HISTORY IN RALPH ELLISON'S *JUNETEENTH*

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Ralph Ellison's second novel, *Juneteenth*, echoes one of the crucial themes of his first—how stories get told, whose stories should be told, and what history is to be believed. The title, selected by John F. Callahan, Ellison's literary executor, refers to the central section in which the characters remember their "Juneteenth rambles." "There's been a heap of Juneteenths before this one," Reverend Hickman says to Bliss, "and there'll be a heap more before we're truly free!"[1] "Juneteenth" stands for June 19, 1865, the day a Union garrison announced to slaves in Texas that they were free. A novel about liberation, *Juneteenth* explores much more than a day in history. It argues for the necessity to keep the past in the present, through celebration, art, and remembrance. As Ellison says about his characters in this novel, "the past is with them and in them" (352). By celebrating it, narrating it, and remembering it, the past becomes living history.

"History" is generally defined as an account of what happened or might have happened, especially in the form of a narrative, play, story, or a tale. Oftentimes, history is assumed to tell what has happened in the life or development of a people, country, or institution—in a systematic account, usually in chronological order with analysis and explanation. The Greek root, *historia*, learning by inquiry or narrative, reinforces the current usage of "history" as all recorded events of the past. The "past" is to be distinguished from "history," in that it is not recorded or in some wise narrated. Derived from the Latin *passus*, which means "step," the "past" is what has happened, what has occurred in the pace of time. The past, therefore, becomes the source of history, and history its art. This essay examines Ellison's art in *Juneteenth,* his personal and public past, grounded in African American culture and history in general. Not only Charles W. Chesnutt, Frederick Douglass, and jazz and popular folklore, but also Greek historians, Thomas Hobbes, T. S. Eliot, and Walter Benjamin have an impact upon his work. Ellison's theme of history throughout emphasizes the necessity of telling one's story, in remembering the past, so that history, the history of injustice, will never repeat itself.

Because it is fiction *Juneteenth* is not technically "history," but it extols the goals of history. Herodotus's goals, for example, in his "inquiries into history" are "to preserve the memory of the past" and "to show how the two races came into conflict."[2] Likewise, Thucydides sets out to describe past conflict and the upset of war. History illustrates, he says, that

"in peace sons bury their fathers, but in war fathers bury sons."[3] *Juneteenth* too is a story about race in which a father buries his son. About his work in progress, Ellison stated in 1974, "I guess that in all my work there is an undergrounding of American history as it comes to focus in the racial situation."[4] His method of history is narrative and remembrance; his subject, among others, is racial conflict and the reversals of nature.

Juneteenth, set in the frame of a deathbed vigil, tells the life story of Bliss, "a little boy of indefinite race who looks white and who, through a series of circumstances, comes to be reared by the Negro minister."[5] That "series of circumstances" includes a false accusation of rape, a lynching, and a birth. Alonzo Hickman, an erstwhile trombonist, delivers the baby from the woman who caused the lynching of his brother and the death of his mother. "Take him and keep him and bring him up as your own," the mother says. "Let him share your Negro life . . . Let him learn to share the forgiveness your life has taught you to squeeze from it" (308). Bliss is her gift to him for causing so much loss, but the ignorance of Bliss, his pursuit of his identity, and subsequent repudiation of his past destroy Sunraider.

Hickman, who grapples with this gift, finally chooses to put down his trombone, pick up the baby, and take him on the road. As itinerant ministers, they "go around and the little boy preached." ("There have been plenty of examples of pairings like this too, in actual life," Ellison comments. "One of the devices used was to bring the little boy into a service in a white coffin, and, at a certain point, when the minister would preach of Christ's agony on the cross, saying 'Lord! Lord! Why hast thou forsaken me?' the little boy would rise up from the coffin."[6]) The little boy grows up learning the art of oratory, eloquence, even chicanery. Bliss remains ignorant about his origins but learns he can pass for white. In time, he runs from Hickman and becomes a "movie man" who seduces a woman of color and leaves her. Eventually he uses his art to become a senator who feeds on the race hatred of his constituents. Trained to be a minister, he becomes a politician.

At the beginning of the novel Senator Sunraider refuses to see the people who raised him, Reverend Hickman and his Southern entourage. Consequently, they are unable to warn him of his impending assassination by his illegitimate son. If there is vagueness in the novel itself as to who is Sunraider's assassin, it is clarified in the notes to *Juneteenth*. According to Ellison, Sunraider's denial of his son and Hickman is linked to America's blindness to the real issues in history:

> It is important to remember that Bliss's denial of Hickman is a denial of himself. . . it is a denial which . . . leads to an uncertain psychological balance. He becomes compulsive on the subject of race, Negroes

> and racial mixing. Thus his denial of Severen and his refusal to see him or to accept his role of father. The old American refusal to recognize its racial diversity. (360)

At the end of the novel, Hickman explains to Sunraider that it is impossible to deny the possibilities of one's blood: "Even if I told you all this, I couldn't tell who your daddy was, or even if you have any of our blood in your veins" (307).

Sunraider does not inherit his racism in his genes; it comes ready made in a tradition that continues to be passed on. When he discovers new territory, a "better" world across the color line, racism justifies his separation from his past. Sunraider does not know who his biological parents are, but he does know who raised him. Yet he challenges both nature and nurture by denying the power of both. Only when he is hit, wounded, and dying in the hospital does he call on Hickman. Sunraider's refusal to embrace his past links him to American history, which, in denying black history, denies its full identity. Seeking to know his ancestry, Sunraider learns nothing about his biological mother and father, but he rejects what he does know and repudiates it, a certain death because it is both *in* him and *with* him.

Sunraider's tragic denial and hypocrisy culminate in his Senate speech "in praise of democracy and diversity." In the name of America's independence from Britain, he privately justifies his independence from his people. "We are a nation born in blood, fire and sacrifice," the Senator states:

> In our beginning our forefathers summoned up the will to break with the past. They questioned the past and condemned it and severed themselves from its entangling tentacles . . . time flows past beneath us as we soar. History erupts and boils with its age-old contentions. But ours is the freedom and decision of the New. . . . So on we soar, following our dream. (14–15)

While giving his speech, Sunraider envisions the American eagle breaking loose and soaring towards him, an image adumbrated in *Invisible Man* when the narrator is "making the old eagle rock dangerously."[7] The center cannot hold because there is too much division, a detriment that Sunraider proclaims can be destroyed by ignoring it. "It requires effort of an order to which only a great and unified nation, a nation conditioned to riding out the chaos of history as the eagle rides out the whirlwind, can arise" (17). But like a dream deferred, Sunraider's denial of his personal history festers and coincides with the denial of the African American experience in American history, and thus the eagle comes unglued:

> High across the chamber . . . the national coat-of-arms had ripped from its moorings and was hurtling down toward him with the transparent insubstantiality of a cinematic image that had somehow gone out of control. (10)

As Sunraider's severance from his past is about to undo him, literally at the hand of his assassin Severn, so is America's future doomed if it does not connect with its past.

Sunraider's vision of birds, symbolic of freedom, flight, and hence emancipation, recurs at the end of the novel, when he dreams a sequence of nightmarish scenes. One contains the slaughter of pigeons at the hands of gunners. They scare the birds into flight and then gun them down except for one wounded pigeon that refuses to fly. "But instead of taking wing, the bird landed on its feet and continued forward, limping now and with a small spot of blood showing on its breast" (336). When Sunraider is shot, the image is similar. He is "still standing . . . his arms lower now, but still outspread" (36). Although also portrayed as a victim, Sunraider is essentially the predator. Blood on the breast summons ideas of victimization and sacrifice, but it is the difference between Sunraider and the pigeon that matters. The wounded bird and the wounded senator are dying, but the bird has refused to play into the hands of its predators and Sunraider has refused to acknowledge his benefactors.

Juneteenth, like *Invisible Man* before it, demonstrates that personal and political identity begins with the past. In telling about the past, the narrators in *Juneteenth* and *Invisible Man* begin with what *was*. At the end of his personal history, the narrator of *Invisible Man* states, "The end was in the beginning" (571). *Juneteenth* ends with a similar message. When Hickman explains to Sunraider that revenge was thwarted by his birth, he says, "And instead of the end it was the beginning" (288). These lines echo Eliot's "In my beginning is my end" and "In my end is my beginning," which in turn refer back to "Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past."[8] Both novels end where they begin, and the body of the text is about the past.

In *Invisible Man* the narrator tells the story of how he came to be speaking from his hole, a coal cellar. It ends with his promise to emerge. In *Juneteenth* Hickman and Sunraider describe their past and how they came to be in the hospital. "There are reflections backwards, forwards, reflections at many different points of time and space, but they all proceed from a continuing, immediate spatial moment in time," observes John F. Callahan of the novel's structure.[9] The novel ends with Sunraider's final

death vision, a nightmarish deliverance from life. Both novels affirm the necessity to keep the past in the present, but *Juneteenth,* which ends in death, is darker. Both echo Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*: "He realized, too, for a moment, the continuity of life, how inseparably the present is woven with the past, how certainly the future will be but the outcome of the present."[10] The difference between Sunraider's fate and the narrator's of *Invisible Man*, however, is *how* they use history. Sunraider, who attempts to escape his past, is destroyed by it. In Callahan's summary, "*Juneteenth* is in some ways a fascinating sequel to *Invisible Man*," in which the protagonist is suspended between the past and the future, while he narrates.[11] In *Juneteenth* the narrative suspends the protagonist between life and death.

History in Ellison's art derives from his complex ethnic, literary, and national tradition. Both personal and political, history is what happened to individuals and to nations, stories that need to be remembered and retold. Emancipation celebrations, which combine personal involvement with the political event, are one form of remembrance. Ellison says, "We don't remember enough; we don't allow ourselves to remember events."[12] *Juneteenth* claims that these remembrances are more than mere "glad noise." They are how history is renewed. Hickman asks, "What does it all mean beyond a glad noise for Juneteenth Day? What does freedom, what does emancipation mean?" (139). Ethnic and national emancipation celebrations help people remember and to look ahead.

According to historian Geneviève Fabre, Juneteenth as a post-Civil War celebration mirrored other Emancipation celebrations like the Fourth of July: "The commemorative spirit which permeated a wealth of celebrations was therefore oriented both toward the past and toward the future. Its mood was *subjunctive*, the *ought* and the *should* prevailed over the *was*."[13] The past has a purpose, says Frederick Douglass: "We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future."[14] Or as Thucydides says, the use of history is "to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future."[15]

In the hospital Sunraider asks Hickman to recall Juneteenth, one of those days in which they raised Lazarus and gave their sermon together:

> "The occasion? It was another revival, wasn't it?"
>
> "Course, it was a revival, Bliss—but it was Juneteenth too. We were celebrating Emancipation and thanking God. Remember, it went on for seven days."
>
> "Juneteenth," the Senator said, "I had forgotten the word."

"You've forgotten lots of important things from those days, Bliss."

"I suppose so, but to learn some of the things I've learned I had to forget some others. Do you still call it 'Juneteenth,' Revern' Hickman? Is it still celebrated?"

Hickman looked at him with widened eyes, leaning forward as he grasped the arms of the chair.

"Do we still? Why, I should say we do. You don't think that because you left . . . Both, Bliss. Because we haven't forgot what it means. Even if sometimes folks try to make us believe it never happened or that it was a mistake that it ever did . . ."

"Juneteenth," the Senator said, closing his eyes, his bandaged head resting beneath his hands. Words of Emancipation didn't arrive until the middle of June so they called it Juneteenth. *So that was it, the night of Juneteenth celebration*, his mind went on. *The celebration of a gaudy illusion.* (114–15)

"Is it still celebrated?" Sunraider asks, because he no longer associates himself with this past. "You don't think because you left . . ." Hickman says, there would be no more Juneteenth? Juneteenth survives, says Hickman, because others "haven't forgot what it means," because it continues to be remembered.

The history remembered on Juneteenth, Hickman suggests, survives in communal memory. It is personal and political experience and a promise for the future. "These commemorations should be analyzed as a *political gestus*," says Fabre, "which contributed to the development of the collective memory—not just memory of past events but the *memory of the future*, in anticipation of action to come—and of the historical consciousness of a people who are often perceived as victims rather than as historical agents."[16] In denying his past, Adam Sunraider leaves paradise, his days as Bliss. In his mind he has stopped being a victim in order to become an historical agent. One of the paradoxes of history is that the past depends on individuals for its existence, but history is about more than historical figures. Sunraider's narcissism is opposed by Hickman's sense of community, and the plot of *Juneteenth* suggests Benjamin Disraeli's *caveat*, "Assassination has never changed the history of the world."[17] The assassination of political figures does not eliminate their beliefs. It takes more than one person to bring down a nation, but it takes each individual to make it what it is. In *Juneteenth*, the assassination of Senator Sunraider by a young black who is his abandoned child forces the personal to open up into the political.

In this quasi-confessional, Sunraider admits that he had to stop knowing some facts so he could learn others. What he did not see, until this dialogue with Hickman, was that his past could never leave him com-

pletely for his past is connected to his future. In his editorial summary, Callahan writes, "Dismissive at first of Juneteenth as '*the celebration of a gaudy illusion,*' the Senator realizes too late that his freedom is bound up with the Negro American communion expressed by and on Juneteenth Day. But it is not too late for those surviving 'to become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern,' the pattern of art. Always in progress, Ellison's work may now find pause, not cessation but pause, in the gift of *Juneteenth* to his readers" (xxiii). Callahan is referring to Ellison's choice of Eliot's "Little Gidding" for the epigraph, which begins: "This is the use of memory: For liberation." Remembrance in "Little Gidding" frees one "from the future as well as the past," and is tied to one's "love of a country." One's "attachment" begins with one's "own field of action" and ends in the public sphere. Those involved in the struggle for freedom may have vanished, but they "become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern" (ix). Eliot's world, so different from Ellison's, becomes a shared landscape of time in which past and future merge with the personal and the public.

Ellison uses both his personal past and Eliot's vision to enhance his own. "In 1935 I discovered Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which moved and intrigued me," Ellison says; "I wondered why I had never read anything of equal intensity and sensibility by an American Negro writer."[18] In aligning himself with Eliot, Ellison asserts that "while one can do nothing about choosing one's relatives, one can, as artist, choose one's 'ancestors.'" His position is a positive rendition of Sunraider's. Richard Wright and Langston Hughes, among others, were his "relatives," while "Eliot, whom I was to meet only many years later, and Malraux and Dostoevsky and Faulkner, were 'ancestors'—if you please or don't please!" Literary tradition forms a call to which new authors must give a response, and "T. S. Eliot initiated the search."[19] Ellison's loyalties to Eliot cut to the same quick of Sunraider's misplaced loyalties. "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" says the narrator of *Invisible Man* (581). Perhaps on a lower frequency, Sunraider speaks for others, even Ellison.

Eliot influenced Ellison on history, but also in imagery. Hickman describing his contemplation of revenge is "sitting there in death's dry kingdom preparing myself for seven months to take a few of them along with me." Then Bliss's mother arrives "looking at me with those hollow eyes" (288). Until Bliss enters his life, Hickman's "thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season" are of murder and suicide. Eliot's "Gerontion" whispers what Ellison knows, "History has many cunning passages."[20] References to "death's dream kingdom" in "The Hollow Men" express Hickman's spiritual poverty before Bliss.[21] *Juneteenth's* summer weather with "Bright flashes of lightning, promising rain" (143) recall "a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust/ Bringing rain" in *The Waste Land*.[22] These images, how-

ever, resonate differently in the distinctly different contexts of a postwar Europe and a pre-Civil Rights America. In Eliot's *Waste Land*, characters yearn to die; in Ellison's world, "That Vanished Tribe into Which I Was Born: The American Negroes," yearn to live (vii). Eliot and Ellison's Lazarus figures both rise from the dead, but Eliot's is an effete, aging socialite: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,/ Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all," says Prufrock.[23] Bliss, on the other hand, is a child acting as Lazarus in a traveling religious revival, living a more traumatic charade than that of a cocktail party.

Eliot's classical Furies in *The Family Reunion* reappear in *Juneteenth* as Hickman and his followers pursue Sunraider, saying, "He'll know who we are; all you have to do is tell him that we have arrived" (4). Unlike Harry's Furies, Sunraider's ghosts of guilt do not succeed in their haunt. They don't get word to him, and Sunraider learns too late that his past has caught up with him. Sunraider appears to realize in the end what Harry learns, that "All past is present, all degradation / is unredeemable."[24] Representing the degradation of "that Vanished Tribe," Sunraider's Furies visit him on his deathbed. "Dark-skinned and broad of face behind the murky window, they peered down on him through dark glasses" (346). He is not met by a soul train from heaven, but by "an improvisation, a bastard creation of black bastards—and yet it was no ordinary hotrod" (347). His death chariot is driven by hostile, jeering blacks and their vehicle is an emblem of America itself: "It's a mammy-made, junkyard construction and yet those clowns have made it work, it runs!" In the end, Sunraider "seemed to hear the sound of Hickman's consoling voice, calling from somewhere above," but Hickman cannot save him. Sunraider's political days in the sun are over (348). No longer in time, the past is no longer in him.

Eliot's line in the epigraph to *Juneteenth* (which Ellison himself chose for the novel), "History may be servitude,/ History may be freedom" (ix), may mean to Ellison that "one man's servitude is another man's freedom." And when Eliot calls, "History is now and England,"[25] Ellison responds, "History is now and America." "It is that aura of a summing up," Ellison said of *Juneteenth*, "that pause for contemplation of the moral significance of the history we've been through, that I have been reaching for in my work on this new book."[26] Saul Bellow claimed that "Ralph was much better at history than I could ever be, but it gradually became apparent that he was not merely talking about history but telling the story of his life, and tying it into American history" (xx).

The history of African American slavery and emancipation, suggests Ellison, is one of America's last frontiers. "Hickman is 'Jim' and Bliss is 'Huck' who cut out for the Territory," said Ellison (362). Huck's flaw,

like Sunraider's, was to abandon Jim. Later, on his deathbed, Sunraider says, "We make for the territory," the new land beyond life (14). The territory is symbolized in Ellison's childhood Oklahoma. "It was the new country which He gave us, the Indian Nation and the Territory then, and everything wide open and hopeful" (319). It is Oklahoma, the undiscovered expanses of the mind, the "unblemished Word," *and* the future of America. Hickman and Sunraider travel the territory of their past. They discover it, explore it, and ultimately conquer it. Ellison says: "Remember that 'the essence of the story is what goes on in the minds of the characters on a given occasion.' The mind becomes the real scene of the action. And in the mind scene and motive are joined" (352). The "word" or narrative art as an outcome of imagination, grounded in his personal past, is Ellison's ultimate territory.

The history of African American slavery and emancipation is also Ellison's personal history, as it merges with political history. It completes the second half of Ellison's history as a novelist. In 1954, after publishing *Invisible Man*, Ellison said, "I've got one Okla. book in me I do believe" (xi). He took the rest of his life to write it. "Now, Oklahoma's just a song," an idealized past, Hickman says (319). For Ellison and thousands before him, Oklahoma had been the Promised Land of mixed blessings, of despair and hope, of fragmentation and acculturation—the tragic circumstances of exile. The five Indian nations were forced to relinquish their lands during the 1830s and 1840s and move to Oklahoma. After the Civil War, cast out by Reconstruction, ex-slaves along with many others sought new lives there. *Harper's Weekly* in 1889 reported that "as the . . . opening [of] the Oklahoma country, draws near, the rush to the borders of the Promised Land has become extraordinary. . . . One railroad runs through the territory, others go near it, and they are preparing for the rush."[27] By 1914, when Ellison was born, however, Oklahoma was no longer a territory of exiles, but the forty-sixth state of the Union, a site of lost innocence. In looking back, Hickman idealizes those "belly-rubbing, dancing and a-stomping off the numbers" days before statehood (319).

As *Juneteenth* is about Oklahoma, history is about geography and place—where one comes from. But whose history is to be believed and whose history gets told is the problem. For Thomas Hobbes, a precursor of liberal thought, the authority of history rests in the individual: "For if I should not believe all that is written by Historians . . . I do not think the Ghost of Alexander, or Caesar, had any just cause to be offended; or anybody else, but the Historian." In other words, humans write history, and the reader determines their authority. "Wee believe any saying . . . to be true . . . from the Authority, and good opinion wee have, of him that hath sayd it."[28] History is to be believed depending on the authority of the

historian. Sunraider represents, however, what can go wrong when one assumes too much authority, that is, one who ignores his constituents, including one's family. Sunraider's denial of his past is counteracted by Hickman's authenticity. Hickman "has his own unique way of looking at the U.S. and is much concerned with the meaning of history," Ellison says (355).

Perhaps the past can never be retrieved or fully understood, but for Ellison the telling of it is what matters—who tells it, who listens, and who responds. Like Hobbes, he warns that not all stories are true. As individuals start out new lives or "cut out for the territory," personal history links to political history. Personal histories of African Americans link to American political history. There can be no ignoring it: "They'll come marching out of the woodpile . . . butt-shuffling into history," Sunraider realizes in his deathbed vision" (245). *Juneteenth* asserts that African American history is integral to American history and to the future of the human condition; therefore, it must be identified and told. In Russell G. Fischer's words, the novel is not only about the "painful struggle of one individual to attain his identity"; "it is also a literary interpretation of the history of the Negro American during the first forty years of the twentieth century."[29] But Ellison would neither "Africanize America" nor "bleach his Negro soul," to put it in the words of W. E. B. Dubois.[30] American history must acknowledge and record both black and white experience.

Because of its lacunae and errors, "the role of history and the meaning of tradition have been at the center of the study of Afro-American culture."[31] As Richard Wright states, "The Negro is America's metaphor. The history of the Negro in America is the history of America written in vivid and bloody terms."[32] Then whose history is it? Is it a record of public events and figures, as Fischer implies when African American history is described as the eras of Booker T. Washington, the migration of blacks from the South to the North, and the involvement of New York blacks in the Communist Party? Or is it personal history? Ernest J. Gaines, commenting on his own novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, says history derives from both personal and political experience. "We are all naive about the true history of blacks in this country," says Gaines. "We have DuBois, Douglass, and Booker T. Washington, but we don't have the story of the average black who lived to be that age."[33] Ellison agrees. History may be personal and political, and it applies and pertains to everyone. In the epilogue of *Invisible Man*, the narrator wonders if his personal history, his improvisational narrative, will be more effective than his political speeches. "Not for the power or for vindication, but because we, with the given circumstance of our origin, could only thus find transcendence?" In this light, Santayana is right: "History is always written

wrong, and so it always needs to be rewritten."[34] And Ellison asserts, "The history of the American Negro is the most intimate part of American history."[35]

Repeatedly, the answers to questions about the function of history in literature require new approaches to what constitutes history, and repeatedly, other forms of records, in addition to the written history of events, present themselves. Hence, all aspects of society and culture—oral, plastic, literary—become "crucial parts of the historical record." However, not only do "sites of memory" differ and vary, they change. "*Lieux de mémoire* are constantly evolving new configurations of meaning, and their constant revision makes them part of the dynamism of the historical process."[36] Pierre Nora, the historian who coined the term, says they exist "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself at a particular historical moment." According to Fabre and O'Meally, "Spurred on by a will to remember—by a conscious effort to limit forgetfulness—*lieux de mémoire* are the products of this interaction between history and memory, of the interplay between the personal and the collective" (7). *Juneteenth* revisits and retells history, both the personal and political sites of memory because so much of what *is* derives from what *was*.

Juneteenth builds a natural bridge between personal and political history. Sunraider puts his personal past behind him and becomes a politician. He joins the making of history, represented by the "history-stained desks" of the United States Senate Chamber (10). "Make Washington function in Hickman's mind as a place of power and mystery, frustration and possibility," Ellison states as one of his goals for the novel. "It is historical, it is the past, it is slavery, the Emancipation and a continuation of the betrayal of the Reconstruction" (352–53). It is also the personal history of Sunraider's betrayal, which parallels the American betrayal of a race, and in more general terms of one people by another. Washington D. C., a counterpoint to the novel's idealized Oklahoma, figures as a site of betrayal.

Douglass makes a similar point in his speech given on July 5, 1852, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July." In this famous call for justice, he asks how Americans can celebrate Independence Day when there is still slavery. "I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary!" Douglass says to the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society. "The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not me."[37] Ellison responds to Douglass's call with "What to the American Is Juneteenth?" In doing so, he replaces Booker T. Washington as the "ancestral model of African-American eloquence and leadership,"[38] exalting Douglass as an orator, historian, and a civil servant who "talked his way from slavery to a government ministry"

(*Invisible Man*, 381). Like Douglass, *Juneteenth*'s narrator talks his way out of his hole, Sunraider talks his way over the color line, and Hickman tries to talk Sunraider back to health. As a model of eloquence, Douglass "belongs to us all" (*Invisible Man*, 378).

"Talking" or orality in African American culture emerges from the "dialectic of innovation and tradition." The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s "reclaimed the power and richness of the black folk tradition, of oral culture, past and present, that writers had to take up and transform into something 'new.'"[39] Writing on Chesnutt's "revision of history," Robert B. Stepto demonstrates that storytelling renews history. The frame structure of the storyteller retelling the story invokes the black folk tradition of vision and revision.[40] Ellison uses a similar structure in both his novels: the narrator of *Invisible Man* tells his story from his coal cellar, and Sunraider and Hickman tell their story at the hospital. The frame sets the stage for narrative. Storytelling links the oral tradition with history; what is told is written down in the frame of teller and listener. Writer and reader merge, as do tradition and history.

Structures in the oral tradition resemble structures in music that Ellison uses in *Juneteenth.* "The method is naturally antiphonal," Ellison says. "Senator and Rev. Hickman, little Bliss and Daddy Hickman. The antiphonal section, or Emancipation myth, is spun out in the hospital where the Senator confesses to Hickman under pressure of conscience, memory and Hickman's questions and it takes form of Bliss's remembered version versus Hickman's idiomatic accounts" (352). Complementary to the antiphonal or "sounding back" structure of the narrative is a diaphonic harmony in the dramatic structure in which two solo voices track each other in parallel intervals, often the unsettling and minor sounding second, fourth, and seventh intervals of an octave. One might also argue for the sonata form in *Juneteenth*, in which the tension lies between the two principal themes of the political voice of Sunraider in his Senate speech and the contrapuntal religious voice of Hickman in his Juneteenth sermon. The novel also modifies the traditional dichotomy of protagonist and antagonist, the dramatic dialectic for resolution. Sunraider and Hickman learn from each other. Their call-and-response narration records history while they rewrite it.

African American storytelling forces a showdown between what *was* and what *should be*. The title of Chesnutt's historical novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*, based on the Wilmington, North Carolina, Massacre of 1898, refers to Charles Lamb's opinion of Hone's *The Every-Day Book*, a nineteenth century cornucopia of trivia, gossip and entertainments, in "whose capacious all-embracing leaves, the very marrow of tradition's shown."[41] In Chesnutt's novel, "the marrow of tradition," the celebrations and habits

of the Reconstruction South promote racial strife, lynching, and the idea of white supremacy. Tradition, in this case, is not to be preserved. In terms of the race riots in which Chesnutt's "disenfranchised whites" shoot down blacks, "the records of the day are historical; they may be found in the newspapers of the following date, but they are more firmly engraved upon the hearts and memories of the people of Wellington."[42] Even another member of a disenfranchised minority so far forgets that tradition as to join in the melee against the blacks: "A Jew—God of Moses!—had so far forgotten twenty centuries of history to join in the persecution of another oppressed race!"[43] The great tradition, that of compassion, needs to be revitalized in order to stop the repetitions of murder, lynching, and riot.

"The marrow of tradition" is the living blood within the bones of humanity. "Dry bones can harm no one," says Eliot; only the living can kill.[44] But the bones of tradition are dangerous, dripping in blood, and in Ezekial's vision able to reassemble and avenge themselves. Hone's tradition, referred to in the epigraph to Chesnutt's historical novel, was occasioned by celebrations and sites of memory. It is, however, impoverished in Eliot's *Waste Land*, racist in Chesnutt's Wellington, and biased in Sunraider's Washington D.C. Tradition and folklore, as found in records like Hone's *Every Day Book* and in folklore, should be passed on through ritual and celebration, but renewed and transfigured through the artistic conscience. As Ellison explains, "I use folklore in my work not because I am Negro, but because writers like Eliot and Joyce made me conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance. My cultural background, like that of most Americans, is dual (my middle name, sadly enough, is Waldo)."[45] In merging the two traditions, Western-European and African American, Ellison stakes out new territory and makes something new, writing of experience "as ordered through one's knowledge of self, culture and literature."[46]

Alan Nadel identifies Eliot as Ellison's "stylistic mentor," concluding that Eliot "provides the means . . . by which . . . invisibility is reinscribed."[47] Eliot asserts that the artist can play a crucial role in history, both during and after the historical event. In fact, if artists possess the historical sense, they can change history; that is, the past may never be understood in the same way again. The past can change, not because the past is relative to individual experience, but because it is entirely present in immediate experience, which in turn is the subject of art. Like Eliot's, Ellison's "historical sense" negates what is commonly called "history," the "record of objects, events, ideas, institutions, or literary monuments classified according to types and periods and representing factual knowledge of bygone times." The past is not external to the present, what one imagines when one

projects oneself into an earlier period. According to Lewis Freed on Eliot's idea of history, "There is but one time, which is ever present; for there is no time apart from consciousness, and consciousness is always a present fact."[48]

Eliot's philosophy of history, influenced by F. H. Bradley's notion of reality as immediate experience, calls on the artist to change the past. "It's just a matter of the past being active in the present—or of the characters becoming aware of the manner in which the past operates on their present lives," Ellison says (xvi). "Of course this gets into the general history, because one of the characters is a senator. He, too, is a trickster."[49] The trickster can conjure, like the movie man that Sunraider becomes for a while. As a child, Bliss thinks he can find his mother on the silver screen; as an adult he discovers he can seduce and fool others through the movies. This is not Ellison's "history." "They call this doo-doo *history,*" one of the viewers says disparagingly in the movie house (242). The artist, as catalyst or the unchanged changer, is a true conjurer. Who knows if indeed Ellison in his art has not changed Eliot?

In order to keep the American eagle in place, Ellison suggests, history and tradition need to remain fluid. "The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence," Eliot says. It is what makes a writer "traditional." "Tradition" should be "positively discouraged" if it is merely a "handing down" from one generation to the next. Instead, tradition, "existing monuments that form an ideal order among themselves," needs to be challenged, even changed ever so slightly, to the extent that "the past should be altered by the present."[50] Identity begins with one's past, but for Eliot and Ellison freedom is liberation *from* self, not *of* self. Through the creative act of writing, and through the narration and remembrance of the past, the personal becomes political. Perhaps the emphasis on the individual in the title of Michael Harper's second book of poetry, *History Is Your Own Heartbeat*, sums up the one side of the personal and public nature of history. Perhaps Walt Whitman's, "I am large. . . . I contain multitudes" provides the other.[51]

Ellison wrote *Juneteenth* with his own generation in his bones, but also with the whole of American history in him. The least studied but crucial characteristic of Eliot's traditional poet comes at the end of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which Eliot explains that the experience communicated in poetry is not the experience itself. Sometimes used pejoratively, the phrase "impersonality of the poet" suggests the suppression of the individual, but Eliot's value is one shared by Ellison. It is the idea that the political derives from the personal. The poet "is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is

dead, but of what is already living."[52] This idea of "knowing what is to be done" is in the epigraph, which presents history as personal and political memory.

History must be heard to exist—a call requires a response. *Juneteenth* begins with messengers pleading for an audience. "Two days before the shooting a chartered planeload of Southern Negroes swooped down upon the District of Columbia and attempted to see the Senator" (3). Their cry is that history belongs to them too, that they too must be heard. "We're from down where we're among the counted but not among the heard," Hickman says (4). His complaint evokes the history of proportional representation in the U. S. Constitution, which was originally calculated by "adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other persons."[53] Democracy requires not only being counted, but being able to vote, not only listening, but being able to speak. *Juneteenth* ends with the consequences of not listening.

History may be used by those in power, and "in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from conformism that is about to overpower it," said Walter Benjamin, deliberately confounding the boundaries of "religious and political modes of thought." Conscious of the ruling class's use of history as its justification, he famously warns that "even the dead will not be safe" from those who claim history. Benjamin's "Angel of History" "subverts the very idea of winning," observes Geoffrey Hartmann. Similarly, Ellison subverts the senator's success in *Juneteenth*. "Catastrophe, instead of remaining fixed in the past, and hope, instead of being an eschatological or future-directed principle, reverse places." In Benjamin's essay as in Ellison's novel, it is the role of the true historian not simply "to represent or recuperate them [the vanquished] by a gratuitous act of sympathy but because the vanquished are the volcanic pavement on which the victors march. It is they who give history its materiality, its uneven, unquiet subsistence."[54] Remembrance becomes a plan of action.

When Sunraider's future is in danger, he seeks to remember his past. In his delirium he calls for Hickman. "He'll have the best of everything, so there's nothing to do but wait and hope," Hickman says. "The fact they let me in here when he asked them is proof of something—I hope that they mean to save him. . . . There's such a lot I have to ask him" (96). Inverting the motif in the *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas sets out from burning Troy to start a new nation, carrying his father Anchises on his back, Sunraider turns his back on Hickman. In his moment of danger, Sunraider enjoins Hickman to articulate his past, to help him remember who he was, and Hickman carries *him*.

In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin explains that it is impossible "to articulate the past" as "it really was"; but we are able "to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." Weakened by his gunshot wounds and impending death, Sunraider for an instant experiences the hopelessness of those oppressed people whom Benjamin describes as living in a perpetual state of emergency. Their history needs to be articulated, "for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."[55] There is some relief in Sunraider's dialogue with Hickman, but it comes too late.

History in *Juneteenth*, however, comes just in time, with its probable fictions. With the "liberty of a poet," in Coleridge's hopeful words, Ellison unbinds "the shackles of a historian."[56] *Juneteenth* is a reminder of that part of American history in which emancipation was staggered shamefully and of that future in which freedoms will be challenged. To be free, Ellison suggests, one must tell one's story. This is what Ellison was still doing when he died. It invoked his personal origins and literary ancestors. It pursued his own future as an author who attempted to integrate the American experience. Yet a gentle reader will detect Ellison's mature vision, one that sees the telling of history as an individual act in which personal and political stories are remembered. And the events of the past on a personal level become the means for a nation to understand freedom on a political level. Ellison's second novel is a reminder that the freedom celebrated on Juneteenth continues to be won. In this way history never ends.

Notes

I want to express special thanks to John F. Callahan for his valuable comments on a draft of this article.

[1] Ralph Ellison, *Juneteenth*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Random House, 1999), 131; hereafter cited parenthetically.

[2] *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (Edinburgh: Penguin, 1955), vol. I, 1, 13.

[3] *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (Baltimore: Penguin, 1961), vol I, 87, 49.

[4] "A Completion of Personality: A Talk with Ralph Ellison," *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 783–818, 814.

[5] "A Completion of Personality," 814.

[6] "A Completion of Personality," 815.

[7] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 576; hereafter cited parenthetically.

[8] "East Coker" and "Burnt Norton," in *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), 123–29, 123, 129; 117–22, 117.

[9] "'Some Cord of Kinship Stronger and Deeper than Blood': An Interview with John F. Callahan by Christopher C. De Santis," *African American Review* 34, no. 4 (2000), 601–20, 611.

[10] Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 112.

[11] John F. Callahan, "On Editing Ralph Ellison: The Riffer's Muse," *New Republic* (Sept. 27, 1999), 31–35, 31.

[12] "A Completion of Personality," 813.

[13] Geneviève Fabre, "African-American Commemorative Celebrations in the Nineteenth Century" in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed. Fabre and Robert O'Meally, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 122–129, 122.

[14] Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" in *Frederick Douglass: Oratory from Slavery*, ed. David B. Chesebrough (Westport: Greenwood, 1998), 114.

[15] *History*, 1, 1, 24.

[16] Fabre, 123.

[17] Benjamin Disraeli, "Speech, House of Commons, May 1, 1865," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955), 180:36.

[18] Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," *Collected Essays*, 210–24, 210.

[19] Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," *Collected Essays*, 155–88, 185, 187.

[20] T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *Complete Poems*, 22–23.

[21] T. S. Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, *Complete Poems*, 56.

[22] T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, *Complete Poems*, 49.

[23] T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *Complete Poems*, 6.

[24] T. S. Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, *Complete Poems*, 234.

[25] T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Complete Poems*, 145.

[26] Ellison, "A Completion of Personality," 817.

[27] "On to Oklahoma," *Harper's Weekly* 33, 1687, April 20, 1889: 306.

[28] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651; Oxford: Clarendon, 1909) vol. I, "Of Man," 7, 52.

[29] Russell G. Fischer, "Invisible Man As History," *Columbia Language Association Journal* 17 (1974), 338-67, 339.

[30] Quoted in James M. Albrecht, "Saying Yes and Saying No: Individual Ethics in Ellison, Burke, and Emerson," *PMLA* 114 (1999), 46–63.

[31] Gunter H. Lenz, ed. *History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture* (New York: CampusVerlag, 1984), 1.

[32] In Fabre and O'Meally, n.5, 16.

[33] Quoted in Lenz, n.7, 93.

[34] Fabre and O'Meally, 3–5.

[35] "The Art of Fiction," 214.

[36] Fabre and O'Meally, 9.

[37] Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," 115.

[38] John F. Callahan, *In the African-American Grain: The Pursuit of Voice in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1988), 168.

[39] Lenz, vii–viii.

[40] Robert B. Stepto, "The Simple but Intensely Human Inner Life of Slavery: Storytelling, Fiction, and the Revision of History in Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Uncle Julius Stories,'" in Lenz, 29–55.

[41] Epigraph to Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (New York: Penguin, 1993), li.

[42] *The Marrow of Tradition*, 274–75.

[43] *The Marrow of Tradition*, 290.

[44] T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land, Complete Poems*, 37–55, 49.

[45] Ralph Ellison, "Change and Joke and Slip the Yoke," *Collected Essays*, 100–12, 112.

[46] Ellison, "The World and the Jug," 110–11.

[47] Alan Nadel, *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon* (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1988), 27, 31.

[48] Lewis Freed, *T. S. Eliot: Aesthetics and History* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1962), 139–40.

[49] "A Completion of Personality," 816.

[50] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1964), 3–11, 4–5.

[51] Michael Harper, *History is Your Own Heartbeat* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1971); "Song of Myself," *The Portable Walt Whitman*, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York: Viking, 1974), 32–97, 96.

[52] Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 11.

[53] *The Constitution of the United States* (Eagan: West Group, 1999), I, 2 [3].

[54] Geoffrey H. Hartmann, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1980), 77–78.

[55] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State Univ. Press), 680–86, 362.

[56] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Ch. 22 in which Coleridge quotes Sir William Devenant's [1606-1608] letter to Thomas Hobbes, *Biographia Literaria*, vol. II, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), 251.