community that raised him.

In the years since then, Bliss passed for white and became the race-baiting New England Senator, Adam Sunraider. The main thrust of the plot begins when Hickman arrives in Washington D.C. and is unable to stop Bliss/Sunraider from being shot by an assassin while the Senator is delivering an incendiary speech in Congress. In a twisted inversion of the words of Christ on the cross, Bliss/Sunraider, who had been intended by Hickman in his youth to be a saving and good force for the people who raised him, shouts the lament, "Lord, LAWD WHY HAST THOU...?" (*Juneteenth* 37), as he is struck down, a strange hallucination earlier in his grandiose speech having signaled that the sin of his betrayal towards those who raised him would soon come calling. Hickman returns

and stays by his former ward's bedside as they partake in a deep journey down memory lane and the preacher tries to figure out where it all went wrong.

The novel's title, Callahan's invention, is derived from the traditional celebration of freedom from slavery by African-Americans that takes place on June 19th, the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation taking effect in Texas after some delay. This festival occupies a turning point within Bliss's eventual choice to set out from his community in search of power, and consequently serves as a touchstone for Bliss/Sunraider and Hickman as they traverse the winding paths of shared memory. Since the novel is composed of flashbacks from two different perspectives after a certain point, with the deathbed conversation serving as the framing device around which the chaos orbits, traditional novelistic linearity is obscured in favor of a narrative that can be confusing to read at times, but is ultimately rewarding in its thematic depth. Ellison brings every bit of stylistic power and finesse present in his other works to the forefront. Surrealistic imagery, tautly constructed prose in the tradition of Faulkner, and a mixture of drama and humor that leave a reader breathless are all present.

Despite the strong qualities of this novel, it was not universally embraced upon publication, for reasons I will explore later in the thesis. This decidedly mixed critical reception has kept the book in relative obscurity, and this is truly unfortunate. *Juneteenth*, despite the complications inherent to its construction, I argue that this novel has a great deal to give to the reader. Notably, Ellison embraces the aesthetics of jazz music, sermons, political rhetoric, and vernacular language to convey his subjects in riveting detail while managing to weave a tale with gripping personal drama and thematic depth. More than just an enjoyable read, however, *Juneteenth* is a work in which the transition

from Modernism to Postmodernism may be observed. By identifying *Juneteenth* as a work that is a hybrid of both styles, it is possible to establish a literary framework in which to place the novel, thus setting it up for further study.

Within and beyond the aesthetic innovations of *Juneteenth* lies a powerful expression of Ralph Ellison's ideals about the role of a writer in relation to his or her nation. *Juneteenth* is a work that, while not the complete protean masterpiece that Ellison spent the last forty years of his life chasing, can display in powerful expressive terms the way in which such feats of creation can affect the world. *Juneteenth* seeks to forge a form of the novel that can speak to the fluid and dynamic realities of America. I will endeavor to examine how it goes about that noble calling.

CHAPTER I: WHAT TO DO WITH *JUNETEENTH* AS ELLISON'S POSTHUMOUS NOVEL?

Even in his forty years of life as a writer and public intellectual that followed the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison was criticized both seriously and humorously for the snail's pace at which his next novel seemed to be approaching. In his biography of Ellison, Arnold Rampersad chronicles the anxieties of Ralph Ellison during this long composition process that was constantly interrupted by life. One of the more embarrassing examples of the way Ellison's novel was becoming more a matter of folklore than a matter of genuine anticipation was a point when, in 1974, "Ralph found himself mentioned in an amusing *New York Times* essay about slowpoke American writers" (Rampersad 493) alongside infamous figures such as Henry Roth. This public pestering came as Ellison was frequently serving on boards, as an instructor at NYU, and was heavily involved with the trappings of his status. He was a frequent speaker and prolific essayist who nonetheless did not always have amicable relationships with his fellow artists. This near mythic status heaped upon *Juneteenth* decades before its publication does nothing to simplify the discourse surrounding it.

Ellison was a notorious perfectionist. Highly conscious of his literary reputation, his ideals of innovation and unrelenting perfectionism ensured that he had to keep composing until he thought it was right. Ellison's remarks about wrestling Proteus are in hindsight a confession of a problem faced by many writers besides himself. Callahan's accounts note that Ellison "talked occasionally about what he called 'the siren song of virtuosity,'" a phenomenon in which "a novelist had to struggle to resist alluring digressions and get back to the central story he was trying to tell" (Callahan 605). This

challenge ultimately devolved into what can easily be termed “the opposite” of writer’s block, following “the riffer’s muse no matter where she seemed to lead” (Callahan 185) while making and remaking attempts to tie together the fringe elements he sought to integrate into the Hickman narrative. While the thematic contents of the story were rooted in a grounded place, the aesthetic sense of the novel, owing to its affinity for forms of expression rooted in the African American tradition, stretches far back into the days before freedom and far forward into the future of the nation.

In addition to the Ellison’s perfectionism and often distinct way in which he composed his work, the vast amount of time that passed between the start of its composition and the end of Ellison’s life is another complicating factor in the text’s status and reception. Despite the vast swaths of time that are encompassed within the novel itself, *Juneteenth*, like Ralph Ellison’s previous novel, *Invisible Man*, is temporally grounded within the context of the post-war, pre-integration era of the 1950s. Perhaps due to the subject matter of the novel, it is able to speak across time. Like *Invisible Man*, *Juneteenth* looks forward to the era of the Civil Rights Movement, but unlike its predecessor, it was composed during and after the events that it predicted. In “Afterword: A Note to Scholars,” Callahan notes that the parts of the manuscript that were used in compiling *Juneteenth* are taken from Ellison’s work or published excerpts beginning in 1960 with the previously published story “And Hickman Arrives” and as recent as some of Ellison’s revisions in the 1990s. The bulk of “Book II” was being composed and revised throughout the 60s, 70s, and 80s. *Juneteenth*’s trans-temporal properties align nicely with its aesthetic methods, themselves looking both backward and forward.

Ellison was, at his core, an artist concerned with pushing boundaries; being innovative was tied up in his notions of patriotism and democracy as well as the lifeblood of his art. He summed up his ideas about the civic responsibility of a novelist thus:

On the profoundest level American experience is of a whole. Its truth lies in its diversity and swiftness of change. Through forging forms of the novel worthy of it, we not only achieve... but we anticipate the resolution of... problems of humanity which for a moment seem to those who are in awe of statistics completely insoluble.” (*Shadow & Act* 106)

The intended three-volume work from which *Juneteenth* was cut would have been a mammoth effort to construct, even for a writer without the perfectionistic tendencies widely acknowledged in Mr. Ellison. A loss of material on the scale of the infamous Plainfield fire would have been catastrophic, even if only revisions were lost. *Invisible Man* embraced the surreal within a decidedly modernist framework and in doing so helped usher in the more radically postmodern authors and literary minds that followed. This, along with the fame of the previous novel, predetermined a vast amount of anticipation the literary world had for its follow-up. Decades of anticipation do not a lenient audience make, and the more negative initial reviews of the novel reflect this principle.

The body of criticism on *Juneteenth* is admittedly slim for a novel that had been anticipated since the mid-fifties. Certainly it has had much less criticism and scholarship devoted to it than its older brother, *Invisible Man*. A great deal of what exists can be

dated to around the time of the novel's publication and the ensuing years, largely drying up after the early 2000s. The novel's reception was decidedly mixed, with some scathing—nay, scorching—criticisms aimed at it regarding both its quality and the way it was realized. James Wood, writing for *The Guardian*, claimed it did not have the right to be called a novel, remarking that “it lacks a novel's shape, rationale, and self-justifying propulsion.” Wood goes on to lambast the *Juneteenth* as “too often sentimental, rhetorical, and homiletic” while claiming the premise as absurd and the driving characters unremarkable or unbelievable. Kenneth Warren, writing in *Modernism/Modernity*, similarly takes issue with the perceived lack of subtlety to be found within *Juneteenth*. He notes that “the voice ventriloquized is not that of Ellison at his most probing, but at his most stentorian” (Warren 307+) and claims that the novel lacks the nuance that could have made the novel great.

Warren's use of the term “ventriloquize” belies a deep stigma about the way the novel came to be. The novel's detractors have often used analogies comparing *Juneteenth* to an exercise of using a puppet of Ellison or raising Frankenstein's monster. Louis Menand, writing for the *New York Times*, accuses Callahan of having “made choices where Ellison was still meditating options” and uses surgical terms when referring to the editorial work done by Ellison's executor. There is a broad sense in many reviews that Callahan overstepped his role in carving out *Juneteenth* from Ellison's manuscripts, and in some cases these difficulties of composition are enough to relegate it to a kind of backwater. For example, Ray Black noted that most of John F. Callahan's editorial decisions were made with “scholarly rather than artistic concerns in mind” (Black 56), but he also asserted that it could often be challenging to find where Ellison ended and

Callahan began, going as far as to name Callahan as a co-author rather than executive editor. This concern was common in many reviews of the work, positive or negative.

Black goes on to prescribe the novel for use in discussion of Ellison's corpus and of posthumous novels, but does not deem it valuable enough for broader discussion.

Callahan's own commentary emphasizes that while more intervention was needed for the novel than Ellison's posthumous essay collections and short stories, it was still essentially Ellison's work, simply the most coherent narrative within the remains of what would have been Ellison's novel.

There are reviews that paint Callahan's efforts and Ellison's work in *Juneteenth* in a much more favorable light. Scott Saul, writing for the *Boston Review*, gives it a mixed review but is nonetheless quick to praise the efforts of the editor and the talent of the author: "The book is more than Ellison fans could expect, yet less than Ellison probably hoped—an ambivalent masterpiece" brimming with "stylistic pyrotechnics" even as it is prophetic enough to understand why it was never fully realized in his lifetime. The composition of the novel, after all, begins before the Civil Rights Act and the flurry of assassinations, riots, and complicated discourse that followed in its wake while seemingly predicting all of these things to some degree. John L. Brown wrote in *World Literature Today* that "In *Juneteenth* one has the impression that the parts, stylistically brilliant and judiciously selected by Callahan, may perhaps be better than the whole" (Brown 156). One reviewer compared it to the posthumous novel of another prominent American author, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, proclaiming it "an essential and vital read for anyone interested in the literature or history of America" (Brzezinski 119).

This comparison is important, as it places *Juneteenth* in a tradition that Ellison acted on as a critic and creator.

Despite the heavy and dismissive criticism heaped upon *Juneteenth* at its publication, a scattered but strong body of scholarship has begun to form around the work. While I have observed efforts to place Ellison within the contours of Late Modernism, most attempts focus on *Invisible Man* rather than the later novel. *Juneteenth* has been brought into these conversations, but the stigma it picked up as a Frankenstein detracts from serious treatment of the book. Until now, *Juneteenth* has not been examined in light of the perspective I propose—the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism. Before we can situate this novel in such a pivotal context, however, we must deal with the stigma it has gained for the way it was composed, edited, and ultimately published.

The criticism of *Juneteenth* as an incomplete work is not fully unfounded. It is not the complete and sprawling epic that Ellison spent almost half a century laboring to create. Even given the publication of *Three Days Before the Shooting*, the significantly larger piece containing more unpublished fragments, we can never know exactly what Ellison would have created if he had finished his work. *Juneteenth* is just a fragment of a much larger, multi-faceted narrative that Ellison was in the process of creating. Many critics have regarded the novel with suspicion and even dismissal for the comparatively quick production of the work after Ellison's death. Sanford Pinsker, writing in the *Sewanee Review*, even went as far as to imply that Callahan had perpetrated a cash grab by publishing the work (Pinsker lxii). Pinsker's assertion is in line with other major detractors of the work in crediting Callahan on the by-line almost as a co-author. Even if the role of Callahan as editor is understood not to be a hindrance to the story, there is no

getting around the fact that *Juneteenth* is a fragment of something much larger that we will never see.

Despite the limits of what *Juneteenth* is as a novel, I would argue that it should not be dismissed off hand as incomplete or without value. Despite the overwhelming bulk of manuscript left behind by Ellison, it should be noted that he often created multiple versions of scenes and chapters. Callahan noted that one of the hardest parts of editing for Ellison was dealing with the “endless variations of a scene” (Callahan 609) that could arise from his years of perfectionism. This was his writing process. Even if they had the entirety of Ellison’s papers, it is debatable whether or not it would be possible for a trained team of scholars to carve out the coherent whole of his ambition from among the many drafts. Callahan described a purely uncut attempt at publishing Ellison’s manuscripts in their entirety as “a nearly impossible task... because Ellison sometimes created file after file of the same episode on his word processor, sometimes changing less than a dozen words or phrases in each version and usually giving the versions different titles” (Callahan 186). In fact, Ellison’s second novel had the cards stacked against it more and more as it was frustrated by his perfectionism.

Juneteenth may not be a perfect postmodernist masterpiece or the Proteus he described wrestling down in his 1952 National Book Award acceptance speech, but it still provides a glimpse into the craftsmanship and mind of one of America’s foremost writers. We the readers are given a look into how a story conceived and rooted in the post-war era aesthetically grows to accommodate both Ellison’s epic vision and the stylistic innovations that Ellison would have seen happening around him. To the criticism that the novel engages in too much preaching and rhetoric, I argue that *Juneteenth* carries

Ellison's concerns about rhetoric to greater lengths than his previous work, and by its very premise relies on the verbal recounting of events. Prophecy is a key component in *Juneteenth*'s weight, and its embrace of the prophetic form alongside other rhetoric is key to the full gravitas of Hickman's role in the novel, both as a spiritual leader and in relation to Bliss.

Indeed, one of the key statements Ellison himself made about his ambitions as a writer on the heels of receiving the National Book Award was that he sought to convey "the rich babel of idiomatic expression" that everyday surrounded him in America which neither the formal literary or "hardboiled" (*Shadow & Act* 103) and realist traditions prevalent in his time could accurately convey. *Juneteenth*'s fixation on political, casual, and religious rhetoric stems from the same creative impulses reflected upon in Ellison's speech, which coincides with the timeframe of his epic follow-up's initial conception.

Returning to the Fitzgerald comparison, it seems that Fitzgerald's novel, like *Juneteenth* (or perhaps more so considering Fitzgerald's monumental self-obsession as an artist), is concerned openly with legacy, the American Dream and the responsibilities of those who wield the promethean fire of creativity, whether in film, rhetoric, or the novel. While Fitzgerald's work is not the focus of this examination, the precedent set by his posthumous work is certainly an important matter to account for: Ellison and Fitzgerald had similar legacies as writers in the sense that they both struggled beneath the tremendous shadow of their own reputations as American Men of Letters. While the author of *This Side of Paradise* was able to compose successful follow-ups in his lifetime whereas Ellison could not, their literary careers did share a strong connection on an artistic level, both creatively and in the arc of their careers. Both rose from a provincial

upbringing full of ambition eventually to move into writing as a vocation and publish landmark works in their medium. Callahan noted aptly that both chased the ever-elusive American Dream in their art and lives in various forms. In addition, both had the “shared vocation as moral historians of America” (Callahan 137) through their art, and Ellison was keenly aware of the legacy that Fitzgerald left, both through his work as a living artist and through the material that had to be edited for publication after his death at a mere 44 years old.

Ellison interacted with Fitzgerald as a critic; he also allowed the method of the Jazz Age writer to inform some of the ways he reconciled multiple identities in *Juneteenth*. Fitzgerald’s work and its reception after his death are relevant to the study of Ellison’s posthumous body of work for this precedent; the publication of *The Love of the Last Tycoon* coincided with a tremendous revival of interest in Fitzgerald’s work. While there were other factors driving the resurgence of Fitzgerald (not least the distribution of *Gatsby* among World War II soldiers in great numbers), the last work of Fitzgerald added to the body of work Ralph Ellison himself examined and drew from. Ralph Ellison held to the precedent that an author’s posthumous work held just as much value as that published in their lifetime, therefore a precedent exists to treat his work in a similar manner.

When examining charges that John Callahan is the co-author rather than facilitator of *Juneteenth*, it is important to note that he himself does not entertain any of these lofty aspirations. There is a strong emphasis in all of his commentary on the subject that he was merely serving Ralph Ellison’s creative vision and the legacy of a good friend. Callahan enjoyed a long friendship with the Ellisons, and he was in frequent

communication with Ralph during his attempts to write the untitled sequel as well as with Fanny Ellison during the editing process that eventually produced *Juneteenth*. While Rampersad does not speak about the critical atmosphere surrounding *Juneteenth* in his biography of Ellison, he does recount Callahan's presence in assisting the Ellisons in Ralph's final days, which ranged from carrying Ralph when Fanny could not pick him up from a fall to "standing guard between her (Fanny) and the many people she did not want to see" (Rampersad 566) at the funeral.

In a long interview with Christopher C. De Santis of *African American Review*, Callahan multiple times asserts that even *Juneteenth*, itself Book II of the saga that Ellison had been laboring after, was *almost* finished. He also asserted that *Juneteenth* was a "jazz novel" (Callahan & De Santis, 619), a novel that takes as an example the formal structure of the riffs and breaks associated with jazz music. Jazz does not fit the rhyme or reason of classical musical structure. It does not adhere to the deterministic structure of most compositions, and the best performers are in a constant state of improvisation. Callahan was also adamant about not tempering any of the idiomatic expressions of Ellison's characters. "Any editor of Ellison's work would need to be particularly sensitive to the complexities of his vernacular, African American and American, and, in the case of *Juneteenth*, his musical, biblical, and sermonic idioms" (607).

Even if Callahan cannot fully downplay the immense work he had to undertake in bringing *Juneteenth* to publication, perhaps it is possible to read Ellison's ideas and all of the other profound insights the text carries without Callahan's involvement being a crippling factor. While John K. Young does acknowledge *Juneteenth* as a fragment, he notes in his book *Black Writers, White Publishers*, that "read as a novel, *Juneteenth*

comments artfully on the novelistic form itself” (Young 167). Young links Callahan’s remarks about *Juneteenth* as a jazz novel with Ellison’s own ideas about the nonlinear nature of time, noting ways in which history simply will not stay in the past, and continues to exercise control over the present, much in the same way that Bliss and Hickman’s memories impose themselves over the present-day deathbed conversation. Young also notes that while Callahan’s actions *do* impact the way the novel is read, the editor’s methods nonetheless “appropriately and artfully mirror Ellison’s compositional habits” (175) in a way that allows the non-definitive volume still to behave like a work of literature on its own while acknowledging the vast multitude of unpublished material and the myriad of other ways this volume could have come into being. The fragmentary nature of *Juneteenth* lines up with Ellison’s views concerning the arbitrary nature of race as a construct that is artificially imposed on humanity.

This assertion that *Juneteenth* can actually gain relevance as a fragment aligns nicely with the aesthetics of the novel. Ellison’s embrace of jazz, sermons, political rhetoric, prophecy, and grounded vernacular not only animates the text and allows it to dodge around some of the critiques aimed at it; so too does it set it up well as a transitional work between the modern and the postmodern. Just as jazz is built on organic riffing at the expense of fixed progression, so too is postmodernism often concerned with the idea that we as human beings cannot grasp the whole truth, that reality cannot always be objectively represented. Readers do not know if Sunraider ever fully makes his way back around to the persona of Bliss and finds peace in the face of death. The last notes of the novel show that “*A blast of heat struck him then, followed by the opening of the door. And as a dark hand reached down, he seemed to hear the sound of Hickman’s consoling*

voice, calling from somewhere above” (*Juneteenth* 348). Was he dragged off to Hell in a patchwork automobile or plucked from perdition by the hand of the Father? We do not receive the answer. Like the Archaeopteryx of old, Ellison’s novel is a blend of both breeds.

There is a detachment from the particular in *Juneteenth* that is often a hallmark of the modern, while at the same time a marked desire to reconcile the conflicting elements of the past is a thoroughly postmodern trait. In the vein of the high modern, Ellison utilizes stream-of-consciousness technique in conveying the stories of Bliss/Sunraider and Daddy Hickman. Even in the dialogue of Bliss/Sunraider, there is a losing battle fought by the Senator to “objectify Bliss’s voice and evade identification” (Dvigne 196), adding an extra psychological component to the way his part of the story shifts between third and first person. Its nature as a dialogue that dips in and out of different periods in time displays the self-reflexive nature of the postmodern. These aesthetic factors combined with the interesting relationship this novel has to time make it a prime candidate for placement as a link between the two schools of thought and expression. Just as the existence of *Invisible Man* and other novels like it proved that Modernism could be observed outside of its interwar natural habitat, so too can *Juneteenth* demonstrate areas in which the postmodern and its prototypes existed before the neat temporal dimensions often marked off for it by literary historians. After all, the “heyday” of postmodernism has faded and it will be important for literary historians to notice the way art has transitioned into the postmodern so they can eventually observe when it begins to transition out.

In answer to the essential question of what to do with *Juneteenth*, I assert that it should first be held to be every bit as valuable and significant as Ellison's earlier, more famous novel, *Invisible Man*. Ralph Ellison is the composer of the piece, and even in the areas in which he was unable directly to shape the work, his principles are at the core of any further work on the novel. From here, examination may be conducted into the many layers of this novel. It can be read alongside Ellison's other writings and that of other authors with equal measure, even in its fragmentary state. The nature of *Juneteenth* as a "Jazz Novel" not only addresses many of the complaints that have been levied against its unorthodox structure, but also provides the backbone for the assertion that it is a strong and appropriate text to use in examining the transition between Modernism and Postmodernism.

CHAPTER II: WHAT TO DO WITH *JUNETEENTH* IN RELATION TO
INVISIBLE MAN?

In finding ways to place *Juneteenth* in a literary context, it is impossible to ignore its connections to Ellison's first novel, *Invisible Man*. While both have relevance in the larger field of Ellison scholarship, the relationship between them is especially important since they are his only novels. Despite the difficulties of dealing with *Juneteenth*'s construction, both of these pieces express Ellison's creative vision, which is intrinsically tied to his conception of the author as moral historian and national innovator. They share a vast number of common motifs and images, as well as a strong fascination with rhetoric and the surreal. The overall themes of each novel, furthermore, paint them as two sides of the same complex coin. *Invisible Man* tells of a nameless young black man who embarks upon a surreal odyssey through both the openly oppressive south and the chaotic, industrial world of New York, breaking free of the manipulations that seek to control him and growing disillusioned along the way. It is an interesting counterpoint to the story of an estranged foster father and son who are locked in a deathbed conversation about identity, community, and reconciliation presented in *Juneteenth*. This relationship also lies with the context of the vast differences in their publishing circumstances, with *Invisible Man* as one of the most successful debuts in history and *Juneteenth* a hotly contested posthumous text. Both the nameless Invisible Man and Bliss/Adam Sunraider are trickster figures who get by on their phenomenal skill at electrifying a crowd, and the similarities do not end there.

Just as *Invisible Man* is a work about the nameless individual breaking free of the exploitative influence of groups and their ideologies, *Juneteenth* is concerned with the

reconciliation of the wayward individual with the community that gave him life and raised him. In this way, the novels can be profitably examined in tandem, particularly considering Ellison's own relationship with his African American heritage and the changing community and discourse surrounding it. For Ellison, race was a powerful component of his work, and racism and moving forward in the face of it were problems he envisioned as treatable in literature when more concrete methods found the problem insoluble. That said, his method of addressing the issue of race was unique; rather than channeling direct, politically charged anger, he often sought to represent the humanity and dynamism of his characters in a way that made their equal human status impossible to deny. This method conflicted with some of the more militant black voices within the literary and political world, but it is consistent with the democratic individualism and egalitarianism championed by Ellison elsewhere. For him, a people gained far more by allowing its ambitious members to exercise their talents than simply enforcing solidarity across the board.

The thematic contents of the two novels interlock with one another. On many levels, *Invisible Man* is about the way individuals are trampled by the machinations of those who would manipulate them. We observe this trend most prominently in the titular invisible narrator with a taste for Louis Armstrong and excessive lighting, but the chains of oppression are seen in the lives of other characters as well; the beautiful blonde with an American flag tattoo who is forced to dance in Ellison's "Battle Royal" chapter of *Invisible Man* is painted as being in a similar predicament to that of the nameless protagonist and his fellow fighters: "I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like my own terror and that which I saw in some of the other boys" (*Invisible Man* 20). Like

them, she is put on display and made a commodity for entertainment and consumption. Imagery of predatory animals permeates many descriptions of the local big shots who fill out the smoker, and it is especially apparent in the way they behave towards her, “howling after her,” one being compared to an “intoxicated panda” (20). The way that they are behaving, controlling the black youths and the blonde, closely mirrors the way in which a pack of wolves would corner their prey or how a sheepdog would herd its flock; this thoroughly deprives the controlled parties of their agency and reduces them to the status of livestock. It is moving away from this condition and towards personal agency that defines the arc of the Invisible Man’s journey.

Even after escaping the segregated south for the whirring life of Harlem, the Invisible Man is still beset by the manipulative influence of the Brotherhood. While the activist organization initially provides powerful opportunities for the protagonist to empower himself and others through his electrifying gifts of rhetoric, it eventually reveals itself as yet another external manipulative force. The main difference being that the Brotherhood coerces those they manipulate with promises of fulfillment rather than the iron heel of overt oppression. By the end of the novel, Invisible Man has broken free of all corrupt influence and retreated into the solitary life of an urban hermit. While he has become an asocial and cynical being, Invisible Man is as enlightened and free as one can be in the world of that novel. This lined up with Ellison’s complex and occasionally controversial views on race and advancement in the world.

Jazz was such an important motif for Ellison’s work because it embodied the democratic individualism that he sought to espouse in his life and writing. Ellison believed that “‘True Jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group,’

Jazz served as a fitting analogy for the society of free individuals that the American Republic was intended to secure” (Morel 60). The great jazz musicians inspired Ellison for their ability to express themselves and be known as individuals despite the oppression they were under. A good jazz musician keeps time with the band while finding ways to improvise new beauty within a tune. Ellison’s idealization of “the Territory” represents the place where this vision of the American Dream is best realized. In Ellison’s fiction and philosophy it is tantamount to form a world where individuals are not limited in the pursuit of their dreams by the impositions of those inside or outside of the group. “For Ellison, racism posed a barrier to individual thought and expression not only for the bigoted white, but for blacks who sought to affirm something about themselves as *blacks* in the face of color prejudice,” Morel writes (60). He had conflict with black nationalists and racists because they pushed for solidarity rather than individuality or uplift. Ellison challenged externally imposed definition through race, either through being dehumanized by prejudice or homogenized by nationalism. This is expressed through the antagonists of *Invisible Man* and in principle the tragic protagonist of *Juneteenth*.

Like the titular Invisible Man of the first novel, Bliss, or Adam Sunraider, is someone who uses his talent for rhetoric to get ahead in life; he utilizes his ability to command a room to acquire power and fundamentally change his social standing, even creating from his words and charisma an entirely new identity. In the process, he betrays the African-American community that raised him and taught him the very skills he utilizes in his political climb, one that helps him chase the ideal of the white mother who gave him up. His black foster-father and teacher, Alonzo Hickman, noted during Sunraider’s senate floor speech that he was using a classic pulpit maneuver while making

his political speeches, describing it as “making somebody mighty uncomfortable because he’s got them between what they profess to believe and what they feel they can’t do without” (*Juneteenth* 35). He has appropriated the instruments of salvation for his own gain.

Unlike the protagonist of the first novel, however, Bliss is seeking to belong rather than be free. His journey away from the African-American community begins when a crazed white woman disrupts the resurrection play and sermon which he and Hickman were conducting. At the beginning of this performance, Bliss had to be brought in via coffin, a traumatic experience that leaves him mentally begging, “Please let me rise up. Let me come up and out into the light and air...” (144), while fearing suffocation before he is let out to preach in tandem with Hickman. The woman claims to be the mother of Bliss and names him as Cudworth: “She means me, he thought, as something strange and painful stirred within him. Then he could no longer breathe” (155). From this moment on, illustrated in the gradual fall of his little Bible from his hands, Bliss starts to become Sunraider.

The symbolism of this encounter, rising from a coffin, being called a new name and dropping his Bible, marks it as a turning point in Bliss’s life. This is the point at which he begins to abandon the path of righteousness that had been previously prescribed for him as a great force for good. His time in the coffin for the miracle play is not only a childhood trauma, but is symbolic of the point at which Bliss dies and the man who would become Sunraider is born. The coffin is described in womb-like terms with “silky pink blackness” (*Juneteenth* 143) that deprives Bliss of his senses, affirming its dual symbolism of death and birth. Despite the crazed nature of the woman, Bliss cannot

shake the idea that this woman could be his mother. His subsequent decision to pass for white and everything he accomplishes as a result of this decision can be traced to this root cause. In his quest to belong to the idealized version of White America shown in the movies, he gains political power but loses the meaningful connections to the community that raised him and the one woman he ever loved, ultimately not reaching the green light across the bay he, like Gatsby, had been chasing.

Despite the window we are given into his experience, it is easy to see Bliss/Sunraider as unsympathetic due to his life choices and deceit, which remind *Invisible Man* readers of another protean trickster: Rinehart, the man with “a smooth tongue, a heartless heart, and . . . ready to do anything” (*Invisible Man* 493). Rinehart is a man for whom the narrator of *Invisible Man* is mistaken for multiple times when he decides to don a pair of dark green sunglasses. The identities embodied by this man show just how well people can be deceived and manipulated. He is, in different turns, greeted as a preacher, pimp, confidence man, pusher, numbers man, and possibly politician. When casually testing his disguise on an old Brotherhood coworker, Invisible Man all too easily falls into a situation in which he had “set out to test a disguise on a friend and now I was ready to beat him to his knees . . . not because I wanted to but because of place and circumstance” (489). The ease of the disguise’s use makes the actual work of Rinehart all the more disturbing to contemplate.

Rinehart is not the only morally ambiguous orator in the novel, however. Most of the named opponents of Invisible Man, namely Ras the Exhorter/Destroyer, Brother Jack, and Dr. Bledsoe, are individuals who hold tremendous power through their words, power to define and control others. They supply the stereotypes that the invisible narrator

ultimately seeks to break, often creating a definition of African Americans or activists that feeds the growth of their own power base rather than the resolution of societal problems. Bledsoe, the President of a State University for Negroes, divulges to our hero that “I tell *them*; that’s my life, telling white folks how to think about things I know about... and I’ll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am” (143). Returning to the running jazz analogy utilized by Morel, through the antagonists of *Invisible Man* and the tragic persona of Sunraider, Ellison shows what happens when a musician plays off-key and dominates the arrangement enough to cause cacophony.

In the figure of Adam Sunraider and his predecessors in *Invisible Man*, Ellison explores the dangers of the phenomenal power of rhetoric in the hands of those who would use their invisibility and protean nature for selfish purposes, rather than for the advancement of civilization. Bliss’s intended purpose was to be a savior for the people who raised him, one who had the potential to bridge the gaps dividing the nation and afflicting the people. When he is shot and Hickman is still reeling from the drawn-out emotional equivalent of said injury, the Reverend screams at the heavens and at his prodigal son, “Bliss! You were our last hope, Bliss; now Lord have mercy on this land” (*Juneteenth* 38). Furthermore, his betrayal of Hickman by becoming the race-baiting Sunraider is thus a betrayal of both personal and societal significance. He has not only robbed the African-American people of a potential uplifter, but also robbed the nation of the positive change, insight, and innovation that he could have brought to the table if he had held to the morals he was taught.

In a way, the con-men of Ellison's works are the reverse of what his own ideals about the role of the author represent; both cons and authors wield the power of morality, eloquence, and local idiom to stir people to action on a profound level, the divergent point being that cons move people to line their own pockets rather than solve the insoluble problems of the world we live in, occasionally even adding to the burden. Just as the con men and political manipulators of Ellison's novels provide a cautionary warning to those who would misuse power, individuals like the Invisible Man and Reverend Alonzo Hickman are shown as more positive examples. Their use of rhetoric is tempered with a realization of what it can do and their moral responsibility of wielding that power in a benevolent manner that brings freedom and positive change. Hickman is a preacher who sought to spread salvation and redemption both on a spiritual and national level, while Invisible Man, naiveté and faults aside, works to create a world in which people are free to exercise the American right to the pursuit of happiness. Both work to bring about "what John Adams called 'public happiness' and what Martin Luther King renamed democratic *agape*," a condition in which the positive manifestations of freedom and individualism Ellison spoke of are able to do their good work (Callahan 221).

On an aesthetic level, both novels can qualify as "Late Modernist," and yet one is much closer to the creative tones of postmodernism than the other. Structurally, *Invisible Man* is a surreal but straightforward picaresque work rife with the symbolism often found in Modernist literature. *Juneteenth*, though perhaps not wholly by intention, represents a stronger embrace of both Postmodern and High Modern methods of storytelling. Much of *Juneteenth*'s presentation and quirks of form can be traced to the influence of jazz music and the oral traditions on the structure of the novel. T.S. Eliot was one of his earliest

literary influences. Ellison also publically acknowledges a keen affinity for the work of William Faulkner, an author on the cutting edge of the Modernist movement.

The surreal elements in both works allow Ellison to weave rich symbolism into the framework and action of each novel. In the pages of *Invisible Man*, this often allows Ellison to go to a very parable-esque place with his assertions about human nature and the way people can be limited by external circumstance; the Optic White manufacturing process at Liberty Paints, for example, lets Ellison express his thoughts on the illogical nature of racism by including a single drop of black in what is supposedly the whitest paint ever made. The ambiguity of the cloth over the Negro statue's eyes at the University foreshadows the deception being carried out by Dr. Bledsoe. These are mundane details, but Ellison positions them so as to maximize their interaction as symbols with the novel's themes.

Juneteenth also engages in symbolic and surreal expression, but often to what can feel like a more disorienting degree, matching the whirlwind of emotion and tension experienced by the characters. Senator Sunraider struggles to finish his speech before Congress while the Eagle on the nation's banner seems to glare at him damningly and hungrily. Ellison describes Sunraider's desperation to stay on task while "two sphinxlike eyes bore in upon the Senator with piercing frontal gaze," and "held him in mute interrogation" (*Juneteenth* 11). This image works on multiple levels. On the surface, we can easily read this as internal sign of the Senator's guilt, while in the context of the novel, it also foreshadows the violent comeuppance he will soon receive for the way he has wronged one too many men who he had once called his kin. *Juneteenth* is comfortable working in these normally tense webs of many-layered meaning, personal

significance, moral weight, and lyrical complexity. Like a sermon, it is able to bob and weave between rough, uncomfortable subconscious associations and the towering heights of human ideals.

This is, in fact, one of the principal ways in which Ellison's second novel more fully embraces the Postmodern aesthetic than its predecessor. Where *Invisible Man* does not even give the reader a name to latch onto and retains the detachment of a much more seasoned individual relaying the events of his naïve past, *Juneteenth* is drenched in the blood, sweat, tears of two intertwined lives as they grapple with deeply personal issues with a deep attention to particular details of vernacular and association. Ellison's second novel is engineered to catch the small quirks of the larger American and African-American idioms in ways that preserve not only the razor-sharp wit and powerful improvisational spirit behind our best national conversation, but also endow the prose with all the weight of history and association. *Juneteenth* embraces detail and particularity in a way that aligns with the arbitrary and particular postmodern method.

Interestingly, both works possess the Postmodern characteristic of self-reflexivity, but each novel manifests this quality in different ways. Each novel is acknowledged within itself as a recollection, a tale told. *Invisible Man* and its titular hero are open about the way in which events are being recalled and written up for preservation while *Juneteenth* is constructed mostly from the interweaving dialogue of an estranged foster father and son, with the son having a clear break of identity to reconcile when telling his half of the tale. Heteroglossia plays greater role in *Juneteenth*. Anne Dvigne describes it thus: "First, there is the narrative structure that swings back and forth between Hickman and the Senator/Bliss.... Second, there is the actual dialogue between the two... but a

third level is also manifest in the internally dialogic nature of the individual voices” (Dvigne 195). The methods in which each story claims to be told can be felt in their form and construction, particularly in the case of Ellison’s second novel. The recollection through dialogue that makes up the bulk of *Juneteenth* begins progressively to grow more and more fragmentary as time goes on, perhaps reflecting the declining health and grip on reality of Senator Sunraider / Bliss. The waking world and spoken dialogue is represented in *Juneteenth* by plain text, while Bliss/Sunraider’s visions and memories are written in italics. Sometimes a character’s dialogue is clearly marked out by quotation marks, and in others it can be difficult to tell who is speaking. In the revival meetings, Ellison employs the latter effect in order to convey the sheer chaos of so many colliding voices.

Particularly in the later sections of the book, the two narrators’ dialogue is distinguished by the use of italics for one speaker and plain text for the other. Deciphering who is talking aloud, thinking, or recalling becomes increasingly difficult as this escalates, and the framing sections of third person limited narration do not help. It is apparent, therefore, that Ellison is preoccupied with capturing the sheer chaos of the vernacular speech pattern and the reality of life’s often chaotic turns. The rapid shifts in perspective are the closest method available to capture this fully, and mirror the way players in a jazz band may simultaneously compete with and complement their fellow players by their musical expression. In addition, while both novels follow an easily traceable narrative arc, *Invisible Man* is temporally linear where its successor is not. This presents other opportunities to engage with these novels in relation to established forms of the Modern and the Postmodern aesthetics. Subsequently, it is possible to observe the

ways in which one writer can easily bridge the gap between two schools of expression that can occasionally seem hard to connect.

The interlocking themes in *Juneteenth* and *Invisible Man*—freeing individualism and communal reconciliation--are related to conversations that must be had not only in America but in the world as a whole. In presenting the dangers of the Promethean flame of rhetoric gone out of control, Ellison's novels provide a moral differentiation between characters like Hickman and the Invisible Man, who use their powers to uplift, and the avaricious tricksters who use their talents for exploitative purposes. Throughout both novels, Ellison's ideal of a novelist's responsibility for the maintenance of American Democracy plays an important part in the aesthetic and thematic discoveries that come from reading these two novels in concert. *Invisible Man* is a frequently taught and read novel with a great deal to say about our national way of living and thinking. An understanding of *Juneteenth* provides greater insight into Ellison's work and ideals.

CHAPTER III: *JUNETEENTH* AS A LINK BETWEEN MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

Arguments about *Juneteenth*'s merit and relationship to Ellison's existing body of work aside, its function as a work displaying the transition between Modernism and Postmodernism is ultimately what distinguishes it and gives it great relevance past being the fabled follow-up to *Invisible Man*. Ellison's second novel reveals styles of expression hard at work to convey dramatic tension, moral weight, and the American idiom with equal intensity and literary skill. Ellison was on the literary scene as an already established author when literary postmodernism emerged as an important force, and any innovation that would better help him capture the speech and life of the nation around him would have been a welcome addition to his tool chest. Situating *Juneteenth* as a stepping stone between the Modern and the Postmodern is a useful way to place this temporally challenging book within literary history.

Previous chapters emphasize the postmodern aspects of *Juneteenth*. It is still important to acknowledge the ways in which it is still very much a modernist novel, albeit a different sort than *Invisible Man*. The shifts in perspective and often-blending voices bring to mind the work of T.S. Eliot in his *Waste Land* or James Joyce's *Ulysses*, particularly as Ellison embraces the stream-of-consciousness narrative style. Eliot, in particular, was one of Ellison's early inspirations for writing literature, and *The Waste Land* occupied a prominent place in his reading when he decided to become a writer. He also publicly held Faulkner, another modernist, in high regard for what he referred to as taking "a much greater responsibility for the condition of democracy" (*Shadow & Act* 104). Modernism was a key part of Ellison's creative DNA.

Juneteenth presents a profound picture of a broken nation, an American *Waste Land* complete with its own fisher-king to reflect and personify that moral and philosophical brokenness. Reverend Alonzo Hickman's foster son does not become the one to rise up and save the people who raised him, just as only the promise of rain reaches Eliot's *Waste Land* while the speaker "sat upon the shore Fishing, with the arid plain behind" (Eliot 427-28). Bliss's taken name of Adam Sunraider is rife with symbolism alluding to the classical past and the biblical creation narrative; "Sunraider" calls to mind the pride of Icarus and Prometheus while "Adam" alludes to original sin. In either example, these are men who earned punishment from on high for their crimes. This level of symbolism calls to mind the ways in which T.S. Eliot and James Joyce mixed allusions to the classical past with the chaos and inconsistency of the modern world. The eagle on the seal that menaces Sunraider as he gives his speech on the Senate floor is both a physical phenomenon he perceives and a subconscious foreshadowing of the way his sins against the integrity of the Republic will catch up with him. Just as *The Waste Land* is patched together from the visions of Tiresias, so too is *Juneteenth* built from the voices and recollections of two men who join to tell a single coherent tale.

It is also essentially a stream-of-consciousness novel immersed in the tellings of Bliss and Hickman, utilizing the conflicted nature of the dying Senator's thoughts to provide an internal heteroglossia that melds some of Modernism's greatest innovations into one narrative. "By placing the many and often contradictory aspects of American culture somewhere between interrogation and play, it manages to embrace the complexity of American experience," Anne Dvigne writes of the novel (193). Given Ellison's stated views on the American idiom, his literary approach allows him masterfully to render his

subject both to achieve aesthetic grandeur and to serve his vision of what a novelist should be for the nation.

While *Juneteenth* may not be the “postmodernist epic” that Ellison could have produced, it is far from “a (relatively) old-fashioned novel” as some have decried it (Pinsker lxii). *Juneteenth* is essentially self-reflexive and layered by its very nature. The two narrators are adopted father and son, and their speech patterns often blend, making the already blurring line between the two men’s spoken and thought recollections all the hazier, particularly as the end nears. The surrealism that had been a hallmark of *Invisible Man* is expanded upon within the pages of the later novel. The ecstasy and heated chaos of the revival sermons, Ellison’s use of jazz as a model of expression, and the gritty detail of earthy human experience within the novel all allow Ellison to indulge the more playful aspects of Postmodernism while still utilizing the exaggerated reality of his other works.

The inability of the reader ever to have certain questions fully answered brings in the Postmodern principle of subjective knowledge, that some things cannot be known. We are not allowed to know with certainty what happens to Bliss’s soul after death because quite naturally that journey into the great beyond does not typically allow passengers to relay the story back to the living. We are not told the identity of Bliss’s father because no one telling the story could feasibly hold that information. Among the many dichotomies set up by noted critic Ihab Hassan in his “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism,” one of the more relevant ones for the task of examining *Juneteenth* is that of “transcendence vs. immanence” (Hassan 6). In most modernist works, a connection to the numinous or the transcendental is acknowledged, often to the point of elevating the situations of modern life to the level of the classics. While *Juneteenth* does

engage in some powerful transcendental encounters via surreal symbols, classical allusions, and preaching, it is also intimately concerned with the fallible human souls who are charged with carrying the transcendental flame. The Reverend Alonzo Hickman is a former jazz musician and gambler who turned to the ministry both for reasons of personal morality and necessity; he had a new son to care for, after all.

Bliss, both in his life as a pastor-in-training and later on as a race-baiting politician, shows how the sacred can be warped and twisted for personal gain. One passage that best exemplifies this can be found when a young Bliss is being mocked by some citizens who question the craft of preaching: “Brothers and sisters, ladies and what comes with you, my text this mawning is A. B. C. Y’all don’t like to think about such stuff as that but you better listen to me. I said *A*—whew, Lord! I says *A!*” (*Juneteenth* 50). When Bliss justifies striking the man with a rock, he mentally reasons that “I was going to sin. Saint Peter got the keys” (54). This encounter involves a great deal of mockery and temptation, and while Bliss endures it as a child, it is frightening to see how he uses this very technique of preaching by ear and not by soul as Sunraider for unjust gain.

Within this passage, we also see another prominent Postmodern aspect of the novel, namely its fixation upon performance and rhetoric. This is a thematic link to *Invisible Man*, but rather than serving only as a means to an end for the characters, rhetoric in *Juneteenth* is worth examining at greater length. When Hickman and his flock are in the Senate Gallery, the Reverend demonstrates to one of his followers the ways in which the wayward Senator is using the same tricks he learned at the pulpit. Later in the long deathbed conversation, Hickman remembers of a masterful preacher named Eatmore

that “it wasn’t exactly what he was saying, but how he was saying,” that so enthralled all souls present at one fateful Juneteenth revival that he was said to be “making pictures rise up out of the Word” (*Juneteenth* 137). It comes as no surprise later on in the novel that Bliss had used one of Eatmore’s sermons to command the pulpit of a white church during his drifting con-man days, and the way the foster father and son talk about that memory sounds like a pair of performers talking, rather than ministers. In both of these instances, Ellison demonstrates the ways in which the power of rhetoric, while capable of beauty and edification, often relies on decidedly immanent and fallible elements of the human experience that have incredible potential for corruption.

How can we connect this novel, which already possesses an excruciatingly weird relationship with time, to the already tangled web of critical theory and the literary canon? Recalling the sphere of Modernism, *Juneteenth* works incredibly well in concert with the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Callahan notes that “the two writers cherished the American Dream with a similar feel for its connections to American history, in particular the boomerang of nemesis, which follows in the wake of overweening, overreaching hubris” (Callahan 128). While each writer chased a concept in his fiction that represented the American ideal (Fitzgerald’s frontier and Ellison’s territory), both were acutely aware of the ways in which the ideals of the nation can fail due to human greed and egoism.

Like the work of Fitzgerald, Ellison’s novels are lodged in what are essentially post-war eras. Fitzgerald deals with the loss of faith in the Western progressive ideal in the looming shadow of World War One while Ellison deals with the dissonance felt by many African Americans after World War Two. In the introduction to *Invisible Man*, Ellison highlights that the original conception of what would have been his first novel

was set in a prisoner of war camp, where a black officer had to deal with both enemies of his nation and the challenge of racism from within the ranks of his fellow American prisoners. The source of existential torment in this scenario was one widely cited among African-Americans who weathered World War II: the question they asked and often got an unacceptable answer for was simply “How could you treat a Negro as equal in war and then deny him equality during times of peace?” (*Invisible Man* xiii). In other words, the promises upon which America was built—of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as a God-given right for all—were tarnished by the prejudice of its citizens and history. Ellison’s novels, including *Juneteenth*, deal profoundly with this question and the pain and alienation inherent within it, just as Fitzgerald and his fellow Modernists dealt with the European ideal of progress tearing itself apart and making a mockery of its ideals during and after World War I.

For all of the ways in which Ellison’s concerns can seem different from those of his modernist predecessors, they are still rooted in the classical tension between reality and the ideal. For the Lost Generation, that tension was between the progressive ideals of the industrial revolution against the way innovation led to slaughter in the first World War; for Ellison, that tension stood between the egalitarian promise of the American Dream to all who would be citizens and the harsh and unfair realities of an America which was still living down its “original sin” of slavery and racial prejudice. In either case, the makings of alienation and irony that are at the heart of Modernist expression are evident.

One way to differentiate between the creative approaches of Ellison and the older writer is to examine *Juneteenth* alongside another American tragedy: *The Great Gatsby*.

Both American tragedies present a Modernist sense of alienation and embody a classical tension between reality and the ideal. Callahan points out that Ellison drew on “Jay Gatsby, originally called James Gatz, as an archetype for American, self-made second identities” (Callahan 135). Gatsby and Sunraider are fabricated identities of ambitious provincials who crossed lines of morality to achieve their ambition, and both are eventually undone by their decisions. In the case of Gatsby, all of his herculean efforts to climb into the higher echelons of society were to impress the capricious Daisy, and it is ultimately her drunk driving that gets him shot. Likewise, Bliss/Sunraider’s craving for power and a connection to his white mother drives him to ascend the political ladder at the cost of the only meaningful love in his life, only for the son of that union to slay him on the Senate floor.

Gatsby and Bliss are both confronted with the forces that brought about alienation, and rather than resigning to their perceived fates, they invest value in external symbols and use their respective masteries to chase their futile dreams. For James Gatz/Jay Gatsby, Daisy becomes the receptacle of all his dreams of grandeur: “He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God” (Fitzgerald 110). This is part of why the actual love affair fails and a large part of what leads Gatsby into such tragic territory. Human connection, both communal and close, was never a goal for Gatsby. He does not truly love Daisy, but rather what she represents; Gatsby loves Daisy only as much as a knight could love the Holy Grail. His idealism about life and idealization of himself and those around him cause Gatsby to fail at achieving happiness or genuine connection, receiving only tragic ruin and rejection for his troubles.

Like *Gatsby*, Sunraider comes into contact with a force that causes him to pursue a distant vision, one that places him in communion with the idealized picture of his white “mother” that comes to him that fateful night at the revival and later through film. In his career as “Mr. Movie-Man” and as a racist Senator, Bliss/Sunraider sets his considerable powers of rhetoric to the task of making him a part of the white half of his heritage. In doing so, he achieves his personal ambition at the cost of his soul: “But you had a choice, Bliss. You had a choice to join up to be a witness for either side and you let yourself be fouled up” (*Juneteenth* 164). At the core of the drama for both novels is a sense of wasted human potential that aligns nicely with the anxieties that fueled Modernism’s birth. The question, “You had all of this power and *this* is what you did with it?” rings out in both tragedies, echoing larger cultural concerns of ingenuity wasted on war and oppression that inspired the movement.

While the core of each novel contains the same Modernist tragedy, the telling of each tale is markedly different. Fitzgerald’s work, much like Ellison’s earlier and less postmodern *Invisible Man*, is the constructed account of a single individual. The truth may not be readily apparent, but it is worth pursuing, and the weight of human action and choice in the face of that truth is never questioned. Even as failure abounds in Nick Caraway’s world and that of the Invisible Trickster, the urge to “make it new,” record events, and keep striving is immortalized. *Juneteenth* ends not with the narrator picking up the pieces or shoring anything against the wreck, but in death and questions. Even in telling the tale, Ellison captures the events of the tragedy and comedy through a non-linear method. Hazy and vivid deathbed memories and dialogue are the vehicle through which the action is conveyed, and even with *Juneteenth*’s larger temporal scope, there is

still so much left unknown to the audience, as realistically befits the limits of two fallible human beings.

One postmodern work that riffs on some of the same methods as *Juneteenth*, without any of its hard ties to the Moderns that inspired Ellison, is Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*. Both novels are heavily concerned with ethics in America and display an unorthodox methodology of dealing with time, flitting in and out of the past without linearity. They also share the ability to grapple with intense and painful existential problems through the use of biting wit and humor. *Juneteenth* has the conceit of the deathbed conversation and all of its intertwining recollections, while in *Slaughterhouse*, the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, is literally unstuck from time and the narrative seems to drift in a completely arbitrary manner between different points within the time and space of his life. It can be hard to tell if Billy is experiencing the actual phenomenon of being unstuck in time and has been instructed by beings who can "look at all the different moments just like we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains," (Vonnegut 19) or if he is simply experiencing trauma induced flashbacks.

Both novels possess the postmodern characteristic of self-reflexivity. In *Juneteenth*, this manifests in the way in which rhetoric, and thereby composition, is exposed as a flawed tool rather than a pure ideal; mastery is not a virtue in and of itself the way it was in the more classically inclined modernist mindset. Bliss/Sunraider and Hickman understand because they are orators that perfect composition does not necessarily equal truth, thus their non-linear exploration. Vonnegut writes the first chapter of his novel more like an author's foreword than a piece of the novel proper, blatantly saying that the reader has picked up "my famous book about Dresden,"

(Vonnegut 14) and utilizes a decidedly conversational voice that seems to subscribe to the Tralfamadorian concept of predestination.

Apart from the temporal oddities and self-reflexivity of each novel, the strongest link between the two is in their status as novels which speak to the social and political realities of America in the Post-WWII period, exposing aspects of the nation that can be moved to bring about horrible destruction. *Juneteenth* deals with the aforementioned tension between the American Ideal and the ways in which rights are granted to its citizens, while Vonnegut deals with the aftermath of the destruction human beings can bring down on one another when properly motivated. Where the novels diverge is in *Juneteenth's* continued insistence of giving discernable meaning to existence; Vonnegut's narrator lends no great moral or existential weight to the actions of Billy Pilgrim. His continued chorus of "So it goes" underscores the fatalism and incomprehensibility of existence under the novel's worldview. Even the clear condemnation of nuclear war and the Dresden Firebombing Campaign is carried out by showing how human life and experience is dwarfed in comparison to such landscape-blackening destruction, not by appealing to an obvious ethical and emotional source of significance.

Juneteenth does not fully behave like a postmodern work in this sense; while Adam Sunraider questions the naiveté of partaking in Juneteenth, the novel's namesake festival of emancipation, calling it "the celebration of a gaudy illusion" (*Juneteenth* 115), Hickman and the lingering soul of Bliss refuse to allow the celebration to be robbed of its significance. Hickman responds to Bliss/Sunraider's cynicism and attempted detachment with his own dedication to the cause, from the communal hope of the gospel to the

detailed recounting of how much snapper, potato salad and coleslaw was served at a particularly large celebration. Rev. Hickman will not let the traumas of his life or Bliss's failures force him to resign to life's wickedness, and deep within the Senator, the need to care still exists as well. Even as he relives his memories with all the cynicism of his present day intact, he cannot help but recall the emotions and the love that he felt. The state of mind with which the recollections of the foster father and son are called up from the past is fundamentally different from the way Vonnegut weaves his tale; the former speaks out of desire to solve a moral quandary while the latter works through exercise of charred dry and black humor. In regards to aesthetic narrative style, *Juneteenth* does not indulge in the borderline absurdist mode used by *Slaughterhouse*. The events of Ellison's second novel, though told in the limits of human perception and in a non-linear fashion, are true recollections for the characters involved. In Vonnegut's piece, by contrast, there is room for speculation regarding the truth of events. Ultimately *Slaughterhouse* takes the full plunge into postmodern waters more than does *Juneteenth*. In observing these differences of narrative methodology, we can make the break between the Modern and the Postmodern far easier to comprehend.

In the end, *Juneteenth* employs both Modernist and Postmodernist literary characteristics within a single work. Some reference works on literary theory, including the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory*, refer to Postmodernism as merely a mutation of Modernism, an offshoot not discernable enough to have its own separate entry. Some critics believe postmodernism to be the inability to enact "reinscription" (Herman 67) or to objectively represent reality with through creation, opposed to modernism by this essential difference. Despite their vast differences, modernism and

postmodernism both rely on similar techniques. By identifying a literary work like *Juneteenth* in which both modes of expression are present, we can aid the task of future literary historians, particularly as whatever is superseding the postmodern aesthetic continues to develop. Hassan notes that even as scholars seek to define the heterogeneous phenomenon of postmodern thought and expression, Modernism is still itself in flux. Just as Ellison was able to capture the playful expression and internal contradiction of America through its language, perhaps this novel can be utilized by the literary world to sort out the blurry lines between these two styles.

CODA: HUMAN POTENTIAL AND THE IMPORTANCE OF *JUNETEENTH* TO THE REPUBLIC

I have always admired versatility in literature, both in expressive capability and scholarly examination. To this end I propose that *Juneteenth* can be viewed not only as a literary space where Modernism transitions into Postmodernism, but as a profound examination of the author's role in maintaining the American democracy that enriches our understanding of Ellison's ideals on the matter. *Juneteenth* may not be the Great American Novel that Ellison envisioned, but it can tell us a great deal about why such undertakings have such lasting importance beyond their value as aesthetic masterpieces.

I have endeavored to argue in critical and literary terms the ways that greater awareness and examination of Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth* could be beneficial and productive. With any false charges naming John Callahan as co-author rather than editor dispelled through the lens of Ellison's own stated ideas about what makes a good story, the reader is free to dive into what exists of Ellison's attempt at the elusive Great American Novel. In editing "Book II" of the novel that would become *Juneteenth*, Callahan essentially followed Ellison's principles to an extent that we can still gain profound insights from the novel as a posthumous fragment. While the Jazz and Sermon inspired novel, *Juneteenth*, can be hard to follow initially, its non-linear quality and premise allow it to explore its themes and narrative in an innovative manner that befits the nature of the tale.

Aesthetically, Ellison's second novel is an example of transition between Modernism and Postmodernism that contains much of what makes both styles so strong in their own right without allowing the two to cancel each other out. As a transitional

place, almost outside of time due to its odd history and mode of composition and setting, *Juneteenth* can be used as a potent tool for examining the distinct traits of both modern and postmodern expression, as well as the enrichment of our studies on Ellison's works and the broader canon of American Letters. Within this exploration I pointed to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* as possible touchstones to demonstrate the commonalities and differences *Juneteenth* has in relation to Modernism and Postmodernism, but a myriad of other possibilities exists for those who would take them on. The obvious contender is the cutting edge Modernist work of William Faulkner, but later Postmodern works such as *England, England* by Julian Barnes or the work of Thomas Pynchon also could profitably be examined alongside *Juneteenth*.

In my own analysis of *Juneteenth* through the lens of Ellison's attitudes as a novelist, I have found that it is a novel deeply concerned with the state of the American Republic. The use of rhetoric in the pulpit and in the houses of government throughout *Juneteenth* is not just the method through which Ellison speaks through the mouths of characters that are fit to handle his prose, though he does take advantage of the opportunities provided by having an eloquent character. Ellison's philosophy about the novelist's role in maintaining the democracy is given tragic representation in the form of the orators within *Juneteenth*. America, and by extension all republics, are governed by the choices of a large group of individuals rather than by a singular prince.

Representative systems of government, especially those like the United States that aspire to an egalitarian ideal, rely on active engagement and individual initiative not only to run smoothly, but also to retain their true philosophical identity. Because of this, a single

individual's decision of what to do with his or her gifts holds far more weight than it would elsewhere. The novelist, in Ellison's view, holds the key to unlocking the mysteries of human nature and illuminating solutions to societal problems of all kinds, including America's original sin of racism. It is the writer's civic responsibility to render human nature with the best forms so that the reader may gain the best insights from the art they encounter.

Within the novel, the morality of using rhetoric is unpacked in the relationship between Hickman and Bliss/Sunraider. Bliss is an individual who exemplifies by his existence and training the impact a single life within a democracy can hold; due to his heritage and upbringing, he holds the capacity to walk easily in both the white and black parts of American society. In addition to the understanding this brings, he has been raised around a tradition of great oratory, men whose mission was to touch the soul of any who would listen and who possess the golden voices to make it so. As Daddy Hickman tutored Bliss in all the ways of wisdom he had on hand, it is clear from his dialogue later in the book (if not from Bliss's rising from the coffin during their joint sermons) that he was grooming Bliss to become a kind of messiah figure, one capable of bridging America's racial divide and fixing what has been broken: "Bliss! You were our last hope, Bliss; now Lord have mercy on this dying land" (38). The techniques of the great preachers work on black parishioners just as well as on white constituents, and both Hickman and Bliss/Sunraider are all too aware of this fact.

Bliss's betrayal of his foster father's teachings is not simply a violation of familial trust but a wasted opportunity for an individual talent to rise up and repair democracy. Rather than bridge divides between the American people, he fleeces his constituents of

their tax dollars, trust, and ability to be represented by someone who cares about their needs more than his own own glory. This tragedy ties together nicely with the pre-existing tension between egalitarian American ideals and the problem of racial prejudice and oppression present in many of Ellison's works. The reconciliation of human love and political action is queried within *Invisible Man*, and John Callahan points out in the closing chapter of *Ralph Ellison & the Raft of Hope* regarding Bliss that, "The Senator's joining of love and politics is expressive of his crisis, and also, in Ellison's fable, the nation's" (Callahan 227). Sunraider's loss of connection with his upbringing is perhaps best emphasized when he has to ask of Hickman, "Do you still call it 'Juneteenth?' Is it still celebrated?" (*Juneteenth* 114).

Through abandoning the African-Americans who raised him and later abandoning the mother of his child, the Senator, Callahan argues, destroyed his own chance to integrate the two contesting forces for the good of the nation's people and his own soul. In wasting this opportunity, Sunraider sets in motion not only his own destruction, but the chaos and tension that would go on to plague his society in the years to come. Ellison's *Juneteenth* is set in the twilight days of segregation, but the author lived on to see the tumult and fire that came with the nation negotiating a process that for many was centuries overdue. Integration did come, but peace and reconciliation are harder to achieve than legal measures. The actions of men like Senator Adam Sunraider create the conditions which produce the militant young black men who, in the Senator's dying vision, serve as a visceral Charon the Ferryman. In choosing to stoke more conflict rather than work out of love, Sunraider has created hostility where he could have created goodwill. As John Callahan writes, "Through Sunraider's vision Ellison asks not if

politics could ever be an expression of love, but if politics has become an expression of irrevocable hate?" (227).

Such a question can be posed even in our own time, more than half a century after the novel's conception and over two decades after its publication. Apart from the racial tensions that actively persist within our own time, political discourse in the last decade has been moving even further away from civility and compromise towards a mentality of "my side right or wrong." Like the case of Sunraider's losing touch with the celebrations of his youth, complaints about an out-of-touch "political class" have spawned strong populist movements on the right and left, many of which are responsible for the country's move further away from civil discourse and common ground. Drawing out Ellison's beliefs concerning the duty of a novelist to his or her nation and the way in which *Juneteenth*'s concerns about rhetoric are portrayed through that lens, it becomes clear that Ellison's creative philosophy could shed a new light on those problems, such as racial tension and the breakdown of political discourse. At the very least, they hold the key to observing how a free society can erode through the apathy and selfishness of their citizenry.

I have always found Ralph Ellison's work enjoyable and compelling because he deals with issues like identity and race in a manner that shows how arbitrary the things are that have been used to divide humanity. *Invisible Man* deals with the unique journey of an unnamed black man towards freedom from control, and while addressing issues specific to its context with great care, it also interrogates wider issues of human nature in ways that still resonate across the spectrum of human experience and humanities scholarship. *Juneteenth*, even more than its predecessor, shows us a great deal about the

condition and nature of ourselves and our democracy. Through the contrast between the methods of Hickman and the tragedy wrought by Sunraider, Ellison shows us that those who wield the power of rhetoric have the ability to give and take much to and from their listeners, just as authors can with their writing. Rhetoric inspires action, but it also shapes human perception. We, as writers and speakers, can choose to invest value in everyone the way Hickman does, even amidst the temptation to hate, or we can embrace the cynicism and manipulative tactics of Adam Sunraider, devaluing the lives of everyone we interact with in the process.

Juneteenth deserves to be read, examined, and taught for its great aesthetic and critical value. Its ability to function as a link between the Modern and Postmodern modes of expression could prove immensely useful to literary critics and historians who seek to better understand and classify their subjects. But I would argue that its ideals and the way it fleshes out the sacred duty of the novelist to the nation also add to the value of Ralph Ellison's last novel. In *Juneteenth* Ellison lends importance and weight to the craft of writing and rhetoric. In a world that sometimes questions the value of the humanities, a novel that shows the direct impact of our words' use for good or ill on a national scale is something we cannot ignore. Ellison's assertion that "Through forging forms of the novel worthy of it, we achieve not only the promise of our lives, but we anticipate the resolution of those world problems of humanity" (*Shadow & Act* 106) gives me hope and drive for my own writing, and *Juneteenth* is the novel I can most point to when reading that inspiring line of speech. The problems this novel exposes are not the sort that we can solve with raw data alone, but I believe that, like Hickman's voice coming down from

above in the surreal close of the novel, there is hope to be had yet: hope to learn, hope to heal, and hope to overcome.

WORKS CITED

- Black, Ray. "Juneteenth by Ralph Ellison and John F. Callahan," *The Black Scholar*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2000, pp. 54-56.
- Brown, John L. Review of *Juneteenth* by Ralph Ellison and John F. Callahan, *World Literature Today*, vol. 74, no.1, Winter 2000. pp. 156-157.
- Callahan, John F. "Ralph Waldo Ellison, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and 'The Dark Fields of the Republic,'" *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, vol. 1, 2002, pp. 122-139.
- . "'Some Cord of Kinship Stronger and Deeper Than Blood': An Interview with John F. Callahan, Editor of Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth*," *African American Review*, vol. 34, no.4, 2000. Conducted by Christopher C. De Santis. Indiana State University, 2000. JSTOR, (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2901421>) Accessed 27 September 2016.
- . "The Making of Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth*." *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, vol. 1, no. 36, 2002, pp. 175-189.
- Dvinge, Anne. "Complex Fate—Complex Vision: The Vernacular and Identity in Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth*." *Amerikastudien*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2006, pp. 193-206.
- Eliot, T.S. "*The Waste Land*." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature, Third Edition*. Edited by Paul Lauter, Houghton Mifflin, 1998, pp. 1411-1426.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. Random House, 1995.
- . *Juneteenth*. Random House, 1999.
- . *Shadow and Act*. Random House, 1953.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Scribner, 2004.

Hassan, Ihab. "Towards a Concept of Postmodernism (From *The Postmodern Turn*)."

Georgetown.edu, <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/HassanPoMo.pdf>.

Accessed 11 March 2017.

Herman, David J. "Modernism versus Postmodernism: Towards an Analytic Distinction,"

Poetics Today, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1991. pp. 56-86.

Hobson, Christopher Z. "Ralph Ellison, *Juneteenth*, and African American Prophecy,"

MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Vol. 51, No. 3, 2005. pp. 617-647.

Kakutani, Michiko. "'Juneteenth': Executor Tidies Up Ellison's Unfinished Symphony,"

The New York Times, 25 May, 1999.

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/05/23/daily/052599ellison-book-review.html>.

Accessed 24 April, 2017

Menand, Louis. "Unfinished Business" *The New York Times*, 20 June, 1999,

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/06/20/reviews/990620.20menandt.html>.

Accessed 25 April, 2017.

"Modernist Theory and Criticism." *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*. 1994.

Morel, Lucas E. "Ralph Ellison's Democratic Individualism," *Ralph Ellison and the Raft*

of Hope. U of Kentucky P, 2004. pp. 58-90.

Pinsker, Sanford. "America, Race, and Ralph Ellison," *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 108,

no. 2, 2000, pp. lix-lxii.

Rampersad, Arnold. *Ralph Ellison, A Biography*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.

Saul, Scott. "Review: *Juneteenth*." *The Boston Review*, 1 June 1999.

bostonreview.net/fiction/scott-saul-review-juneteenth. Accessed 21 April, 2017.

- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse Five*. Vintage, 2000.
- Warren, Kenneth. Review of *Juneteenth: A Novel* by Ralph Ellison, edited by John F. Callahan. *Modernism/Modernity*. Apr. 2000, 307-309.
- Wood, James. "Son of a Preacher Man." *The Guardian*, 26, Nov. 1999.
www.theguardian.com/books/1999/nov/27/fiction.reviews. Accessed 24 April, 2017.
- Young, John K. *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature*. UP of Mississippi, 2006.