

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Ralph Ellison's Juneteenth and African American Identity

Chris Hobson

December 4, 2001

One weakness of much radical thought is its use of abstract, formalized categories and a reductionist method. Radical theories often begin with some area of social existence—the nation and national identity, the system of production and class, race/ethnicity, gender, and others—that they use as a basic category to explain social life. Though there is nothing wrong with using such categories, they are most often reified, that is, treated as real and objective; for example, gender theories assume that people really are of one gender or another, whether “essential” or “socially constructed,” rather than that gender is an idea that partly explains some ways people act. Radical theories further often take a reductionist approach, treating the chosen categories as exclusive of and/or more basic than others rather than simultaneous and functional (that is, the same person may act in terms of class in some situations and nationality in others). Abstract and reductionist thinking misses the complexity of social experience, most of which occurs through the interaction of multiple categories of experience. In particular, thinking that reduces social behavior to seemingly objective cate-

Chris Hobson
Ralph Ellison's Juneteenth and African American Identity
December 4, 2001

Retrieved on 6th May 2021 from utopianmag.com

theanarchistlibrary.org

gories like economic-social class misses (or deliberately discounts) the importance of cultural ideas of various kinds—political, social, religious, historical, communal, etc.

One example of the multidimensionality of social experience is the complex nature of African American (Black) identity in the U.S. When radicals have tried to explain African American identity in terms of various social categories—oppressed nation, superexploited section of the proletariat, oppressed caste, or a combination of these or others—they have most often not dealt with the basic role of culture. Yet African Americans are defined in large part by African American culture, circular as that may sound. African Americans take part in a historically defined, evolving, complex continuum of attitudes characteristic of a particular group and different from those of other groups, away of living, feeling, thinking, and experiencing, and this culture is largely what African Americans *are*. One must be careful not to reduce African American culture to any one (or two or three) dimension(s), but to see it as a whole, as “the self-conception in terms of which most Negroes have actually lived and moved, and had their personal being for all these years,” as the novelist and critic Albert Murray wrote in 1970.¹ Further, culture is not just a reflection of some more basic (which usually means more material) aspect of existence; it is a partly individual, partly collective way of finding pattern in life in the present, past, and envisioned future. To quote Murray again—he is talking about blues music, but the point is true about Black culture over-all—it is not just a way of “making human existence bear-able physically or psychologically,” but “to make human existence *meaningful*” (58).

One of the best ways to learn about African American culture is to read African American literature—plenty of it, fiction, poetry,

¹ Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy*. 1970. Reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1990. Murray’s title contains its own unstated polemic: by “the folklore of white supremacy,” he means most liberal and even radical theories about African American consciousness.

drama, essays, autobiography, from the eighteenth century to today. After all, artistic creation of all kinds often provides as complex and serious a view of social, moral, and ethical realities as political writing—or more so. However, in looking at African American literature one must guard against assuming that one knows in advance what definition of African American culture is valid and then evaluating the artists one reads according to how close they come to this conception. This approach usually means one assumes that African Americans are defined by some objective category (nation, superexploited section of class, etc.) and that the writers' subjective ideas about identity are accurate or distorted reflections of this reality. In other words, this is a variety of abstract, reductionist thinking. One needs to start from the other end: African American literature is a way African Americans have had of *defining* and *determining* (deciding by defining) their identity, and by reading different African American authors, one can see what African Americans think about this identity, i.e., what it is. And one must guard against being satisfied with first impressions and glib generalizations—one must understand the depth and complexity of the topic, the existence of a long prior discussion with its own major and secondary trends.

Ralph Ellison (1914–1994) is among the most complex and original African American novelists and essayists. Ellison was born in Oklahoma City, attended Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) but did not graduate, and moved to New York in 1937. There, he was helped by Langston Hughes and befriended by Richard Wright, and was close to the Communist Party for several years, until he concluded that the CP subordinated Negroes' interests to its own desire for power. In later years he was a political liberal. He is most famous for his novel *Invisible Man* (1952), which develops a distinctive view of racial identity and U.S. society—a view he adds to and also changes in his final novel, *Juneteenth*. This work, the central portion of a much larger planned three-part novel that he worked on for the last forty years of his life, was

edited after his death by John F. Callahan and published separately in 1999.² Most of *Juneteenth* was written from the 1950s to the 1970s; Ellison's later work was on other sections of his unfinished manuscript.

Juneteenth centers on two characters: a racist white U.S. senator, Adam Sunraider, who is fatally shot on the Senate floor sometime in the 1950s, and an older African American minister, Rev. Alonzo Z. "Daddy" Hickman, who, we learn, raised the future senator as a boy preacher, Bliss, in his congregation earlier in the century. As even this sketch suggests, *Juneteenth* is not intended as a social-realist novel but as a kind of comic-tragic tall tale about racial identity in the U.S. and what Ellison sees as the importance of African American culture in and for the struggle for democracy.

To understand what *Juneteenth* says about African American identity, we first need to look very quickly at *Invisible Man*'s view of the same topic. As that novel's many readers will remember, it is told by a first-person narrator who never reveals his name, who is raised and educated in the south in the 1930s, moves to New York after being expelled from a Negro college, and eventually joins and then leaves the Brotherhood, a radical organization very similar to the Communist Party. Almost every scene of *Invisible Man* mixes realistic description, fable, folktale, metaphor, and symbolism. (For example, the tenth chapter, set in the "Liberty Paint" factory in New York, combines realistic descriptions of production and a union meeting with a factory floor plan representing the power relations in U.S. industry and a symbolic account of U.S. whiteness—"If It's Optic White, It's the Right White.") Along the way the narrator encounters multiple models of African American identity, from the middle-class professionalism of his college to the folk and blues culture of working-class Negroes to the class radicalism and racial assimilationism of the Brotherhood, and in the process works out

² Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*. 1952. New York: Vintage, 1989. *Juneteenth*. Ed. John F. Callahan. New York: RandomHouse, 1999; Vintage, 2000.

Cullen, Jean Toomer, and Zora Neale Hurston, are in print; most of W. E. B. Du Bois's works are in print, including *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Darkwater* (1920) in Dover Thrift editions and his magnificent *Black Reconstruction in America* (1930) in a Simon and Schuster paperback. Of Toni Morrison's seven novels, *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Beloved* (1987) are essential; I had a hard time with her two more recent novels, *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise* (1998). I dislike the novels of Alice Walker, but a lot of people think highly of them; I haven't read Charles Johnson, who is very highly regarded. Among less-known works, John Oliver Killens's *Youngblood* (1954), about a Georgia family early in the twentieth century, is in print; his *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1962), based on an uprising by U.S. Negro troops during World War II, is out of print but available from used book sources; Ann Petry's *The Street* (1945), a Wright-inspired novel told from a woman's viewpoint (largely absent in Wright) is in print. Among many, many poets, Robert Hayden (1913–1980) and Michael Harper and Yusef Komunyakaa, both active today, are recommended. The late Melvin Dixon, a mentor and friend, wrote *Vanishing Rooms*, a beautiful, disturbing African American gay novel, and *Love's Instruments*, poetry, and translated the *Collected Poems* of Léopold Senghor, president of Senegal. Many others could be mentioned; and one should read at least *Light in August* (1932), *The Sound and the Fury* (1928), and *Go Down, Moses* (1942) by William Faulkner, the only major white writer of the earlier twentieth century to deal consistently and seriously with race, and highly regarded by Ellison.

a conception of his own. In a powerful scene, he is present when an old Black couple is being evicted, their possessions piled in the street:

I turned aside and looked at the clutter of household objects which the two men continued to pile on the curb. And as the crowd pushed me I looked down to see looking out of an oval frame a portrait of the old couple when young, seeing the sad, stiff dignity of their faces there... My eyes fell upon a pair of crudely carved and polished bones, "knocking bones," used to accompany music at country dances... Pots and pots of green plants were lined in the dirty snow, certain to die of the cold; ivy, canna, a tomato plant. And in a basket I saw a straightening comb, switches of false hair, a curling iron, a card with silvery letters against a background of dark red velvet, reading "God Bless Our Home"; and scattered across the top of a chif-fonier were nuggets of High John the Conqueror, the lucky stone; and as I watched the white men put-down a basket in which I saw a whiskey bottle filled with rock candy and camphor, a small Ethiopian flag, a faded tintype of Abraham Lincoln, and the smiling image of a Hollywood star torn from a magazine. And on a pillow several badly cracked pieces of delicate china, a commemorative plate celebrating the St. Louis World's Fair... (271)

The old couple's mix of possessions, from lucky charm to curling iron to Lincoln portrait to flag of African freedom to memento of the 1904 World's Fair—that magnet for people of all races—is their African American identity. Ellison's point is that African American identity is not one single thing, Negro or African or would-be white American, but a created culture amalgamating all these. Ina

later chapter, he sketches a trio of zoot-suited Black youths, “their legs swinging from their hips in trousers that ballooned upward from cuffs fitting snug about their ankles; their coats long and hip-tight with shoulders far too broad to be those of natural western men... speak[ing] a jived-up transitional language full of country glamour, think[ing] transitional thoughts...” (440–41). Ellison sees African American identity as self-created, fluid, stitched together from odds and ends of every U.S. culture; the zoot suit, a group style of Mexican American youth in World War II that caught on with Blacks and white hipsters, is the perfect emblem of this process. Still later, the narrator encounters Rinehart, a protean con-man who is minister, gambler, lover, and numbers-runner for different audiences. Rinehart clearly embodies the danger of chaos in a completely fluid identity without any self-imposed or communal restraints. Still, *Invisible Man* emphasizes the “infinite possibilities” of self-created identity in a world whose very illogic makes it “concrete, ornery, vile and sublimely wonderful” (576). *Invisible Man*’s narrator, referring to his tormentors, calls this self-created, fluid, amalgamated mix of cultural influences “the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine” (559).

Ellison adds, in later essays, that the overall U.S. culture, music, and language are partly African American: “The American language owes something of its directness, flexibility, music, imagery, mythology, and folklore to the Negro presence. It is, not, therefore, a product of ‘white’ culture as against ‘black’ culture; rather it is the product of cultural integration.” Therefore, U.S. speech “is partly the creation of a voice which found its origin in Africa” (Collected Essays 430).³

Juneteenth restates but also goes beyond and changes this view of African American identity. Aside from giving a much more scorching picture of a corrupt political system than *Invisible Man*,

³ *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. Ed. John F. Callahan. New York: Modern Library, 1995.

African American writing, wrote *Iola Leroy* (1892) as well as three serialized novels recently rediscovered and cited in notes below. *Iola Leroy* and numerous other novels by nineteenth century African American women have been reprinted by Oxford UP. Among Richard Wright’s many books one should read *Native Son* (1940); *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1945, 1993), his autobiography, now reincorporating a major section cut by Wright before publication; and *The Outsider* (1953), a philosophical-ideological novel on totalitarianism. Among James Baldwin’s six novels, read at least *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Giovanni’s Room*, *Another Country*, and *Just Above My Head*, his last novel; of his essays and essay collections, *Notes of a Native Son*, *Nobody Knows My Name*, and *The Fire Next Time* are available as single titles, in his *Collected Essays* in the Library of America series, and in his own collected essay volume, *The Price of the Ticket*.

Thanks to a publishing boom in the last twenty years, many of the earliest African American literary works are now in print, including *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845; Penguin), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Jacobs (several editions), the collected works of poet Phillis Wheatley (Penguin), and such early novels as *Clotel, or the President’s Daughter*, by William Wells Brown (1853, loosely based on Jefferson and Hemings; St. Martin’s), *The Garies and Their Friends*, by Frank J. Webb (1857; Johns Hopkins), and *Our Nig*, by Harriet Wilson (1859; Vintage). Besides the series of women’s writings mentioned above many other late nineteenth- early twentieth-century works are in print, including the stories, novels, and poetry of Charles W. Chesnut (*The Marrow of Tradition*, 1901, is a wonderful novel I read only recently) and James Weldon Johnson. For the Harlem Renaissance, there is an excellent anthology edited by David Levering Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1994). In addition, most HR writers, including but not limited to Langston Hughes (*Collected Poems*, ed. by Arnold Rampersad and David Roesel; Vintage), Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, Claude McKay, Countee

Below I list some books by and about the writers mentioned in my article, and then a somewhat broader list of African American literary works that I think important or valuable. I emphasize that it is a personal list; others might include some quite different authors and works, though no doubt many would appear on most people's lists.

Since *Juneteenth*, published in 1999, is still a quite new book, not much serious analysis has been written about it. A partial exception is Robert J. Butler, "Juneteenth: Ralph Ellison's National Narrative," in *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*, ed. by Butler (Westport: Greenwood, 2000):217–25. But this is a fairly superficial article and also makes some factual mistakes.

Two excellent essay collections deal with *Invisible Man* and with Ellison's work as a whole prior to *Juneteenth*. One, *New Essays on Invisible Man* (1988), is cited in notes below. The other is *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*, ed. by Kimberly W. Benston (Washington: Howard UP, 1987). It contains a wonderful essay, "Ellison's Zoot Suit," by Larry Neal, a cultural nationalist who once rejected Ellison's work and later admired it, and several other excellent pieces. Both are still in print according to amazon.com. Robert G. O'Meally's *The Craft of Ralph Ellison* (1980) is out of print but in libraries.

Ellison's two essay collections, *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986) are in print in 1995 editions from Vintage and are also included in full—with some other essays and interviews—in Ellison's *Collected Essays*, cited in notes below. *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995) is a fairly full selection of interviews.

Major works by African American writers mentioned in my article include Martin R. Delany's *Blake, or The Huts of America* (1859–62), usually considered the first insurrectionary novel by an African American (Beacon Press, paperback). Frances E. W. Harper, a major poet represented in anthologies of U.S. and

Juneteenth places more emphasis on community, specifically the sustaining value of African American community and culture. It also stresses what Ellison sees as an organic link between African American life and ideals of democracy—as Rev. Hickman thinks to himself late in the book, "If we can't cry for the Nation, then who? Because who else draws their grief and consternation from a longer knowledge or from a deeper and more desperate hope? And who've paid more in trying to achieve their better promise?"(274).⁴ And *Juneteenth* moves from irony, the main artistic mode or form of *Invisible Man*, to prophetic speech, the kind of speech needed to move toward a nonracial democracy, "Bliss."

Juneteenth's title refers to the African American Juneteenth holiday, originally celebrated in Texas and later in other southern and southwestern states through the early twentieth century, and revived in recent decades. The holiday commemorates the landing of Union troops in Galveston, June 19, 1865—two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation—with the news of and power to enforce emancipation. Thus it celebrates emancipation—but, specifically, *belated* emancipation and, through-out most of its history, freedom promised and denied, and so it provides an apt focus for *Juneteenth*'s central events.⁵

The novel begins with the shooting of Senator Sunraider, a liberal and also a race-baiter who represents a New England state but—though appearing white—was raised in the deep south as Bliss in Hickman's African American congregation, which he later abandoned. Hickman and his congregants, who have kept track of Bliss through the years, are in Washington trying to warn the senator of danger when the shooting occurs as he delivers a speech that mixes U.S. idealism and slurs about Negroes in Cadillacs,

⁴ Ellison uses italics to distinguish thought from speech, memory from present time, etc. My quotations follow his usage.

⁵ The title was chosen by the editor, John F. Callahan (Ellison had not indicated one); Callahan also selected the order of some episodes, working from Ellison's notes and his own hunches.

the “Coon Cage Eight.” Hickman is brought to the hospital at the senator’s request, and the rest of the novel consists of their fragmentary conversations, shared and individual memories, and finally the senator’s dream-delirium as he sinks toward death. This format lets Ellison move back and forth in time to create a kind of memory-montage. The memories veer among the future senator’s young manhood in 1920s Oklahoma (an idyllic love affair mixed with references to mob violence and KKK rallies), a sequence of several chapters at the Juneteenth festival that supplies the book’s title, Bliss’s early curiosity about the white world at the movies and the circus, a few hints of his later political career, and Hickman’s memories of his birth, near the end of the book. (It appears that Bliss’s mother and perhaps father were white, but that the mother accused Hickman’s brother of rape, bringing about his killing by a white mob; in a reluctant act of mercy, Hickman later accepted the newborn child from the mother and raised him.) Despite his white skin, Bliss is accepted by others in his childhood community as completely African American—though his playmates think they detect “colored,” “Indian,” and “cracker” blood in his actions (55). And we realize not only that young Bliss was African American—because his culture was—but that his Edenic boyhood name is meant seriously; the time when this white boy lived among African Americans and was African American was paradise.

Several parts of this deliberately tangled pattern of memory are crucial for Ellison’s ideas about African American and U.S. identity. The first is the Juneteenth festival that fills four central chapters. During the festival, Hickman delivers a long sermon that essentially contains Ellison’s own ideas. It is a symbolic-metaphoric narrative of African enslavement, survival, and fusion with a new land, preached in call-and-response fashion with the child Bliss. This mythic narration evokes the kabbalic tradition of Adam Kadmon, the primordial human divided to form present humanity, as well as the prophet Ezekiel’s promise of resurrection in the valley

out of it, we bled in it, our tears watered it, we fertilized it with our dead,” give the lie to such oversimplifications and help make clear why—from my observation anyway—most African Americans have insisted on their Americanness and their African African or Black identity and valued and defended both. Hickman’s words also make clear the complex relation of many (most) African Americans to U.S. democracy, as fervent believers in a political ideal they know well has never fully existed. Ellison’s idea that U.S. life contains a democratic kernel that African Americans can struggle to fructify—an idea expressed in organizing the novel around a *Juneteenth* celebration—not only goes back as far as Frederick Douglass, but probably represents the majority view among serious African American thinkers. These are points that radicals studying African American culture would do well to ponder seriously and respectfully.

Besides learning Ellison’s ideas on these points, we can learn that his view is only one among many, since he worked it out in polemical opposition to assimilationists and cultural nationalists. If we are going to talk about anarchist politics in the U.S., we will have to understand the range of different African American ideas on this and other points, and think and write concretely and meaningfully about why our social perspective might represent an improvement.

I don’t pretend to be able to answer that question fully, though I believe the answer must include a full and free flowering of African American and other so-called “minority” cultures. But in any case, besides these specific points, to study African American culture through the medium of literature increases our understanding of African American history and social existence, as well as overall U.S. history, social life, and literature. And it helps correct the one-sidedness of much radical social thought, its overemphasis on material categories and underestimation of ethical, spiritual, and artistic components of human society.

Further Reading

stories of Hickman's mission and Bliss's betrayal and destruction contain portions of the fall and redemption pattern; Bliss's story, taken alone, is a tragedy, but one tempered with hope and faith ("Hickman's con-soling voice..."), and Hickman's story is one of redemption and steadfastness, with, at the close, gathering clouds of apocalyptic war. Most fundamentally, *Juneteenth's* use of prophecy is embodied in the idea Ellison builds his story on—the need for Bliss. In the plot, he is raised to be a prophet, someone born from racial separation and hate but educated to give leadership to the nation, in the manner of a Lincoln. As a narrative creation, Bliss embodies symbolically the need for such a figure. Though he is a failed prophet, the novel's final sequences urgently proclaim the need he has not been able to fulfill. The closing dream-vision both makes clear the need for a prophet able to bridge the racial gap while remaining true to his African American origins—and is itself an act of prophetic speech forecasting the costs of failure.

Students of U.S. culture can learn a lot from *Juneteenth*. We can learn something about the complexity of African American thought on U.S. life, culture, and identity: Ellison is an integrationist in both politics and culture, but his integrationism does not mean assimilation or suppression of differences, but recognition of diversity. More than this, Ellison believes African Americans have forged a historically new identity, not purely African, Black, or U.S., but drawing on each of these; he believes U.S. culture itself is partly based on African American culture; and he believes this African American identity has been present all along in the communal culture of ordinary, not elite, African Americans, his "hick man." To outsiders, the complex sense many African Americans have of their relationship to the United States often appears as an either-or matter: if African Americans emphasize their Americanness, they are assumed to be assimilating to white culture, and if they stress Black culture and identity they are assumed to be sympathetic to nationalism or separatism. Hickman's powerful words quoted earlier, "This land is ours because we came

of dry bones, a central redemptive text in African American tradition (125–27). Ezekiel's vision of the bones that "stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army," and of God's promise, "O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel" (37:10–12), becomes one of a primordial collective human stolen from its homeland, chopped into pieces and buried in American land, watered in it, then joined together, "rebirthed from the earth of this land and revived by the Word" (127). Given "a new language... a new name and a new blood" (127), this people has fused with American soil yet retained its difference:

This land is ours because we came out of it, we bled in it, our tears watered it, we fertilized it with our dead... We know where we are by the way we walk. We know where we are by the way we talk. We know where we are by the way we sing. We know where we are by the way we dance. We know where we are by the way we praise the Lord on high. We know where we are because we hear a different tune in our minds and in our hearts. (130)

This sense of a culturally distinct, sustaining African American identity and destiny rooted in U.S. history is the core of Hickman's message. Hickman's words maintain some similarity to the idea of a self-created, profoundly African American identity in *Invisible Man's* zoot-suiters episode. But the differences are significant. *Juneteenth* speaks of a historically forged, collective identity of endurance, specifically African American in a cultural rather than genetic sense—a cultural fusion born of dismemberment, burial and resurrection in American earth, an identity of "we" as opposed to "they" (130–31), even though the relationship to "they," "the others," is not antagonistic but redemptive.

This identity is prophetic, being created by God for the purpose of forming what Hickman calls "a new kind of human. Maybe we

won't be that people but we'll be a part of that people, we'll be an element in them" (128). And the African American people are charged with the task of redeeming the whole nation: "Time will come round when we'll have to be their eyes" (131). This extraordinary sense of a redemptive African American mission of service to democracy is, of course, symbolized by Hickman's—the hick man's—fidelity to and vigil over the dying senator, the sun raider who has flown too high and fallen.

Another episode crucial for Ellison's sense of African American and U.S. identity grows out of later events at the festival, when a white woman bursts into the prayer area and claims Bliss as her child. (Since we have not yet reached Hickman's memories of Bliss's birth, we are not sure that her story is false; nor is Bliss.) Although the congregation repulses her, the incident begins the fascination with the white world that ultimately leads Bliss away from his African American community. If Juneteenth partly celebrates possibilities of nonracial democracy, embodied in a child who appears white but is raised African American, this section warns of the dangers of unrootedness and the powerful gravitational pull of the majority U.S. culture. Bliss begins almost at once to accept the white woman's claims, transfers to her both his questions about his unknown mother and his awakening sexuality, learns to devalue the African American women who surround and care for him, and begins to glimpse the possibility of becoming or seeming white. Ultimately, in a later episode, having run away from the congregation in Atlanta, he sees "her"—the white actress in a movie poster, whom he fantasizes as his mother—in a movie palace colored red, white, and blue (257). Alone, he is able to pass for white, but postpones the attempt while he engages in a ritual of imitation, following (and briefly preceding, backwards), a white boy on a bicycle adorned with icons of racial, sexual, military, and civil power—Confederate flags and coon tails, a bull, a U.S. eagle, a policeman (258). Ultimately entering the theatre (though the ticket-

ing it," as the critic John G. Wright says (183),⁷ conditioned by the simultaneous openness and exclusion of U.S. life.

But *Juneteenth*, written from a sense of social crisis, turns to an equally important African American tradition of prophetic speech found in writers as varied as Martin Delany and Frances E. W. Harper in the nineteenth century and (in secularized form) Richard Wright and James Baldwin in the twentieth. In this tradition the authorial voice and/or one or more characters invoke divine justice and faith in a new day, or speak of a promised future, retribution, and/or new dawn of justice in a way that draws on biblical traditions (and sometimes language, especially that of Isaiah). Prophecy, as I use it, also means the attempt to make sense of history through an understood pattern that moves from corruption or degradation through redemption to a society of universal justice—as well as the challenges that block this pattern yet are seen as inescapable parts of it. Less obviously "vernacular" than blues-derived irony, Christian and prophetic speech are still very deeply based in African American life and tradition. As the critic Frances Smith Foster argues, "Christianity was not manufactured in Europe and does in fact contain beliefs and practices common to many African religions" (xiv).⁸

Prophetic speech in these senses is found all through *Juneteenth*. Hickman himself chooses Bliss's name in an ironic mood—"I'll call him Bliss, because they say that's what ignorance is" (311)—but we realize that the novel's use of the name is not ironic; the lost possibilities of brotherhood are its very marrow. Hickman's sermons—there are two, plus a short homily and meditation at the Lincoln Memorial—communicate the novel's most significant ideas. The

⁷ John G. Wright, "The Conscious Hero and the Rites of Man: Ellison's War," *New Essays on Invisible Man*. Ed. Robert O'Meally. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988. 157–86.

⁸ Frances Smith Foster, Introduction. *Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, Trial and Triumph*. By Frances E. W. Harper, ed. Foster. Boston: Beacon, 1994. xi–xxxvii.

“who you really is,” as the old woman in the senator’s delirium warns him. Further, *Juneteenth* dwells at length on the dangers of Rinehart, but locates Rinehart’s “vast seething, hot world of fluidity” (*Invisible Man* 498) not in the anonymity of urban African American life, but in the majority society’s ruling circles. For Sunraider is Rinehart, his now-hidden name and essential nature the same as those—Bliss Proteus—that Ellison insisted were B.P. Rinehart’s.⁶ Thus Ellison warns first that improvisational identity in a partially closed society may lead to opportunism and treachery; second, that the U.S. political system is the archetypal arena of this danger; third, that the possibilities of self-transformation Ellison himself has celebrated are empty if they mean forgetting Jerusalem. But at the same time, *Juneteenth* holds up against the senator’s virtuoso role shifts the constancy of identification with a historically constituted community—if one specific to the U.S., as Ellison contends against nationalists and Africanists.

A second crucial shift in *Juneteenth* is its use of the language of prophecy. *Invisible Man*, in spite of the prominence it gives to a group that resembles the Communist Party—or more accurately, because of this—is skeptical about efforts to make the world better. At most, writing in the politically conformist 1950s, and opposing the assumed whiteness of U.S. society, Ellison calls for “diversity” (577). *Invisible Man* emphasizes individual action and artistic communication, in preference to political speech and action. Consistent with these attitudes, *Invisible Man* is written in—and celebrates—what Ellison calls “an ironic, down-home voice” filled with “echoes of blues-toned laughter” (Ellison’s introduction, *Invisible Man* xv-xvi). Many of Ellison’s best interpreters have seen this ironic, blues-derived speech and thought as characteristically African American—a life style as well as artistic style “for expressing simultaneously the agony of life and the possibility of conquer-

⁶ “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” in the essay collection *Shadow and Act* (1964), New York: Vintage, 1972. 56.

taker is on to him)young Bliss fails to fuse with the film’s white mother-goddess, yet realizes his possible future:

...the world had grown larger for my having entered
that forbidden place and yet smaller for now I knew
that I could enter in if I entered there alone.(265)

We realize that this is the crucial moment in Bliss’s mental development: he can have all the U.S. offers if he enters the palace of its culture “alone,” separated from the African American community that has nourished him.

From this crossroads Hickman’s and the senator’s memories develop separately, leading to a final dream-delirium episode in the dying senator’s mind. Too complex to summarize fully, the sequence recaps parts of the senator’s life in dream symbol, including a drawn out, grotesque pigeon-shoot at a country club that basically embodies his own career in the Senate. Finally, he emerges into a city street and encounters a “bent little black-skinned woman” who calls him out: he is an “old jacklegged, knock-kneed, bow-legged, box-ankled, pigeon-toed, slack-asted piece of peckerwood trash... You is simply nothing, done gone to waste” and much more. This sibyl-witch threatens, “SHETUP! Or Ah’ll tell you who you really is!” and the senator “turned away, amused but filled with a strange foreboding. Never mind, he thought, I know who I am, and for the time being at least, I am a senator”(342–43).

Thus he fails his last chance at redemption; at the point of death he cannot turn from his self-created identity and reclaim his boyhood community. After an interval, the Cadillac of his fateful speech appears, a hovering winged apparition painted with flames and bearing familiar emblems—bull’s horns, coon tails, the U.S. and Confederate flags—and the slogans “WE HAVE SECEDED FROM THE MOTHER! / HOORAY FOR US! / TO HELL WITH CHARLEY!” It is peopled by three “dark-skinned” figures speaking in West Indian tones, which Ellison often uses for the

language of race militancy: “*The mahn donelow-rated our pride and joy, so don’t ask the bahstard not’ing, just show he whadt de joeccah kin do!*” (347–48). The senator realizes that

he was watching no ordinary automobile... it was an arbitrary assemblage of chassis, wheels, engine, hood, horns, none of which had ever been part of a single car!... an improvisation of vast arrogance and subversive and malicious defiance which they had designed to out-rage and destroy everything in its path... They have constructed it themselves, the Senator’s mind went on... And they’ve made the damn thing run!... It’s a mammy-made, junkyard construction and yet those clowns have made it work, it runs!...(347–48)

Chanting their “*mah-toe,*” “*Down Wid de Coon Cawdge, /Up WID DE JOE CAH!*” the three pull the senator into the car in a “*blast of heat*” we assume is the moment of his death, as he seems to hear “*the sound of Hickman’s con-soling voice, calling from somewhere above*” (348).

This retributive vision, which ends the novel, evokes the 1960s in its imagery of flames and heat. Yet though Ellison was an integrationist and scornful of (and scorned by) some Black radicals, the scene does not reflexively deplore racial violence or use Hickman simply to stake out an integrationist stand. Rather, the scene is a prophetic vision of one kind of racial justice, the wrong kind according to Hickman and possibly not justice at all, but *justified* by the senator’s failure to accept his identity and responsibility. *He* has failed, and in the novel’s symbolic structure this means that the U.S. political culture has so far failed, though Hickman has not failed in his mission and vigil nor the youths in theirs.

The senator’s dream-vision is therefore both prophetic and apocalyptic, in the sense of an unveiling, a revelation of hidden truths. The youths, the senator thinks, are “*clowns*” who have cobbled up

the car “*in defiance of the laws of physics, property rights, patents, everything... and made it run!*” (348). “*Clowns*” is a charged word in Ellison, signifying a higher-class disregard of the common people (*Invisible Man* 25, 33), and the illogic and arbitrariness of the car’s parts mark it as Juneteenth’s version of “*the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine*” (*Invisible Man* 559): like the zoot-suiters in *Invisible Man*, the youths have assembled a culture—in this case a retributive one—out of odds and ends and “*made it run.*” And, as the coon tail and other paraphernalia show, the car is simply a projection of the equally phantasmal bicycle Bliss imagines he saw long ago, the dream youths’ appropriation of and counterpart to the young Bliss’s worship of white power. In the senator’s mind—which we may take as the mind of a racist culture—the youths and the car *come to exist* through the senator’s uneasy yet arrogant and self-blinded response to the witch-sibyl. Though the “*Joe-cah*”—the wild card and the car of the common Joe—is a destructive machine and though Hickman has rejected retribution, the answering acceptance from the senator has not come and may never come and the car is the result. Hickman’s voice, sounding without words at the scene’s end, holds out some future hope.

Ellison’s unfinished but powerful second novel develops but also changes the ideas I have too briefly summarized from *Invisible Man*. Among other points, *Juneteenth* alters *Invisible Man*’s emphasis on self-selected identity. *Invisible Man* takes its narrator on a journey of discovery of amalgamation, fluidity, and even chaos—qualities embodied in the evictees’ mix of possessions, the zoot-suiters’ “*jived-up transitional language full of country glamour,*” and the Rinehart episode. *Juneteenth* maintains Ellison’s basic conceptions—Bliss is surely a declaration that identity and race are not genetic and objective but socially created and personally chosen. But Bliss is more than just an idea Ellison has already explored. Far more than *Invisible Man*, *Juneteenth* focuses on the sustaining qualities of traditional African American culture, the value of community identification, and the danger of forgetting