

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Ralph Ellison died without ever completing his second novel. After his death, the executor of his literary estate, John F. Callahan, edited Ellison's work into a novel published under the title *Juneteenth*. This thesis examines the problems posed by Ellison's posthumously released text, especially the issues of authorial intent and reading incomplete narratives. As a way of addressing these problems, this thesis draws upon the field of literacy studies as a method for approaching Ellison's fragmented text. Theory from the field of literacy studies provides a lens through which the novel is examined. A close reading of *Juneteenth* foregrounds the ways in which Ellison represents literate traditions in the novel, and speculates as to what these representations reflect about the author's concerns.

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Unfinished Work: Reading Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth*

by

Angela F. Ridinger

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Unfinished Work: Reading Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth*

Chapter 1: Introduction

By titling this thesis “Unfinished Work: Reading Ralph Ellison’s *Juneteenth*,” I mean to suggest not that this thesis is a reading of *Juneteenth*, but instead that this thesis is about reading *Juneteenth*. Indeed, the main thread of this project is not a particular interpretation of Ellison’s posthumously released novel. This project instead explores reading as a series of assumptions that are brought to a text, and the question of what readers are to do when the usual series of assumptions cannot be applied to a text. Readers traditionally feel safe in assuming that an author has had control over the general structure of his or her manuscript. In turn, this means that readers can assume that an author intends a particular narrative structure or plot sequence, and that the author intends to convey a particular meaning (or meanings) through his or her work. Yet in the case of *Juneteenth*, Ellison never made a number of the decisions about the text that readers often take for granted that authors do. The fact that Ellison never made these decisions is what makes reading *Juneteenth* such a complicated process.

Chapter 2 begins this exploration by examining the history of *Juneteenth* as a text. By identifying *Juneteenth* as an unfinished, rigorously edited work by a deceased author, I call attention to the problems with assuming an intended narrative structure or theme in *Juneteenth*. I explain that the work’s editor, John F. Callahan, has omitted extensive portions of the author’s original manuscript in this edition of *Juneteenth*, and that these omissions leave readers unsure of which decisions are the editor’s and

which are the author's. Thus, in this thesis about reading Ellison's *Juneteenth*, Chapter 2 serves as an explanation for why questions about reading need to be considered in the case of this work, and suggests several important limitations to the way the work can be read.

Chapter 3 explores a possible approach to the text through language. In Chapter 3, I identify *Juneteenth* as the product of a culture in which distinct cultures and the literate traditions that represent them come into contact with one another. Drawing from Mary Louise Pratt's "Arts of the Contact Zone," as well as Ellison's literary essays, I suggest that the novel might be read in a way that considers the literate traditions that it represents. In relation to this thesis' central focus on reading *Juneteenth*, Chapter 3 functions as a consideration of methodology. I end Chapter 3 by explaining that viewing *Juneteenth* in terms of the literate expressions it embodies allows readers a way of looking at the work as Ellison's project rather than as his product. The patterns of contact between the literate traditions can be read in *Juneteenth* as a way of revealing some of Ellison's thinking about language, culture, and identity as he wrote the manuscript.

Chapter 4 moves to an actual reading of Ellison's novel. Considering the observations in Chapter 3 about the ways that literate traditions can be brought together in a novel that is a product of a "contact zone," Chapter 4 adopts a specific framework for examining these patterns of contact. Drawing from Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen's "Reading Literacy Narratives," Chapter 4 focuses on the literate expressions of *Juneteenth*'s central character, Bliss/Adam Sunraider. Where Mary Louise Pratt discusses the need to recognize diverse expressions of literacy in

“Arts of the Contact Zone,” Eldred and Mortensen describe a way for reading literature in a way that calls attention to issues of language and literacy. Eldred and Mortensen introduce what they call the “literacy myth,” the unfounded notion that by acquiring “better” literacy, one will advance socially. In *Juneteenth*, Bliss/Sunraider finds himself in the middle of contact between the Afro-American and white cultural traditions. As a central figure of a literacy narrative, Bliss/Sunraider moves between the literate traditions, responding to a sort of “literacy myth” that the language of white America will lead him to success. Chapter 4 of this thesis focuses on these moments of cultural contact and literate negotiation in *Juneteenth*. The aim of Chapter 4 in relation to the thesis is both to respect the problems of readership identified in Chapter 2, and to demonstrate a possible way to read *Juneteenth* that reveals something about Ellison’s authorial interests.

Chapter 5 discusses the possibilities for *Juneteenth*’s future as a literary text. Where Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to providing a method for reading *Juneteenth*, Chapter 5 considers whether or not *Juneteenth* should be read at all, and how the way the text is read (or not) influences readers’ notion of Ellison as an author. Chapter 5 briefly explores the possibility for future scholarly work on *Juneteenth* and suggests that readers should read the text, but should do so with full awareness of the problems an unfinished text proposes. In calling this thesis “Unfinished Work,” I have meant not just to suggest that Ellison’s text is unfinished, but that reading the text is also unfinished work that needs to be continued if Ellison’s forty year project is not to be forgotten.

Each of the four following chapters approaches the issue of reading from a slightly different angle; each chapter has its own agenda. However, the main thread that runs through each of these chapters is the discussion of reading—either as a problem, process or a series of possibilities.

Chapter 2: The End of Waiting, the Beginning of a Problem

There is an eerie echo when we read some thirty-eight years later an observation made by Ralph Ellison's unnamed narrator in the last paragraph of the 1952 *Invisible Man*, "And I suppose it's damn well time. Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation . . ." (581). For after the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison seemed to enter a hibernation of sorts in his career as a novelist, a public perception that followed him to the grave. In the forty-two years between the publication of *Invisible Man* and Ellison's death, we might well wonder if the writer occasionally marked the period of authorial silence by stealing into his study in the dead of night and offering up curses to the manuscript that had begun to haunt him like a sort of neo-Grendel. The fatal manuscript I speak of is not the much awaited Hickman stories released only in small snippets until after Ellison's death. No, the literary monster is of course *Invisible Man*. Ellison's 1952 novel was, and remains, a refined and complete work of art. As one critic observed, "Writing a first novel that becomes a classic can be a blessing and a curse. There's instant acclaim, of course, but with the fame comes intense pressure to write an even better second book. Margaret Mitchell and Harper Lee didn't even attempt to top their spectacular debuts. Ralph Ellison died trying" (O'Briant S2). Indeed, Ellison never lived to see the publication of his second novel. Perhaps he never recovered from the fire that destroyed parts of his manuscript in November 1967, forever unable to regain what had nearly been in his grasp. Perhaps American society changed so rapidly and so much that he could never fully come to terms with the novel's social context. Or perhaps, knowing that his reader's

expectations were high, Ellison never felt he was able to write himself out from under the enormous shadow of *Invisible Man*. For short of another classic, what can top a classic?

Certainly not *Juneteenth*. At the bequest of Ellison's widow, Dr. John F. Callahan, executor of Ellison's literary estate, edited the author's forty-year project into a publishable work. The result of this process is *Juneteenth*, a relatively short novel (for Ellison, anyway) that centers on a boy of ambiguous racial descent who is raised by an Afro-American jazz-musician-turned-tent-revival-preacher. The boy, Bliss, eventually leaves behind his surrogate father, Reverend Hickman, lives as a white man and takes on the name of Adam Sunraider. Sunraider works as a filmmaker, then later becomes a United States Senator. It is during a speech delivered from the Senate floor that Sunraider is shot by a would-be assassin, and most of the novel takes place by Sunraider's bedside, in the form of dreams and reminiscences, as well as in occasional dialogue between Sunraider and Hickman. Critics anxiously awaited the new manuscript's June 1999 publication. However, many readers agree that the new novel only confirms what Ellison seems to have known all along: it is not a finished work of art. Thus, as readers, before we can even begin to read *Juneteenth*—at least in the informed, critical way that Ellison would have surely demanded of us—we must explore the problem that an unfinished work poses. In order to do this, I will look first to Callahan's editing process, focusing particularly on various criticisms of the process, to elucidate the issues raised by editing and releasing an unfinished, posthumous work, both in a practical and theoretical sense. This will lead into a discussion about the difficulty of assessing authorial intent in the case of

Juneteenth. I will conclude this chapter by discussing what “the problem” of *Juneteenth* means in relation to the way readers can and should approach this text.

While most critics have been respectful of Ellison in their appraisals of *Juneteenth*, a number have been less generous to the novel’s editor. Louis Menand, professor of English at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, levies one of the sharper criticisms of the editing process. Menand argues that *Juneteenth* “is not Ralph Ellison’s second novel” (Menand 7: 4). Pointing to Callahan’s own account of the editorial process in “Afterword: A Note to Scholars,” which appears at the conclusion of *Juneteenth*, Menand describes Callahan’s work as a “surgery” (7: 4) in which both the novel’s organization and title are the editor’s creation. “But there is no evidence (at least none cited) that Ellison ever intended ‘Juneteenth’ as a title for the book he was struggling to produce. Not that it matters. For whatever that book might have been, this is not it” (Menand 7: 4). For Menand, as for me, the most difficult part of considering *Juneteenth* is not these more delicate acts of editorial surgery. Rather, it is the mass amputation of the two accompanying volumes of which *Juneteenth* was originally a part.

What I mean by this is that Callahan’s editing process included more than an intensive proofreading of Ellison’s novel. As the executor of Ellison’s literary estate, Callahan was not placed in charge of an orderly series of notebooks or computer disks containing the author’s nearly perfected masterpiece. What Callahan inherited was instead an unruly ward—forty years of Ellison’s drafts and notes totaling thousands of pages of possibilities, visions and revisions of the book that refused to be written. As Callahan explains:

As I tried to discern one coherent, inclusive sequence, I realized slowly, somewhat against my will, that although Ellison had hoped to write one big book, his saga, like William Faulkner's, could not be obtained within the pages of a single novel. Aiming, as Ellison had, at one complete volume, I proceeded to arrange his oft-revised, sometimes reconceived scenes and episodes according to their most probable development and progression. While doing so, I felt uneasily procrustean: Here and there limbs of the manuscript needed to be stretched, and elsewhere a protruding foot might be lopped off, if all the episodes were to be edited into a single, coherent, continuous work. (Callahan 365)

Just what Callahan means by "protruding foot" is not clear, but his choice of words smacks of understatement. In a May 23, 1999, interview with Callahan, novelist Gregory Feeley reports that Ellison's unedited manuscripts "total some 1,500 pages, not counting multiple drafts of many scenes" (6: 50). However, *Juneteenth* totals only 345 pages of text. The "protruding foot," then, includes some 1,100 pages of text. The omitted text also includes a story line revolving around a main character named McIntyre, who is "reduced to bare mention in *Juneteenth*" (6: 50).

This rigorous editing process leaves readers of *Juneteenth* in a difficult place. While on the one hand, we might merely say that 345 pages are 345 pages that we did not have before, and that these 345 pages are Ellison's, and that we should lay the issue to rest with that, the answer really is not that simple. A brief examination of literary theory helps reveal why Callahan's editing process is so very problematic. In Kenneth Burke's essay "Terministic Screens," he argues that in language, the selection of words reveals a complex set of choices. "Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" (Burke 45). To draw a simple analogy, if I say, "the sky is gray," that is a *reflection* of reality. However, since the sky is not gray for everyone everywhere, such a statement is a

selection of reality (mine), and consequently also a *deflection* of reality (someone else's). Burke's notion of the "terministic screen" is similar to Jacques Derrida's argument in *Limited Inc.* that text is decision. Echoing J.A. Austin's observation that language or definitions reflect intentions and that descriptions are "selective and uttered only for a purpose" (Austin 145), Derrida maintains that representations (for Burke, reflections) portray some aspects of their antecedents, and exclude others. In his critique of Austin's work, Derrida argues that the distinction Austin makes between "felicitous" and "parasitic" speech is a decision to exclude fiction and other forms of literature. He further adds that decisions are based on value (i.e. the values of the one making the decision). To acknowledge one set of constructions as being felicitous, and another as parasitic, as Austin does, when all are merely constructions indicates a value-based decision (Derrida 88-96). What I am trying to make clear from mentioning Burke's and Derrida's observations about language as a set of decisions is that while the words a text includes are important, so are the words a text does not include. This seems to me especially true when looking at the case of *Juneteenth*, and Callahan's decision that 345 pages of words could be in the novel, and over 1,100 pages of words could not.

If we do not approach *Juneteenth* carefully, the novel might reveal to us more about Callahan's intentions than Ellison's. We know from Callahan's lengthy "Introduction," which appears at the beginning of *Juneteenth*, that he has very specific opinions on what Ellison's work-in-progress is, both thematically and structurally. Callahan declares in his "Introduction" that "On many levels *Juneteenth* is a novel of liberation, literally a celebration of June 19, 1865" (xxiii). In other words, Callahan

has made a decision about what the theme of *Juneteenth* is, or what the work's essence is. Thus, he has also made a decision about what *Juneteenth* is not. Callahan believes that *Juneteenth* is a "jazz novel," which no doubt influenced the narrative structure he imposed on the book. In interviews, Callahan repeatedly refers to *Juneteenth* as the nearly finished center of an unfinished project. Again, Callahan has a sense of what "finished" and "unfinished" mean. Of course, that Callahan makes a series of decisions about what *Juneteenth* is and what it means is not particularly unique. All readers make such decisions about any text, and to Callahan's credit, he is a very sophisticated reader. However, reading a text and editing a text based on one's reading are two entirely different things. Reading a text does not change the text; editing a text does. Furthermore, that Callahan holds a determined meaning of Ellison's manuscript (and in all fairness, how could he not?) means that to some degree, his decisions about what makes the text "finished" or "unfinished," and which portions of the text constitute a "finished" section, are made according to the criteria of what the manuscript's essence is. Thus, Callahan's use of editorial license to exclude some 1,100 pages of text from Ellison's forty-year project reveals his intentions and not necessarily (in fact, almost certainly not) Ellison's. To use the language of Burke's terministic screen, *Juneteenth* is a *reflection* of Ellison's work, but it is also a *selection* of his work, and consequently a *deflection* of other parts of his work.

Of course, presumably any author suffers his or her work to change during the editing process. Yet in the case of *Juneteenth*, this process seems more controversial because Ellison died without showing most of his final project to publishers (Menand

7: 4). Furthermore, Callahan's notion of the project is dramatically different from what Ellison had in mind when he labored over the Hickman manuscript. Where Callahan has selected a short, one-volume novel, Ellison was working on a triptych novel. As Menand explains:

It seems unfair to Ellison to review a novel he did not write. It does not even seem fair to access his intentions. A three-part work implies counterpoint: whatever appears in a Book 2 must be designed to derive its novelistic significance from whatever would have appeared in a Book 1 and a Book 3. That Ellison hung onto the entire manuscript until his death seems a pretty clear indication that he did not imagine the sections of his novel to be freestanding. (Menand 7: 4)

Menand's point here that readers cannot assess Ellison's intentions should not be dismissed. Those who are familiar with Ellison's writing process know that the writer sought perfection in his work. The fact that he spent nearly forty years working on a novel that he never finished is certainly evident of the care with which he approached his craft. However, it also seems necessary to analyze what Menand means by "intentions." Certainly, studying *Juneteenth* as a work in which the author controlled all aspects of narrative would be irresponsible (or at least the results would be inaccurate). As Menand points out, it is not clear where Ellison wanted the final emphasis to lie. There is also the fact that *Juneteenth* contains scarcely one-fifth of the original manuscript Ellison had in draft. Finally, we have Callahan's own admission that the larger manuscript from which *Juneteenth* emerged is incomplete; we have no idea of what else might have been had Ellison lived longer or written faster. In short, whatever version of narrative readers are given in *Juneteenth*, it originates from Callahan. If *Juneteenth* is a complete narrative, it is a complete narrative according to Callahan's definition, not Ellison's.

The problem with narrative also gives way to another problem with reading *Juneteenth*. One of the traditional assumptions we carry with us as readers is that authors put a series of events in the novel—perhaps chronological, perhaps not—for the purpose of conveying a meaning. As children, we read fairy tales in which a series of events compose a story that in the end reveals to us a moral or a lesson. To put it still more simply, the writer of such a story uses narrative structure to take readers from point A to point B to reveal theme X. As we become more sophisticated readers, we come to realize that authors attempt to reveal (or perhaps disguise) multiple themes within a text. Narrative structure, we realize, ceases to be neatly linear and takes on a variety of shapes. However, our basic assumption—that the author strings together letters to form words to form sentences to form events to form a narrative to convey meaning—remains an expectation we take with us into our reading. For example, in *Invisible Man*, the narrator begins his narrative underground, and ends his narrative underground, as a demonstration of his indecision, invisibility and inability to act. In between the beginning and the end, the narrator moves through a myriad of social situations, all of which reinforce his invisibility. Narrative structure functions as a way of elucidating the larger issues Ellison wanted to convey. However, Ellison died before he could decide on the narrative structure of *Juneteenth*. To return to simplistic terminology, Ellison decided upon neither point A, nor point B, nor the path between the two. As a result, theme X is all the more difficult to identify. Even in novels where authors are in control of narrative structure, theme is often subjective and open to interpretation. In the case of *Juneteenth*, readers cannot even make an educated guess. Ellison may not have known himself.

All of this not to say that *Juneteenth* is unreadable (and here I mean it is not unreadable in the scholarly, critical sense). Nor am I asserting that Callahan's work with editing *Juneteenth* was poorly performed or a disservice to Ellison. Since the larger Hickman manuscript has not been released at the time I am writing this, and since all of the possibilities of the Hickman manuscript—some ten boxes worth (Carpenter 2)—will likely never be published, it is unlikely that anyone, aside from the few scholars who endeavor to wade through the boxes of Ellison's drafts stored in the Library of Congress, will ever fully know with what the editor was faced. I do disagree with some of the editorial decisions in *Juneteenth*. For example, Callahan notes in "Afterword" that he "made silent corrections on matters of substance, such as correcting erroneous quotation ('Full fathom five' for 'Four fathom five')" (368). My sense of Ellison as an author leads me to believe that he would have known the quotation is "Full fathom five," and that "Four fathom five" is exactly the sort of delightful word play I expect from him. Yet while I cannot help but question Callahan's decisions, I believe his work here is admirable, and his position is not enviable. Ellison's readers wanted to read the author's second novel—something that, sadly, will never exist.

Whatever readers would have gotten would have been incomplete; indeed, even if Ellison had published the Hickman manuscripts during his lifetime, if his reflections on *Invisible Man* are any indication, the perfection-driven author still may have seen the work as something that fell short of his expectations. *Juneteenth* is maybe as good as anything else Callahan could have released. Maybe it is better than anything else Callahan could have released. Truly, the only option besides an

imperfect selection of Ellison's work is nothing at all. Not releasing Ellison's life's work would have been a mistake. Yet, that Callahan may have done the best that could be done, or that an imperfect something is better than nothing, does not help any of us stranded in the margins of *Juneteenth*, attempting to read a text for which traditional assumptions about reading are useless. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, my discussion of the problem *Juneteenth* poses for us as an unfinished text is meant to elucidate what such a text means for those who read the novel.

By discussing the problematic dimensions of *Juneteenth*, I have not meant to suggest the text is unreadable, but rather that reading it is a potentially dangerous task. Readers need to be careful about the assumptions they bring to the text. Traditional ways of reading need to be re-evaluated, and perhaps abandoned; this does not, however, mean that the text should not be read. On the contrary, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., observes (and he has not been alone), *Juneteenth* contains some fine Ellisonian moments. "At its best, this book is a stunning achievement, allowing us at least a glimpse of Ellison's mature vision as a novelist" (Gates 66). Indeed, there are sufficient examples of Ellison's genius in *Juneteenth* to make it worthy of bearing the author's name. Yet the novel's fragmentation is something that even gracious critics like Gates cannot seem to ignore. "Unfortunately, however, even the greatest solos or riffs do not a brilliant composition make" (66). Gates's point here is a good way of thinking about *Juneteenth*. It is filled with great "solos" and "riffs," but the "composition" is lacking. Despite this incompleteness, however, the brilliance of the novel's Ellisonian riffs makes it likely that *Juneteenth* will find a place in the literary canon. As Menand argues, "The trouble with Frankenstein's monsters is that after a

while the seams and the stitches disappear and what at first seemed hideously contrived begins to seem perfectly natural, even a little adorable. ‘Juneteenth’ will go into the world and become ‘Ralph Ellison’s second novel.’ People will teach it and write about it as though the story it tells is a story Ellison wanted to tell” (7: 4).

Menand’s concerns should not be dismissed. While not acknowledging Ellison’s life-long project seems to be a disservice to the author’s legacy, likewise reading *Juneteenth* as something it is not is equally unfair, both to Ellison and the generations of American readers that are yet to encounter him.

The task for critics, then, is to find a way of reading *Juneteenth* that acknowledges the triumph of the riffs and moves past the dissonance of the composition. In other words, reading *Juneteenth* requires accepting the text as a fragmented text. Readers should turn their focus to the parts, rather than the whole. I suggest, then, that reading Ellison requires thinking of *Juneteenth* as evidence of a writer’s process, rather than a writer’s product. In the following chapters, I will draw upon the field of literacy studies as a way of looking at *Juneteenth* on its most basic level—its language. Chapter 3, a discussion of Mary Louise Pratt’s “Arts of the Contact Zone” and several of Ellison’s critical essays on American language and culture, focuses on what is embodied in language, and what is produced when different sorts of language come into contact with one another in the context of a culture. Chapter 4 moves to a close reading of *Juneteenth*; informed by the issues raised in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 borrows from the field of literacy studies to examine how language, or rather, the representations of different types of language, are brought into a sort of “dialogue” in various scenes in *Juneteenth*. In Chapter 4, I examine

these representations of language to reveal what Ellison may have been thinking about these issues as he wrote *Juneteenth*. Appropriately then, Chapter 5 focuses on how *Juneteenth* stacks up in relation to Ellison's authorial legacy. Above all, my attempt is to present a framework that may provide readers with a way of looking at Ellison's "second novel" that allows room for a critical examination of his work while acknowledging *Juneteenth* as an incomplete labor.

Chapter 3: Ellison's *Territory* in the "Contact Zone"

As I explain in Chapter 2, the primary problem *Juneteenth* presents readers with is that traditional assumptions about reading and literature, or more specifically, traditional ways of approaching literature, cannot be applied to this text. That is, we cannot approach this novel by asking (at least not from the outset) questions about theme, characterization, plot and narrative structure in hopes that such inquiry will yield Ellison's intentions as an author. Instead, we must begin reading this novel on a much more fundamental level, focusing on what we can know with reasonable certainty belongs to Ellison. This more fundamental level is, of course, the language in the novel. This chapter will serve as a sort of bridge between Chapters 2 and 4. Where Chapter 2 seeks to identify the problem *Juneteenth* poses for readers, Chapter 4 takes on a reading of *Juneteenth*, focusing on the literate expressions contained in various scenes of the novel. In order to make this transition, here in Chapter 3 my objective is to focus on what is embodied in a literate expression. The task of this chapter is to examine what language is, what its connection to culture is, and how the relationship between language and culture, and between languages and cultures, influences the way an author represents himself or herself through language. Thus, here in Chapter 3, I present Mary Louise Pratt's "Arts of the Contact Zone" as an entry into the questions of what is at stake in literate expressions in a diverse culture. This will be compared with Ellison's reflections on the American scene of writing, in order to make clear how his sense of the American language and culture affected the way he perceived the act of writing. Finally, I return again to the central concern I express in

Chapter 2, and explain how viewing language in the way that Pratt's and Ellison's essays suggest provides a point of entry into *Juneteenth*.

As a way of beginning this discussion, we might look at Ellison's remarks on the American scene of writing. In his critical essay "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," Ellison discusses the tremendous challenge faced by an artist who has as his or her audience the American people.

But it is worth remembering that one of the implicitly creative functions of art in the USA (and certainly of narrative art) is the defining and correlating of diverse American experiences by bringing previously unknown patterns, details and emotions into view along with those that are generally recognized. Here one of the highest rewards of art is the achievement of that electrifying and creative collaboration between the work of art and its audience that occurs when, through the unifying forces of its vision and its power to give meaningful focus to apparently unrelated emotions and experiences, art becomes simultaneously definitive of specific and universal truths. (497)

Ellison's reference to "previously unknown patterns, details and emotions" in relation to narrative art seems to be a reference to language, for in narrative art, language is the medium out of which the art is constructed. While at its most fundamental level, we might say that language is a series of sounds, gestures and characters recognized by members of a given community that are used in oral and written communication, we might also say that as an extension of this process, language is the way that individuals represent themselves within a social context, either through writing, visual arts or oral discourse. However, when a social context consists of individuals who represent themselves in different ways, and when these representations (made through language) are not recognized by all members of a given community, it complicates the process of expression, particularly for the artist, who attempts to transcend social context.

Ellison recognized this element of complication in his own work as an artist. In "The

Little Man at Chehaw Station,” he acknowledges that the American audience is unique; its audience members may share only the commonality of their diversity. The task of the American artist, then, is to remember that at any time he or she may be watched by “the little man at Chehaw Station,” an invisible audience member who might be anyone. Ellison seemed to believe that the American author is first and foremost an artist for the American people, and he vehemently rejected the notion that an author can write for only one particular audience and still call such a product “art.” Of course, the question then becomes, how does an individual—for everyone is to an extent a product of his or her social context—transcend context to make art?

As a way of answering this question, we can look to Pratt’s “Arts of the Contact Zone.” Central to Pratt’s argument is her discussion of what makes up a culture. As I have mentioned before, the reality of culture is that it is more diverse than we might at first recognize, and this is very much what Pratt derives from her analysis of the defining criteria of culture. Pratt presents Benedict Anderson’s threefold definition of an “imagined community.” “First, it is imagined as limited by ‘finite, if elastic, boundaries’; second, it is imagined as sovereign; and third, it is imagined as fraternal, ‘a deep, horizontal comradeship’ for which millions of people are prepared ‘not so much to kill as willingly to die’” (qtd. in Pratt 450-1). Pratt uses Anderson’s definition of the “imagined community” as a point of contrast to what she believes to be the actual (rather than imagined) nature of a speech community. Because “modern nations conceive of themselves as . . . ‘imagined communities’” (Pratt 451), languages have also been seen (and continue to be seen) as “held together by a homogenous competence or grammar shared identically and equally among the

members”(450). In essence, Pratt asserts that in cultures that are dominated by one particular social group—like the United States during the 20th century—language is perceived of as a uniform mode of communication. The implication of this is that those who speak or write in the “uniform” way are considered part of the community. Those individuals who do not, however, are often (by virtue of their chosen mode of communication) held at a distance from the community. Also important to note is that in nearly all cases, what does and does not constitute the “language” of the speech community is determined by those in whose hands the concentration of social, political, and economic power lies. Pratt determines that these “imagined communities” exist, quite simply, only in the imagination. In other words, the method of defining language as culturally uniform is now (and perhaps always has been) inadequate. The reality of modern cultures is that they are diverse. Ellison certainly perceived that diversity as an author. Again, the problem is how individuals move beyond the diversity to communicate or create art; this is Pratt’s focus.

The diversity in cultures underlies the sites of discourse Pratt refers to as “contact zones,” a “term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, class, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (444). Pratt’s definition of contact zones situates these discursive cultural clashes in real world, historical conditions that shape the opposing literate traditions that are brought into contact. Pratt uses the notion of contact zones to read Guaman Poma’s *New Chronicle*, a 1,200-page letter written in 1613 to King Philip III of Spain by a native Andean who had been taught to write Spanish. Pratt characterizes

Poma's *New Chronicle* as "an autoethnographic text . . . in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations other have made of them" (445). Pratt goes on to argue that "autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct *in response to* or in dialogue with" the tests of the dominant culture (445). Pratt's discussion of Poma's text centers on the ways in which Poma renegotiates the lines of domination, and uses his own native language to alter and interact with the dominant Spanish speech community. If Poma's letter contains "Arts of the Contact Zone," then readers may infer that Poma is an artist of the contact zone.

While Pratt's lecture ends with a challenge for teachers, calling for the invention of ways of incorporating students' diverse histories and cultures into the dominant culture of the classroom, her challenge might also be thought of in terms of readership. The method for reading a text like Guaman Poma's *New Chronicle* as an art of a contact zone seems clear, largely because the lines of cultural clash are clearly drawn. Poma's text brings into contact two separate languages (Quechua and Spanish), two separate nationalities (Incan and Spanish), and two separate geographical locations (Peru and Spain). But what happens to the notion of a contact zone when the lines between the clashing cultures are more difficult to discern?

If ever there was a nation that claimed to possess the characteristics of the "imagined community," it is the United States of America. The notion of America as a great melting pot, as the country where all citizens are uniquely bound together by the common dream of success through hard work, is continually asserted and reaffirmed through political policy, educational practice and mass representations of

American culture. People talk about baseball or apple pie or McDonald's, and are able to say, without hesitation, "That's American!" Similarly, when talking about literature, the authorities who determine the direction of education in the United States are quick to point to Thoreau's *Walden* or Melville's *Moby-Dick* and say with certainty "That's American!" In the middle of the widespread cultural certainty of what is American, texts continue to emerge—more now than ever—from writers who according to their birth certificates are American. However, readers of these texts, especially readers in positions of authority, resist proclaiming them American texts. These texts present a problem to the notion of American identity in a number of ways, including but not limited to: rejection of dominant cultural myths, resistance to formal mechanical structures, and revision of pre-existing works of the canon. The response to these texts and their authors has largely been to name them as "other" and describe them as "alternative" or "marginal." We need only to walk through a medium-size bookstore to see the way texts are categorized. Works by Afro-American authors, Hispanic-American authors, etc., have their own sections separate from American literature.

One of the unique characteristics of these "marginal texts" is that they almost always originate from a writer who has found himself or herself on the outside (though still very much on the inside) of American culture. In the same way that politicians who preach the American dream fail to account for the barriers of race, ethnicity and gender that keep hard-working Americans from attaining the promises of prosperity, our authoritative readers often fail to qualify how ways of speaking or writing that fall outside of the dominant vernacular of American English are any less American. In

other words, both in terms of political policy and authoritative readership, this nation continues to a certain extent to define itself as an “imagined community.” The dream of integration is attractive, perhaps because it is simpler. If we assume a common identity, then we do not have to change our identity to accommodate difference. Not only is this economically more attractive, but it is reassuring because we do not have to reevaluate questions about who we are as a society. This seems especially true for us in terms of language. It is easier to fail students who primarily speak in Spanish or Black English than it is to reform the academic community to accommodate them. Likewise, it is easier to say that a film like Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971) has nothing to do with Disney movies than to account for how both can be produced in the same nation at the same point in time. My point here is that the challenges these different ways of speaking and writing present to the dominant speech community are solved by labeling these modes of speaking and writing as alternative. Labeling gives them a place, and allows the dominant culture to dismiss them to the margins. However, this dismissal is a mistake. I assert here that many of the texts that have been dismissed by the authorities of the American canon include arts of contact zones. By looking at the historical conditions that shape the discourse of the dominated, the way in which the underrepresented author’s speech interacts with the discourse of dominant American speech and culture is revealed. These points of contact reveal not only the complexity (and talent) of the “marginalized” author, but also the complexity and importance of alternative ways of speaking. Recognition of the depth and significance of these “marginal” vernaculars is an important first step in expanding the richness and inclusiveness of the American

canon. Arguably, this recognition might also be an important first step in making America itself inclusive of those who speak, write and communicate in these vernaculars.

Of course, one might wonder what the politics of the American language has to do with reading *Juneteenth*. Readers familiar with Ellison's reputation as an author might also ask what the politics of the literary canon have to do with the author, for although Ellison is an Afro-American author, and although few people would deny that Afro-Americans have historically been oppressed, Ellison's works are generally not thought of as marginalized texts, nor is Ellison thought of as a marginalized author. In fact, in 1972, twenty years after the original publication of *Invisible Man*, the novel was "named as the 'most likely to endure' among two dozen novels published between 1945 and 1972, in a survey of American critics" (*Conversations* xx). However, Ellison was also interested in the politics of the American language, and often voiced dissatisfaction with the segregation of languages and literary text.

As an author, Ellison resisted labeling. In fact, Ellison was even criticized for not being "black enough" during the 1960s and 70s. He often identified a number of his literary ancestors as white writers, including Joyce, Eliot, Dostoyevsky and Stein (Hersey 286). Indeed, a great deal of the literary analysis and criticism that has been written about Ellison's first novel focuses on the book's connections to works written by white writers. Few could deny that Ellison's work engages significantly with and incorporates a number of the symbols, patterns, themes and speech conventions of the dominant American speech community. Ellison's identification with this tradition has

no doubt been partially responsible for the way that *Invisible Man* was and continues to be included in the dominant American canon.

What is also undeniable, though, is the fact that *Invisible Man* also incorporates symbols, patterns, themes and speech conventions that are rooted in the Afro-American vernacular tradition. Ellison's *Invisible Man* brings the Afro-American vernacular into dialogue with America's dominant speech community. We might think, for example, of the conversation between the farmer Trueblood and the college benefactor Mr. Norton, in which Trueblood's skills as a storyteller are brought into contact with Norton's white assumptions about Afro-American sexuality, which results in Trueblood getting the best of Norton by fulfilling his expectations. Ellison's representation of this dialogue, his authorial decision to bring together the cultural assumptions embodied in the two literate traditions, was not merely coincidental. The multicultural dialogue Ellison renders in *Invisible Man* reflects his commitment to a vision of American art as a product of what Pratt calls a "contact zone." For Ellison, the American artist (in his case, the American author) was charged with producing work for a culturally diverse audience, epitomized for Ellison by the "little man at Chehaw Station." Moreover, for Ellison, the work of the American author is to advance through language not just himself or herself, or those with whom he or she shares a social identity, but all of society. In *Heroism and the Black Intellectual*, Jerry Gafio Watts argues that Ellison believed "that one's private artistic creations inherently advance the status of the entire group, not to mention the nation at large or even humanity" (21). Watts equates Ellison's vision of the Afro-American artist to the role of the hero (21-2). Not only must serious minority authors engage and

acquaint themselves with the dominant literary canon, mastering the techniques and motifs that body of knowledge encompasses; minority authors must elevate themselves to a higher standard of excellence to transcend the barriers social and racial discrimination place between them and their entrance into the dominant culture (Watts 21-2).

For Ellison, writing as an Afro-American author meant more than simply resisting or protesting white culture (including what in *Juneteenth* is called “Good Book English”). Here it seems necessary to draw a distinction between the cultural dialogue of the “contact zone” and what has often been labeled “resistance literature.” Watts writes at length about Ellison’s distaste for the notion that Afro-American authors write in response to white oppressors. Chronicling a 1960s debate between Irving Howe and Ellison about the “artistic role of the black writer in America and particularly the merits of the protest tradition of Afro-American fiction,” Watts examines Ellison’s views on the work of Richard Wright, who Ellison conceived of as a writer of the protest tradition of Afro American literature.

In Wright’s view, individuals are inherently social creatures . . . [a]n individual who is oppressed, repressed, and distorted . . . is forced to live a wretched and alienated existence . . . Ellison’s claim that Wright’s ideology led him to write protest novels is undoubtedly correct. Furthermore, protest fiction did not allow Wright the artistic space to write of “a Negro as intelligent, as creative or as dedicated as himself.” (Watts 84-5)

Watts goes on to note that Ellison’s ideology, in turn, prevented him from writing protest literature. The distinction between protest literature and literature from the contact zone, then, is that protest literature is formed in response to the dominant culture, and thus its essential nature is dependent on a relationship with the society which it protests; literature from the contact zone draws primarily upon the literate

traditions of the minority culture that either were in existence prior to contact with the dominant culture or that were formed apart from the dominant culture. Literature from the contact zone, then, reflects the contact between two cultures rather than the contact serving as the genesis for the representations made by the minority author of his or her own culture.

As an extension of this point, we should also note that Ellison perceived Afro-American culture as something that is more than a response to white oppression. This will become very important in Chapter 4, when we examine language as a representation of Afro-American culture. In "A Very Stern Discipline," an essay drawn from a 1965 interview that Ellison published with his collection of essays *Going to the Territory*, Ellison describes the Afro-American culture as one with its own "internality" (730). Rejecting the protest tradition of Afro-American literature, Ellison argues:

We have been exiled in our own land, and as for our efforts at writing, we have been little better than silent because we have not been cunning. I find this astounding, because I feel that Negro American folklore is powerful, wonderful and universal. It became so by expressing a people who were assertive, eclectic and irreverent before all the oral and written literature that came within its grasp. ("A Very Stern Discipline" 732)

In other words, the literate expression of the Afro-American culture, for Ellison, is not dependent upon the white culture. The culture from which Afro-American expression is drawn existed prior to contact with the society.

However, acknowledging the "internality" of Afro-American culture is not to also argue that social contact between Afro-Americans and whites has had no effect on either culture or their literate traditions. In fact, Ellison believed quite the opposite. In his 1970 essay "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," Ellison argues that

Afro-Americans are one of the “major tributaries” of America’s “cultural mainstream” (580). Writing specifically of the American English language, Ellison asserts that “whether it is admitted or not, much of the sound of that language is derived from the timbre of the African voice and the listening habits of the African ear” (581). Citing examples from the literature of Walt Whitman and Mark Twain, Ellison argues that the American literary canon is dependent on the creative tension created through the contact between the Afro American and white American cultures (581-2). Ellison even goes so far as to argue that while Afro-American literate culture is not a response to white America, the very notion of what it means to be American for whites is defined in relation to the essence of Afro-American culture (583). Ellison concludes that “Materially, psychologically and culturally, part of the nation’s heritage is Negro American, and whatever it becomes will be shaped in part by the Negro’s presence” (583).

Ellison firmly believed in the existence of a unique Afro-American experience. As artist, Ellison believed not that his task was to respond to the white canon, but to enrich it, to add to it his own contribution. This is very much what Pratt claims Poma achieves in his *New Chronicle*. As Ellison believed the American author should, Poma’s representation of Quechan culture places his tradition in the context of the Spanish language, and presents something new—a direction that both cultures could take together to improve their relationship. In a similar way, *Invisible Man* is a conversation between cultures, a text in which the Afro-American literate traditions are placed in dialogue with the tradition of the American literary canon to produce something new. The final lines of Ellison’s first novel—“Who knows but that, on the

lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (581)—suggest an attempt to reach out to an audience, to suggest a universality of the narrator's (and perhaps Ellison's) experiences with their own. In short, the novel is a text that reflects a contact zone; Ellison's first novel is a product of the collision between two distinct cultural traditions.

Thus, if we read Ellison's fiction in the way that Pratt reads Poma's *New Chronicle*, we can see moments where distinct literate traditions are brought together in interesting ways that alter and complicate dominant notions about language and power in America. The product of these moments is Ellison's art of the American contact zone. For readers curious about Ellison's work, the exchange of language, particularly in places that reflect a clash between cultures or literate traditions, is a promising place to begin. Not only does this affirm what Ellison already has revealed in his criticism—an interest in multiple ways of speaking—but the way these traditions are brought into contact reveals something about Ellison's thinking on these issues and how he attempted to transform them into a product of narrative art.

Juneteenth, or rather the project that eventually became *Juneteenth*, arguably makes up a good share of Ellison's life's work. The critical observations about uncertain authorial intent cannot be dismissed. As Menand correctly observes, *Juneteenth* is not Ellison's second novel. The work is, however, a part of Ellison's literary legacy. Even the most skeptical readers cannot ignore the fact that Ellison attempts to take up the elements of the authorial craft for which he expressed an interest, both in *Invisible Man* and the vast body of literary criticism he authored. In *Juneteenth*, as in many of his other writings, Ellison's interest was in what Pratt calls

“the contact zone.” Writing in the midst of a divided nation, in which power relations between Afro-Americans and white Americans were unequal and in contention, Ellison clearly worked in a social space defined by cultural clash. A close reading of Ellison’s criticism reveals not only his awareness of the social space of 20th century America, but also the author’s desire to change through his art that social space for the better. As an Afro-American artist, Ellison was to the American literary canon what Guaman Poma was to the Spanish empire: an born outsider who used his knowledge of the dominant culture to assert his own literate tradition, and in turn, redefine the literate tradition of the dominant culture to include himself.

While *Juneteenth* may not be Ellison’s second novel (and as I try to make clear in Chapter 2, there are sound critical objections to reading it as such), the language in the text published as *Juneteenth* is—save the occasional Callahanian amendment—Ellison’s. Ellison selected the literate traditions represented in the novel, in whatever order they are represented. Even those sections of *Juneteenth* that Ellison may have later omitted represent ideas and ways of using language with which Ellison was concerned. The approach then that this thesis will take towards reading *Juneteenth* is to read it as Ellison’s selection and use of language. The body of critical writing that Ellison published (and thus chose final emphasis for) acknowledges that at the time he was writing what became *Juneteenth*, he wrote with an awareness of the complexity of his audience that reflects Pratt’s notion of the contact zone. Chapter 4 begins with this assumption about Ellison’s representations of language—the assumption that they represent a dialogue of literate traditions—and places this assumption within the context of *Juneteenth*. In this way, Chapter 4 examines the specific representations of

literate traditions that are made in the novel, and seeks to explain what these representations reveal about Ellison's thinking about language, power, and the American contact zone.

Chapter 4: Transformational Literacy

Central to Ellison's *Juneteenth* is the character Bliss, the boy of ambiguous racial heritage who is raised by Daddy Hickman as an Afro-American, runs away and reinvents himself as a white United States Senator from an unnamed New England state. In his creation of Bliss, Ellison seems to be working with the premise that identity—especially racial identity—is culturally constructed, for the character discards and takes on racial identity with surprisingly little difficulty. Bliss the boy preacher is accepted in the Afro-American community; likewise, Adam Sunraider (the name Bliss adopts as a preacher) rises to the upper echelons of his white peers. Bliss/Sunraider does not achieve this transformation by donning physical disguises; rather, it is in the character's expressions of language that readers see the racial and cultural transformation.

As a way of explaining Bliss' transformational identity, then, we can examine the contrasting literate traditions that the character reproduces in *Juneteenth*. One way of approaching *Juneteenth* that allows us to acknowledge the text's fragmentation and foreground the issues raised in the novel's language is to consider *Juneteenth* as a literacy narrative. More specifically, focusing on Bliss'/Sunraider's progress as a literate subject provides an entry into the relationship between language, race and identity that exists within the novel.

Reading *Juneteenth* as a narrative that features Bliss'/Sunraider's experiences as a literate subject can accomplish certain things and cannot accomplish others. By claiming that the novel deals with Bliss'/Sunraiders' experiences as a literate subject, I am not making the argument that this issue is the only one the novel is about, nor am I

claiming that this even a major feature of the novel. My point is that there are scenes within the novel in which language and its transformational power are important. Reading with a focus on Bliss'/Sunraider's experiences as a literate subject allows us to examine a selection of these scenes. Reading *Juneteenth* as a literacy narrative also offers a way of adapting to the fragmentation of Ellison's texts, for literacy narratives have traditionally been conceived of as fragmented texts. Reading with a focus on Bliss'/Sunraider's experiences as a literate subject does not, however, allow us to look at all of the forces at work in Ellison's *Juneteenth*. Nor does adopting this critical lens allow us to read *Juneteenth* as a complete text. All of the problems I discussed in the second chapter—the inability of asking traditional questions about the text, the impossibility of accessing authorial intent, the questions raised by the missing 1,100 pages of text—remain problems. Finally, even within the limited scope of this critical lens, the following reading of *Juneteenth* will undoubtedly fail to include all of the scenes in which Bliss'/Sunraider's experiences with literacy are foregrounded, and even in the scenes that I discuss, the analysis of the ways in which language and power are at work will not be all inclusive. Ellison's writing, even in its unfinished state, is dense and complicated, and so any discussion of his writing is doomed to fall short of capturing all of the notes of the great jazz opus that is Ellisonian fiction.

For the sake of clarity, I have organized this chapter into several sections. The first section is a brief introduction to the field of reading literacy narratives, including the definitions of the field and their connection to Pratt's notion of the contact zone that I discuss in Chapter 3. The remaining five sections focus on various scenes from

the novel that explore Bliss'/Sunraider's experiences with language and the literate traditions that are at work in those scenes.

I. The Language of Literacy

In their essay "Reading Literacy Narratives," Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen argue that literacy studies—the field devoted to studying the significance of reading and writing—"can enrich literary criticism" by providing readers with a way to "study how the text constructs a character's ongoing, social process of language acquisition" (512). Within their article, Eldred and Mortensen develop a methodology for reading literacy narratives, which they apply to George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Eldred and Mortensen read *Pygmalion* with a focus on the scenes in which the lower class flower peddler Eliza is transformed by Professor Higgins into an educated, sophisticated young woman through her acquisition of the language of the upper class. As Eldred and Mortensen note, their reading of *Pygmalion* as a literacy narrative not only allows them to "acknowledge and engage in the central theme of the play: the place that society and language hold in schooling," (536) but further reveals insight into the authorial interests of Shaw.

Instead of seeing only the Shaw who leaned toward the fascist ideal of the Superman, or the Shaw who wrote simple comedies of manner with witty dialogue, we can illuminate Shaw, the Irish playwright, writing in the shadow of Shakespeare and trying to claim recognition as a literary talent in England; we can construct a Shaw who experienced firsthand the promises and pitfalls of literacy, a Shaw engaged—as we are—in the science and politics of literacy. (Eldred and Mortensen 536)

My hope is that reading *Juneteenth* as Bliss'/Sunraider's literacy narrative will allow us to see similar things about both the text and the author's interest. By examining the political and social aspects of the acquisition of language in the novel, I hope to

uncover not so much the central theme of *Juneteenth* (for, as I explain in Chapter 2, that is an unreasonable question to bring to this work), as the way that the novel examines these issues. Furthermore, I expect that such a reading will reveal Ellison's thinking on language and power as he wrote *Juneteenth*. Such an examination of Ellison's craft provides a way of considering *Juneteenth* in relation to the author's other works, a topic I take up in greater depth in Chapter 5.

Eldred and Mortensen begin their reading of *Pygmalion* by introducing several key terms from the field of literacy studies. Since I will be using a few of the terms in my reading of Bliss'/Sunraider's literacy narrative, and since the definitions are specific to what is a relatively new field of criticism, I think they are worth repeating here. For Eldred and Mortensen, "literacy narratives" are "those stories . . . that foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy" and "sometimes include explicit images of schooling and teaching" and "include texts that both challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy" (513). The genesis of literacy narratives is what Eldred and Mortensen identify as the "literacy myth." "The literacy myth grows out of the easy and unfounded assumption that better literacy necessarily leads to economic development, cultural progress, and individual improvement" (Eldred and Mortensen 512). To clarify, by using the term "myth," Eldred and Mortensen do not mean to invoke the term as it is commonly used in literary studies; their use of myth is not as a truth story. Instead, Eldred and Mortensen mean myth as a falsehood or misconception. The literacy myth, then, is not altogether different from commonly held assumptions about the importance of schooling in American society—

our belief in education as the great means through which an individual might attain upward social mobility. The literacy narrative is a story that chronicles that mobility.

Eldred and Mortensen also refer to “literature of the contact zone.” Citing Pratt, they define literature of the contact zone as “fiction authored in colonial contexts or out of colonial histories” that “studies the particular problems of forcing a literacy on colonized subjects and examines, among other things, the role of “autoethnography” in resisting legislated representations” (513). Although I agree with Eldred and Mortensen’s implied point that literature of the contact zone may take on the form of a literacy narrative in the sense that it rejects the literacy myth of a dominant culture (515), I think they unnecessarily limit the definition of the genre. As I try to make clear in my discussion of Pratt in Chapter 3, the term contact zone may be applied to any cultural or historical context in which social groups of unequal political power come into contact with one another, and should not be limited only to the power relationship of colonized and colonizer. Literature of the contact zone, or what Pratt actually calls “arts of the contact zone,” is the result of such historical or cultural contexts and contains a dialogic representation of the literate traditions of the two groups. If literature of the contact zone (like *Juneteenth*) is being read as a literacy narrative, then, the literacy myth the literature responds to is the notion that the dominated must take on the literate traditions of the dominator to succeed in that culture. Literature of the contact zone represents a rejection of a literacy myth by re-representing the language of the dominant culture in relation to the literate traditions of those who are dominated. A literacy narrative that is also an example of literature of the contact zone would, therefore, chronicle the experiences of a character, who

would almost necessarily be a member of the marginalized culture, with negotiating an existence between competing literate traditions.

There are two additional terms that I would like to introduce to clarify my discussion. When I refer to Bliss/Sunraider as a “literate subject,” I mean to convey that he is a main character in a literacy narrative (*Juneteenth* in this case). When I refer to a “literate act” I mean to denote an instance from the narrative (or a scene from the novel) in which the acquisition of language or the ability to use language is of primary importance. Many literacy narratives are, in fact, merely a series of literate acts. Each experience with language is analyzed as an event that contributes to an individual’s progress as a literate subject. Herein lies the nature of literacy narratives as fragmented texts. When examining an autobiographical literacy narrative, such as Jane Tompkins’s *A Life in School*, it is readily apparent that the author does not—and could not possibly—chronicle all of the events (literate acts) that comprise her identity as a literate subject. Nor does the author of a literacy narrative necessarily draw a narrative or progressive relationship between individual literate acts. Each literate act has its own significance in relationship to the literate subject (the author) without necessarily having a connection to the other literate acts. Since literacy narratives can be written in this fragmented way—a method that perhaps expresses the inability to acknowledge all of the factors that shape one’s literate self and the relationship between those factors—it seems to me not unreasonable to read literacy narratives in this way, even when examining literature as a literacy narrative. Obviously, the fragmentation readers face in reading *Juneteenth* is the result (at least in part) of it not being a finished text. However, even if Ellison had finished *Juneteenth*, reading it as a

literacy narrative would require looking at the novel in a fragmented way, studying the book for literate acts that contribute to Bliss'/Sunraider's identity as a literate subject. There may have been more literate acts to study or the ones available in *Juneteenth* may have appeared in a different order. However, the method would remain the same.

Finally, before beginning an examination of several literate acts from *Juneteenth*, I want to make it clear that such a reading is not an attempt to find some sort of "essence" of Bliss/Sunraider. In other words, I am not trying to suggest that by putting all of the experiences with literacy together in the novel that they add up to a character who amounted to a sort of "finished product" for Ellison. Rather, I am examining Bliss'/Sunraider's experiences with language and power in hopes of revealing something about Ellison's thinking on these subjects.

II. The Emergence of the Myth: Hickman's Notion of Literacy

As a way of beginning a reading of *Juneteenth* as a literacy narrative, it seems appropriate to examine the literacy myth that is at work within the novel. A scene early in the novel, relayed through the memory of Sunraider as he lies in the hospital bed, reveals some very specific notions held by Hickman about what constitutes literacy and the ways in which these standards of literacy (that form a literacy myth) are conveyed to Bliss.

The scene begins with Hickman teaching Bliss the fine art of tent revival preaching. Hickman plans to scare his audiences into believing in the power of God by having Bliss arise from a coffin during the revivals, and explains to Bliss how he should emerge from "death" in a way that will be sure to send the sinners running to the arms of Jesus. The situation is obviously filled with irony. Hickman is attempting

to show people the light by pulling the wool over their eyes; Hickman has a set of rules for himself and a set of rules for others, and this extends to the sort of instructions he gives Bliss. For example, in this scene, Hickman insists that Bliss use “proper English.” When Bliss answers a question Hickman asks him, he says “Yessuh” (*Juneteenth* 44). Hickman promptly tells him “Say *Sir!*” (44), and adds “Don’t talk like I talk; talk like I *say* talk. Words are your business, boy. Not just *the* Word. Words are everything. The key to the Rock, the answer to the Question” (44). Hickman’s comments here reveal two important aspects about the literacy myth to which Bliss/Sunraider will continue to respond. First, the novel makes clear that Hickman is Afro-American, and when he tells Bliss not to talk like he talks, “Yessuh,” that he means that Bliss ought not use the Southern Afro-American vernacular. In other words, Hickman privileges one way of speaking over another, and the way of speaking he privileges is the “white” speech. Furthermore, by telling Bliss that “Words are everything,” Hickman conveys to Bliss that language is power. More specifically, Hickman conveys the message that “white” language is the key to power.

Hickman’s message is further emphasized later in the scene when he remarks to Bliss that it is time to introduce him to canonical literature. “. . . say it with the true feeling, hear? And in good English. That’s right, Bliss; in Good Book English. I guess it’s ’bout time I started reading you some Shakespeare and Emerson. Yes, it’s about time. Who’s Emerson? He was a preacher too, Bliss. Just like you. He wrote a heap of stuff and he was what was called a philosopher” (*Juneteenth* 45). That Shakespeare and Emerson are the authors that Hickman plans to verse Bliss in is interesting. By referring to Shakespeare, Hickman seems to be pointing to the great

father of English literature, the author against whose works all others are measured. Suggesting that Bliss should be read Shakespeare seems a traditional affirmation of the literacy myth. Taken together with Hickman's directives to Bliss to speak using "good" English, his planning to read Shakespeare to Bliss hints at the belief that mastering the "traditional white canon" will empower Bliss to move beyond his station in life.

Likewise, Hickman telling Bliss that he needs to learn the works of Emerson also affirms the traditional literacy myth. There is, however, a degree of irony in this suggestion. Hickman tells the boy that Emerson is a preacher "just like" Bliss. Yet it is clear that Emerson and Bliss have relatively little in common. Emerson did not preach in Southern gospel tent revivals. Emerson did not rise out of coffins. Emerson, in fact, left the ministry in 1832, fairly early in his literary career. While Hickman is in the act of instructing Bliss to become the self-resurrecting preacher, he is telling the child that he is "just like" Emerson, someone very unlike the person into whom Bliss is being molded.

The mixed messages of the literacy myth Hickman imparts to Bliss in this scene from *Juneteenth* seem to be at the heart of many of the other literate acts the novel describes. Bliss/Sunraider often seems to chase the myth that language is power, that language has the power to transform him into something he is not. Yet at the same time, the character seems haunted by the sneaking suspicion that he is not fully what his words reveal him to be. Bliss/Sunraider knows that he should pursue the literacy myth handed to him by Hickman, but is constantly reminded that the myth

is just that—a myth—and does not always work in the world in which he must function.

When reading Bliss/Sunraider as a literate subject, then, we see that he is caught between belief and disbelief. He chases the literacy myth, all the while seeming to know that it, at base, is not true. When we consider the scene where Hickman instructs Bliss as part of a literacy narrative written by Ellison, this representation of the literacy myth as a set of contradictory notions suggests some interesting things about the author's thinking on the idea of language and its power. In much of his literary criticism, Ellison articulates a notion of America as a country in which identity is multicultural. For example, in his essay "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," Ellison writes that the American language reflects a mixture of race and nationality.

For one thing, the American nation is in a sense the product of the American language, a colloquial speech that began emerging long before the British colonials and Africans were transformed into Americans. It is a language that evolved from the King's English but, basing itself upon the realities of the American land and colonial institutions—or lack of institutions—began quite early as a vernacular revolt against the signs, symbols, manners and authority of the mother country. It is a language that began by merging the sounds of many tongues, brought together in the struggle of diverse regions. And whether it is admitted or not, much of the sound of that language is derived from the timbre of the African voice and the listening habits of the African ear. So there is a de'z and do'z of slave speech sounding beneath our most polished Harvard accents, and if there is such a thing as a Yale accent, there is a Negro wail in it—doubtless introduced there by Old Yale John C. Calhoun, who probably got it from his mammy. ("What America . . ." 581)

In this particular passage, and in many other places in his critical writing, Ellison seems to view America, and particularly the scene of the American language, as a place that held great democratic potential for people of different racial identities.

Language is the common ground, the one aspect of the nation in which all voices are

represented. Yet in *Juneteenth*, the power of language seems not quite so limitless. In the scene in which Hickman is imparting the literacy myth to Bliss, for instance, it is clear that Hickman does not believe that the “most polished Harvard accent” (like Emerson’s) is as good as his own way of speaking. Whereas in his criticism, Ellison articulates a notion of language as egalitarian, as spanning across social and racial barriers, in *Juneteenth* certain ways of speaking are appropriated to people in particular social positions. Furthermore, as readers, it is clear not only from this scene, but from several other literate acts that I will be discussing later in this chapter, that language itself has the potential to pose barriers. In other words, rather than being a reflection of a universal identity, in the world of the novel, language imposes identities on the characters. In order to move from one social situation to another, Bliss is forced to give up one way of speaking and take up another.

If we think about Bliss’/Sunraider’s literacy narrative in relation to Pratt’s notion of the contact zone, we can see the literacy myth Hickman imparts to Bliss reflects a social situation in which two literate and cultural traditions have come into contact with one another. The cultural class is deeper than the obvious racial lines of white and Afro-American. The references to Shakespeare and Emerson connote a canonized, privileged tradition. Indeed, we might even say that the inclusion of Emerson adds a regional element to the cultural clash, as he evokes the New England intellectual tradition. Clearly, this culture of which the literate tradition is its representative is the privileged culture in this contact zone; the Southern Afro-American culture and its literate tradition are represented as more primitive, not consisting of whatever is necessary to succeed in the contact zone. In this way, it

seems that not only is *Juneteenth* an art of the contact zone (for the clash between these cultural traditions in America is, indeed, a historically known scene of contact), but within the world of the novel, Hickman's literacy myth becomes a sort of art of the contact zone in itself. Unlike the autoethnographic text Pratt analyzes, however, Hickman does not attempt to renegotiate the power relations through his representation. Instead, his intention seems to be to offer Bliss a way to move from the culture he knows (the Southern Afro-American culture) into (at least the language of) another culture with which he is unfamiliar. He does this by relating unfamiliar texts to Bliss' identity as a preacher. Even though this comparison is faulty, it represents Hickman's attempt to grapple with the dominant culture in his own terms (and to prepare Bliss to do the same).

On the one hand, then, we have Ellison the literary critic, optimistic about the potential of American language as an egalitarian, democratic medium. On the other, there is Ellison the author, whose text reveals a vision of language as socially specific and limited. We can only speculate about the origin of this disparity, but it seems to reflect an author torn, not unlike his protagonist Bliss/Sunraider, between hope and reality. Ellison enjoyed an interesting place in society as an Afro-American intellectual in the mid-20th century. On the one hand, he witnessed what for him became the fruition of the same sort of literacy myth we see in *Juneteenth*. Ellison dutifully learned his Shakespeare and his Emerson, he mastered the language of the dominant white culture and asserted for himself and his writing a place in the American literary canon. More specifically, in *Invisible Man* and the Hickman manuscripts, Ellison included the Afro-American vernacular literate tradition in his

fiction, in essence placing the literate tradition of his Southern Afro-American heritage in dialogue with the literate tradition of the white canon—the language of Joyce, Dostoyevsky, Eliot and Stein. Like Poma's *New Chronicle*, *Invisible Man* and *Juneteenth* seem to assert the validity of a previously underrepresented literate tradition by placing it along side the dominant tradition. Ellison's efforts in *Invisible Man* won him critical acclaim; as an author, he realized a degree of success that moved him financially, socially and intellectually beyond the social position into which he was born.

Yet while the literacy myth became reality for Ellison, at least in a sense, he must have surely witnessed that all around him, the literacy myth did not come true for many other young Afro-Americans. Ellison began working on the Hickman manuscripts in 1955, three years after the original publication of *Invisible Man*, one year after the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* that "separate but equal" was unconstitutional. Ellison would have seen federal marshals escort James Meredith to the University of Mississippi in 1962. He would have seen student protesters blasted with fire hoses and bitten by police dogs in the Birmingham marches in 1963. He would have witnessed the closing of the schools in Little Rock, watched the nation-wide race riots of 1967 and mourned the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968. In other words, if Ellison's sense of the potential for upward mobility for Afro-Americans was not conflicted before the period in which he wrote the Hickman manuscripts, it certainly would have been during the time the project was underway. The promise that education and self improvement would lead to liberation may have seemed to Ellison at best empty, at worst cruel.

There is also the distinct possibility that Ellison was already critical of the literacy myth well before the writing of the Hickman manuscript. We need only think of the unnamed narrator of *Invisible Man* and his complicated relationship to the impotent Founder—arguably an allusion to Booker T. Washington, who advocated patient, passive progress for Afro-Americans, to be achieved through the group becoming educated and economically valuable to the white culture—to see that Ellison already knew that the literacy myth could for some never amount to more than a myth. Ellison the literary critic, the Afro-American intellectual, may have felt the need to maintain optimism, but Ellison the fiction writer offers us an alternative view of the potential of language. Reading *Juneteenth* as a literacy narrative, then, reveals ways that Ellison may have been thinking about literacy, language and power that he did not reveal so openly in his critical writings.

III. The Myth Tested: Bliss' Vernacular Voice

In the present version of *Juneteenth*, it is in the scene immediately following Hickman's literacy myth that the myth seems to be put to the test for Bliss (I want to clarify that whether or not the present sequence is Ellison's intention seems to have little importance to the way the literate act is read). The boy reverend finds himself in a battle of words and wits with another boy his own age. As the event unfolds, it becomes clear that more is at stake than pride. Indeed, the verbal exchange serves as a moment in which Bliss gains acceptance into the community of young Afro-American boys. The confrontation unfolds when the other boy (he is unnamed) finds out that Bliss is a preacher and begins to mock him. What ensues is a battle not only between two children, but also a battle between literate traditions. Bliss enters the

confrontation resolved to use “Good Book English,” to practice the way of speaking Hickman has instructed him in. What he quickly discovers, however, is that this language is almost entirely powerless in this social setting.

The boy tells Bliss “say ‘when’” (*Juneteenth* 51), to which Bliss replies “‘When’ what?” The boy again commands Bliss to say “when;” Bliss relents, thinking he can avoid a fight, mentally adding in “Good Book English,” “And blessed are the peacemakers” (51). However, Bliss’ cooperation leads him into a verbal trap. Once he finally exclaims “WHEN!” (51), the other boy replies “WHEN THE HEN BREAKS WIND—See, I got you!” (51) to the delight of the other boys in the group.

Bliss tries a second time to deal with the other boy using “Good Book English.” The boy asks him, “Say, Rev, if you so smart, what’s the name of that dog who licked those sores poor Lazarus had?” (51). Bliss replies “He didn’t have a name” (51). The boy answers back, “Yes he did too. He name Mo’ Rover! Dam’, Rev, we got you agin!” (51). Bliss naively responds “you mean *more-over*” (51), only to be defeated again with “how can you have *Mo’* Rover when he ain’t got *no* Rover?” (51).

As the taunts get worse, Bliss threatens his tormenter with the wrath of God, saying “Boy, I said, before you were just pranking with me; now you’re messing with the Lord. And just for that He’s going to turn you into a crow” (53). Again, his tormenter bests him. “Hell, I can’t wait that long. Goin’ on a cotton-pick next month . . . See, he said, bending over and patting his bottom. I ain’t no crow. Can’t see no feathers shooting outta my behind . . .” (53).

The climax the confrontation comes when the boy takes Bliss' "name in vain." This particular taunt, and Bliss' response to it, deserves a deeper examination, for each of the exchanges reveals a very specific engagement with language on the part of Ellison.

Hell, he said, I'm a poet and I didn't even know it.
He did a rooster strut, flapping his arms and scuffing up the dust.
Hey, y'all, he said, listen to this:

Bliss, Bliss
Cat piss miss!

He flicked his fingers at me like a magician, taking my name in vain.
Man, you sho got a fine kinda name to put down a conjure with.
(*Juneteenth* 54)

The taunt by Bliss' adversary reflects in significant ways the Afro-American literate tradition. As John W. Roberts explains in *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom*, the conjurer is a person who in the Afro-American folk tradition is believed to have a great deal of power. Roberts chronicles the history of the "conjurer as hero," tracing the figure back to the spiritual traditions of the African continent.

Roberts argues that in the African spiritual tradition, preservation of communal harmony is valued above individual concerns (76). This hierarchy reflects the African worldview that all living creatures are bound together, sharing a common "life-force" (76). In this worldview, humans bear the responsibility for preserving the balance of this life-force (76). Thus, in the African spiritual tradition, individual actions are believed to have implications both for the community and the natural world. As Roberts explains, "A consequence of this belief was that in the traditional African religious worldview there could be no occurrence that was accidental, since accident implies an absence of a perception of cause. All good or evil had its cause in a human

agent whose actions either enhanced or diminished the flow of life-force” (76).

Roberts further argues that in this cosmology, the power of speech is identified as the distinguishing feature between humans and other living creatures, and more specifically, “as the embodiment of an individual’s life-force” (77). The word, then, in this worldview functions as a tool that has the power to alter the life-force of the community (Roberts 77-8).

Roberts notes that when the African spiritual tradition was transplanted to America with the slave trade, the belief in the power of the word was transformed, shaped by the experience of slavery (84). In America, Africans discovered that their individual actions did little to influence the life-force of the slave community; rather, the arbitrary and despotic control of the slave owners maintained the harmony (or disharmony) of the community (Roberts 84-6). Yet as Robert adds, though slaves acknowledged that their owners held the power to dictate the course of social relations in the community, their owners failed to protect them from disease, and largely ignored their spiritual needs (82-8). The duality of the slave owner’s status as both despotic and impotent shaped the way slaves viewed the role of the conjurer.

Because slave owners often meted out punishment for offenses that threatened the order of the slave population (for example, conflicts between slaves or challenges to the master’s authority), such punishments often were inflicted upon the slave community as a whole (Roberts 92). The result of this was a reinforcement of the African spiritual worldview that individual actions affected the community.

While they did not possess the power to change or influence the masters’ rules governing their behavior to any appreciable degree, they could, by transforming their own tradition of religious leadership, create an intra-group

mechanism for defining and controlling the actions of members of their own community to maintain a communal atmosphere supportive of their interests. (Roberts 92)

The crucial distinction, however, between this “intra-group mechanism” and the African cosmology of the shared life-force is that while the latter acknowledges that each individual’s actions affect the community, the “intra-group mechanism” reflected the enslaved African’s knowledge that their actions could not affect their masters. This belief in the powerlessness of their actions in regard to their masters extended to the slaves’ belief in the power of the spoken word (Roberts 91-2). As Roberts notes, “enslaved Africans frequently expressed the view that their conjurers were ineffective in directly affecting the whites” (91).

Simultaneously, the slave owners inability to protect their slaves from the disharmony that disease brought to the community stood out as a limitation of *their* power, and underscored the need within the slave community for protection from the uncertainty of the natural world (Roberts 88, 94). Thus, while the role of the conjurer was conceived less in terms of having a decisive power over the harmony of the community (since in America that belonged to the white masters), the role of the conjurer maintained its importance as a sort of “medicine-man,” for the role of the medicine-man “had been less tied to the institutional or communal practice of religion in Africa” (94). Since the medicine-man operated largely outside of the cosmology of the communal life-force, and since the function of this role was not appropriated by the slave master, the conjurer-as-medicine-man became a celebrated role within the Afro-American oral tradition (Roberts 94, 97). Moreover, the conjurer-as-medicine-man became important to the enslaved African community because the source of his

power was believed to originate from a source outside of the white dominated social structure. “Therefore, conjurers offered enslaved Africans a focus for creating oral expressive traditions to transmit a conception of behaviors alternative to those fostered by existence under European domination” (Roberts 94). Through his historical account of the role of the conjurer in Africa and among the enslaved Africans in America, Roberts draws a direct link between the African spiritual tradition and the conjurer tales that are a part of Afro-American culture (96-9). Specifically, we can draw from this history that the figure of the conjurer is uniquely an Afro-American archetype. Moreover, the literate tradition of which this figure is a part is a distinctly Afro-American literate tradition with its source, like the conjurer’s power, emanating from outside the white dominated social structure.

In applying the conjurer figure’s significance to Ellison’s allusion to the figure in Bliss’ confrontation with the neighborhood boy, the passage becomes charged with several possible meanings. First, Ellison’s inclusion of the conjurer can be read as an acknowledgement of the African spiritual belief in the power of words. Indeed, in the confrontation between Bliss and his adversary, power seems to be at stake. Moreover, in this passage, as in the African spiritual tradition, power is measured in terms of the community. In the African tradition, as in the Afro-American tradition, an individual’s words are important because they affect the harmony of the community. For Bliss, words hold the secret of his acceptance into the community. Finally, the conjurer belongs to a literate tradition that is separate from the white European literate tradition. That Ellison, who surely would have been aware of this tradition’s genesis, chooses to expose his character to this literate tradition is significant, for by doing so,

he suggests that Bliss is being trained in a uniquely Afro-American literate tradition, and that his character's identity is also a product of this training. Moreover, Ellison seems to suggest that this a world that Bliss cannot deny or avoid. It is something he must confront.

The nature of the conjure the adversary "puts down" may also hold some significance. In Newbell Niles Puckett's 1931 sociological study, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, he cites specific uses of cats and urine in conjures that resonate in interesting ways for Bliss' identity. For example, some believed that by holding a cat's backbone in one's mouth, one could attain the power of invisibility, though the cost for this power was that the invisible traded his or her soul to the devil (Puckett 257). Urine, when aimed at a piece of red flannel, was believed to have the power to lure the absent (Puckett 273). Whether or not Ellison had these cultural symbols in mind when he wrote the "cat piss miss" conjure cannot be known. However, given that the character of Bliss is defined both by the uncertainty of his identity (like Ellison's invisible man) and his absence later on from the Afro-American community, it may be entirely possible that Ellison wrote the "cat piss miss" conjure to invoke specific symbols of the Afro-American conjure literate tradition.

Bliss' response to the conjurer also reflects his engagement with a uniquely Afro-American literate tradition. More particularly, Bliss' response reflects his mastery of the tradition, and his use of the vernacular to gain acceptance in the community of young Afro-American males. As the other boys begin to laugh at Bliss, he launches a verbal attack at the conjurer.

So you think you're so smart now here's one for you, I said. *Meat whistle.*
That's for you.

What?

You heard me, I said. *Meat whistle*.

He bucked his eyes like I had hit him. It was quiet. I bent and picked up the rock. Someone snickered.

What do you mean, he said, I never heard of no *meat* whistle . . .

They looked at us, changing sides how. Ha, he got you! one of them said.

Ain't but one kind of meat whistle and us all got one, ain't we, y'all. (54-5)

Bliss continues on:

Maybe you know this one, I said.

Clank, clank, clank, I said and waited, watching his eyes.

What you mean, "clank, clank, clank," little ole yella som' bitch?

Clank, clank, clank, I said, that's your mama walking in her cast iron drawers.
(55)

Bliss' method of verbal banter in this scene is what is called playing "the dozens," "a black game of verbal insult and boasting" (Fay 630). According to the *Africana Encyclopedia*, "[t]he exact origins of the dozens is uncertain. But it resembles traditional African 'joking relationships' in many ways and seems to draw heavily on the African oral tradition. Like preaching, signifying, rapping, and toasting, the dozens reinforces the high value placed on verbal skills in the African diaspora" (Fay 630). K. Sue Jewell further discusses the dozens in her study of the Afro-American female image, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond*. Jewell argues that "playing the dozens" functioned as a sort of informal rite of passage for Afro-American males passing into adulthood, particularly before the Civil Rights Movement (61). Jewell traces the ritual back to the slave era, when it served as "a method by which young African American male slaves attempted to impress females, by displaying their verbal adeptness at using rhymes, put-downs and comedic forms of jest" (61). According to Jewell, the aspect of playing the dozens that distinguishes it from other forms of Afro-American verbal sparring is that the game "is directed more

at joking and verbal put-downs of a male's female relatives," usually the mother (61-62). This practice of young Afro-American men was so widespread, Jewell claims, that playing the dozens contributed to the formation of one of the stereotypes of Afro-American women, Aunt Jemima. "One of the most common statements made by young men 'playing the dozens' used to be 'Hey man, ain't ya' momma on a pancake box?' Stated rapidly this statement sounds like, 'Aunt Jemima on a pancake box?'" (Jewell 62).

Clearly, Bliss' retort to the conjurer, "that's your mama walking in her cast iron drawers," can be read as an example of the "mama jokes" central to the tradition of playing the dozens. Moreover, the rhetorical situation of the exchange between Bliss and the conjurer mirrors the manner in which the game was historically played—"in front of a neutral audience who egg on the participants" (Fay 630). Just as the conjure "cat piss miss" threatens to alienate Bliss from the community of young Afro-American males from whom he craves acceptance, Bliss' response to the conjurer results in his acceptance by the male community. In his recounting of the exchange, Bliss is careful to note the reaction of the audience: "They looked at us, changing sides now," and later, "They were laughing at him now" (55). Clearly, the response of the community is just as important as the method of response. One's mastery at the game of the dozens is measured by the degree to which the player wins over his audience.

Dexter B. Gordon points out in "Humor in African American Discourse: Speaking of Oppression" that "playin' the dozens" serves a function even beyond that of an informal initiation rite. In an examination of the works of Afro-American film

makers, civil rights activists and writers—specifically Ellison—Gordon asserts that “Playing the dozens’ . . . is also a strategic survival tool . . . part of the humor that continues to fulfill the need for a sense of power in the midst of misery, the need for both a morale booster and amusement in Black culture” (3). Bliss’ playing of the dozens, then, might be thought of not just in terms of humor or initiation, but of survival. Bliss uses the convention to survive in the community; the community uses the language to survive in relation to the white culture. This adds an additional element of complexity to the exchange, for Bliss will eventually become a part of the white culture—a member of the entrenched white establishment. But for this moment in the novel, Bliss aligns himself with the Afro-American community and seeks the protection of the language. He momentarily moves away from the “Good Book English” that separates him from the community and uses the Afro-American vernacular tradition to find a (albeit temporary) place among his peers.

Reading the exchange between Bliss and the conjurer makes obvious the power that Ellison assigns to language in *Juneteenth*. The way one speaks literally, and in a very short period of time, can determine one’s identity. Bliss goes from being outside of the community of Afro-American males to becoming heroic in that setting. Reading the exchange as a literate act also presents an interesting response to the literacy myth developed in the preceding scene. The exchange between Bliss and the conjurer is a sort of test—a test of “Good Book English”—and clearly the literacy myth is proven flawed. To think about this in terms of the contact zone, Bliss’ turn (or return) to the vernacular language seems almost heroic in and of itself. The language of the dominated group is held up as the most powerful; “Good Book

English” is defeated. In other words, it is a reversal of the reigning hierarchy of the literate traditions—and their cultural antecedents—that is at work in the novel and in the zeitgeist from which the novel emanates, 20th century America.

What this reveals about Ellison’s thinking on the issue of language and power again is a matter of speculation. We can ascertain from both *Invisible Man* and Ellison’s literary criticism that he believed that the Afro-American vernacular language was dynamic and powerful. Indeed, in *Invisible Man*, the unnamed narrator increasingly uses the vernacular language as he seems to get closer to discovering his identity, and furthermore, seems to use the vernacular language as a way of resisting those who attempt to coerce him. Yet, in his criticism, Ellison seemed to consciously distance himself from any characterization as an Afro-American writer. Besides arguing that his literary ancestors (who were all white) and his racial ancestors were two different categories, Ellison sharply criticized many Afro-American novels for their authors’ limited focus on race (Watts 65-97). Ellison instead argued that Afro-American authors, like their white colleagues, should aspire to high artistic standards. “. . . [P]rotest is not the source of the inadequacy characteristic of most novels by Negroes, but the simple failure of craft, bad writing; the desire to have protest perform the difficult tasks of art; the belief that racial suffering, social injustice or ideologies of whatever mammy-made variety is enough . . .” (qtd. in Watts 79). It is clear from reading Ellison’s fiction, particularly *Invisible Man*, that high artistic standards meant for him much more than including representations of the Afro-American vernacular language. Ellison considered himself a Modernist, and his craft reflected a demand for readers of the highest literate consciousness. Ellison’s ideal reader of *Invisible Man*

needs as much understanding of the works of the white canon as of Afro-American folklore to properly appreciate the work. In places in the novel, Ellison's narrator's "signifying" (use of Afro-American rhetorical tropes (Gordon 3)) appears in the form of a Joycean riff.

What I mean to suggest by discussing Ellison's resistance to be characterized as an Afro-American writer is that we should avoid reading into the exchange between Bliss and the conjurer the notion that because "the dozens" bests "Good Book English" in the scene, Ellison saw this as the hierarchy of the literate traditions. If Ellison's other writings tell us anything, it is perhaps that the author—and presumably any American literate subject—is always to be in service to the language of the canon. The exchange between Bliss and the conjurer, then, should not be read for any sort of conclusion about the value of either literate tradition. Instead, the scene seems only to acknowledge that a way of speaking can be powerful in certain social contexts and impotent in others. The scene reveals to us an Ellison who was interested in thinking about when and where and how people communicated with one another. The scene also reveals an Ellison who found value in different modes of speaking, and who was perhaps more committed to acknowledging the value of Afro-American culture and language than critics in the 1960s and 70s credited him. The scene reflects an author with a relationship to the literacy myth that is more uneasy than he revealed publicly.

IV. The New Adam: A Reinvention of Self

At some point in time, Bliss ceases to be Bliss and becomes Adam Sunraider. This transition is mysterious and jolting, and there is not any way of fully knowing whether or not it was meant to be. Perhaps the force that drove Bliss to leave Daddy

Hickman and take on a new identity was lost in the amputation of text performed by Dr. Callahan. Perhaps the explanation for the transition burned in the Plainfield fire that destroyed much of the manuscript in 1967 and Ellison never got around to rewriting it. Perhaps Ellison saw it as unimportant to the whole of the novel and never contemplated it at all. My point in mentioning this absence is not so much to speculate as to why it exists, but to make it clear that readers of *Juneteenth* do not and cannot know the reason for the gap between the events. I do so to in order to guard against the all too easy tendency to bridge this gap with manufactured narrative explanations. I mentioned in chapter 1 that I do not see *Juneteenth* as a complete text. For me, how Bliss becomes Adam Sunraider is one of the more frustrating omissions. Yet, the sense that something is missing does not mean that Sunraider's experiences as a literate subject cannot be read. If anything, this "hole" in the narrative structure of *Juneteenth* reaffirms the need to look at the novel in fragments.

Although we cannot know why or when Bliss transformed himself into Adam Sunraider, what we are able to know about the transformation is interesting to consider. From reading *Juneteenth*, we first of all can surmise that in becoming Adam Sunraider, Bliss left the Afro-American community, and more specifically, left Reverend Hickman. It also seems rather apparent that the separation was Bliss'/Sunraider's choice. We can also presume that Bliss chose to change his name to Adam Sunraider; Adam Sunraider is an identity constructed by Bliss for himself. We might then begin to understand the significance of this transformation by looking at Adam Sunraider as a constructed identity.

Naming is perhaps one of the greatest exercises of the power of language. Considering in particular the act of naming one's self, the act not only represents a power to select one's own identity—for each name no doubt resonates meaning—but to control to an extent the language of others. In other words, in calling himself “Adam Sunraider,” Bliss exercises a choice to construct another version of himself. In naming himself “Adam Sunraider,” Bliss exercises the power to have others acknowledge him by that name. By the same token, in asserting a new name, Bliss excludes (and perhaps discards) the version of himself known as “Bliss.” Since we also know that Bliss is named by Hickman, in choosing a new name, he revokes Hickman's power to name. By choosing to change his name, then, Bliss/Sunraider is doing much more than merely using a different name to refer to himself. There seems to be a reason why Adam Sunraider and Bliss cannot fully be the same person; a reason why the identities require different names. For if Adam Sunraider could also be called Bliss, there would be no need for Bliss to begin to call himself Adam Sunraider. “Adam Sunraider” conveys a meaning or an identity that “Bliss” cannot.

What Sunraider intends that meaning to be is not made entirely clear in the novel. However, the name alludes to Judeo-Christian and Greek creation narratives. Adam, of course, brings to mind the Adam of “Genesis,” the first man in creation. Coincidentally, while the Adam in “Genesis” receives his name from God, he also receives the authority to name the rest of creation. The name Adam evokes an Edenic landscape and a connection with nature. Ultimately, it connotes a beginning. Yet Adam in “Genesis” is also a fallen man, a man cast out of “bliss” by temptation. The name at once resonates with hope and ruin, with unlimited optimism and impending

damnation. The nomenclature Sunraider is less obvious, but it suggests perhaps Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods; Prometheus is also the figure in Greek mythology who is credited with forming humankind out of clay (Graves 143). If Sunraider is meant to be a reference to Prometheus, then, the name suggests the power to create and to take for one's self the dominion of the gods.

Whether or not he is meant to be the antecedent of Sunraider, Prometheus seems to have been on Ellison's mind when he wrote *Juneteenth*. In a scene that takes place at Sunraider's bedside in the hospital, Sunraider recalls for Hickman a sermon that he once preached at a white church, sometime after he left Hickman's flock (exactly when is not clear). When Hickman asks Sunraider which sermon he preached to the white congregation, Sunraider replies, "They needed special food for special spirits, I preached them one of the most subtle and spirit filling—one in which the Right Reverend Poor John Eatmore was most full of his ministerial eloquence: Give a Man Wood and He will Learn to Make Fire . . . Eatmore's most Promethean Vision . . ." (*Juneteenth* 98). As Sunraider continues to relay the sermon, it is clear that it is an example of the style of preaching in which Hickman trained Bliss; a sermon that must have surely raised some eyebrows on the "[s]tern Puritan faces, dry concentrate of pious Calvinist dilution distilled and displayed for Sunday" (98). The sermon is a retelling of the time after the great flood, when "Man cried, *Give me fire!*" (102). Yet according to Sunraider (and presumably Eatmore), "For Man was beseeching the Lord for warmth when it was the Sun itself he coveted. And God knew it. For he knoweth all things. Not fire, oh no, that wasn't what Man was yelling about, he wanted the Sun!" (102). Indeed, in Eatmore's/Sunraider's Promethean

vision, fire is not lasting; sun, however, is. If we read the sermon, the revised Promethean myth, as the antecedent of the invented name “Sunraider,” then the name seems to take on additional significance. Part of the meaning of Prometheus, for Sunraider, lies in the way the myth has been reinterpreted by Eatmore, who we assume is an Afro-American gospel preacher. The name is not purely a reference to Greek mythology; instead it acknowledges a mixture of the Western and Afro-American literate traditions.

There are a number of ways to read the significance of Bliss’ changing his name to Adam Sunraider. Perhaps Ellison meant it to reflect some sort of transition from Paradise to reality; the protagonist leaves behind “bliss” to become Adam. Perhaps he meant Hickman to be read as a sort of God-like figure and for Bliss/Sunraider to be his “lost sheep.” These readings would be guesses even with a complete text; with *Juneteenth*, any thematic reading of Bliss’/Sunraider’s renaming is untenable. However, when considering the renaming as a literate act, several things can be observed. That Bliss changes his name seems to reflect not only a need to move forward, but the sense that doing so requires him to abandon his vernacular associations with language, including his own name. Again, we can see this as Bliss’ engagement with the literacy myth. His choosing of the name Adam Sunraider, a name that strongly suggests a connection with Western mythology, seems to reflect a shift away from his connection to the Afro-American community in favor of rising in the social ranks. The references to Adam and Prometheus suggest the power to create, to begin anew through language. Again, this is an affirmation of the literacy myth—the notion that language has the power to advance the individual socially. If we draw

the correlation between Sunraider and the revised Promethean tale, then the renaming as a literate act also reflects a degree of resistance on the part of Bliss to the literacy myth. He retains within his name a degree of connection to the Afro-American community. Sunraider seems very much like a coded revision, a way Bliss secretly carries his past with him into his future. To this extent, it is very much like Pratt's description of the arts of the contact zone—a revision of the dominant literate tradition that asserts the validity of the oppressed literate tradition in a subtle way.

What exactly Ellison had in mind when he conceived of his protagonist's two names, or what the author intended to be the particular circumstance in which the transformation took place, as I mentioned earlier, is not clear. In the end, the names may have meant nothing. Ellison may have chosen to change "Bliss" or "Adam Sunraider" before the final version of his novel hit the press, had he lived long enough to see the day. However, the fact that Ellison entertained the possibility of renaming his protagonist midway through the novel again suggests an author interested in the connection between language and identity. The following two portions of this chapter deal with the literate acts of Adam Sunraider, in each of the two distinct and unclearly related capacities in which the character operates. In both of his careers as a flim-flam filmmaker and as a United States Senator, Sunraider's literate acts seem to respond to the literacy myth. Each of the literate acts returns to the concern of the relationship between language, power, and identity. They seem to call into question what it means to reinvent the self through language.

V. Mister Movie-Man

If we try to piece together a chronology from *Juneteenth*'s scattered narrative structure, it seems to me that one of the earliest moments in which Bliss has become Sunraider is in the scene recounted in a memory by old Sunraider in the hospital, in which he and an Afro-American woman (she is unnamed) enjoy a love tryst in the countryside. In this scene, we see Sunraider is a character torn between past and present, between racial distinctions, between what is true and what he wants to be true.

The setting for the scene is nearly Edenic. Sunraider and his companion are "under the trees, away from the town" (*Juneteenth* 65). They picnic in a "parklike space" (68) filled with lush vegetation and white rabbits. As the scene progresses, the sexual tension between Sunraider and the woman increases. The result, of course, is that Sunraider succumbs to the temptation and leaves town, and there is the suggestion that the product of the brief union is Sunraider's assassin (though, the book offers too little evidence to make a convincing case for this). To read the scene as Sunraider's "fall from Paradise," though, is to oversimplify the conflict.

Sunraider expresses a view of nature as a sort of tainted Paradise. "Eden, I thought, Eden is a lie that never was. And Adam? His name was 'Snake.' And Eve's? An aphrodisiac best served with raw fresh oysters on the half-shell with a good white wine" (68). The irony of Sunraider's comment here is, of course, that he has transformed himself into an Adam as a way of beginning anew. His comment here seems a sort of self-deprecation, or an expression of doubt about this new identity he has constructed for himself. Indeed, Sunraider seems torn between his persona of Adam Sunraider, or as the woman calls him, Mister Movie-Man, and his old self,

Bliss. This conflict is powerfully represented in the act of writing. As he and the woman walk through “paradise,” Sunraider says:

And I remembered the Bliss years. He, Bliss, returned. (Laly was like ‘lasses candy, with charm of little red socks in little gril’s black patent leather shoes on slim brown legs, her gingham panties playing peekaboo beneath a skirt flip as a bird’s tail, and her hair done up in tight braids. *Bliss loves Laly*, I wrote in the sand where the ladybirds lived but the me preacher wiped it out. Then I wrote, Bliss loves you know who, and the preacher me wiped that away. So only *Bliss* and *loves* remained in the sand.) But coming now was no Laly and I no preacher for a long time now and Bliss no more, though blissful beside her moving there” (66).

Sunraider seems to be describing how his feelings of love and sexuality had to be suppressed when he was Bliss, his preacher self. Perhaps that also is a reason why he had to shed the former identity. Yet there seems to be another side of Bliss that Sunraider misses, and that may well be the Bliss that identifies himself with the Afro-American community through language. For right after Sunraider declares “He, Bliss, returns,” he begins to engage in a playful banter of words with his companion. He “remembered the one phrase, ‘teasing brown,’ and used it” (66). Sunraider’s speech becomes so elusive and vernacular that his companion eventually remarks, “I can’t figure you out, Mister Movie-Man . . . [t]he way you talk sometimes. Once in a while you sound just like one of us and I can’t tell whether you mean it or just do it to make fun of me” (73).

His physical desires also become torn. Sunraider seems to want to leave; Bliss wants to stay. “. . . I thought, Turn back now. Now is the time, leave her and go West. You’ve lingered long enough, so leave before the complications. So I thought. But Bliss said, *Come. Come*” (68). As Sunraider and his companion continue to walk through the woods, she places her hand on his arm and he “fought Bliss for my arm to

keep its place against my side, denying that sweet fugitive fulfillment” (69). Sunraider gets the eerie sense that he has sprung a third identity during this walk. “And somehow there were three of us now, although only two were actually within the trees, Bliss inside me but still I felt the stranger following. Twice I turned but couldn’t see him. I should have run” (69). Clearly, Sunraider is haunted by his multiple identities. The love tryst is about more than just sex. It is about Sunraider defining himself in relation to nature—a natural world that includes sexual temptation. It is about Sunraider constructing an identity for himself as “Mister Movie-Man,” and testing the limits of that constructed identity.

For example, during the picnic, it becomes clear that part of Sunraider’s charm is derived from his companion believing in his identity as Mister Movie-Man; it is also clear that part of his companion’s charm results from his belief that he can use his authorial vision (and by authorial here, I mean the way a director “writes” or constructs films as a text) to construct her identity. The scene seems to indicate that Sunraider and his partners, Karp and Donelson, have involved the town in a scheme to raise money to fund the making of the movie. Sunraider’s companion hints to him that she wants the lead in the film. Sunraider tells her, “You just work the contest and win, I said. I’ll take care of the rest,” to which she replies, “Oh, I will . . . I’ll raise more money than all the other girls put together. You’ll have to give me the best part” (81). Whatever her physical interest in Sunraider might be, his companion is also obviously interested in his power to transform her into a film star. This, coupled with her repeated references to him as “Mister Movie-Man” (never as Bliss or Sunraider) suggests her fascination with his constructed identity. She also seems to play on his

need to feel powerful, to cast himself in a role, in the moments before their relationship is consummated. She says to him, "Mister Man . . . you're making me a problem I never had before . . . Well, I'll tell you the truth, Mister Movie-Man—I'm so country I don't know where the long nose you have is supposed to go . . ." (93). While her words attest to her innocence, her cunning implies something quite else. Sunraider, however, seems not to notice this. While she constructs herself as a naïve country girl in opposition to him as the sophisticated "Mr. Movie-Man," he not only seems to "believe" her identity, but constructs the love tryst into a sort of a mythical reconnection with Eden, in which his companion serves as the transformational vessel. He begins picturing his companion in a "pink sari," imagining "[w]alking her along Fifth Avenue" where through him, she has become "more formed, more realized, more magically achieved" (72). He believes that her raw form can, through his genius, be metamorphosed into a new being. He also believes in turn that through recreating her, he will somehow come to possess himself more fully (72-3). The sex act becomes for Sunraider the moment when this self possession is completed, the moment when "The heart's own that rejoins its excited mate once in a lifetime—like Adam's rib returned transformed and glorious" (93). The act completed, Sunraider recalls that he was "at rest . . . enclosed in peace, obsessionless and accepting a definition for once and for once happy" (94). Again, Sunraider's words here refer to an Edenic vision, and it is not too much of a stretch to equate Adam to Adam, from whose essence his lover is recreated.

Understanding the love tryst as a literate act requires examining the scene's events in relation to the recreation of identity I discussed in the preceding section of

this chapter. Sunraider is attempting to construct for himself an identity not just as a filmmaker, but as a white, adult, sexualized being. During this scene in the novel, his sense that he is followed by a stranger and internally tortured by Bliss demonstrates Sunraider's unease with his constructed identity. Sunraider seems at times reluctant to express his white, adult, sexual self. Something more is at stake here than a coming of age or the nervousness of losing his innocence. Sunraider's recollection of Bliss' inability to express his love for Laly in writing reflects his sense that a name is laden with representations and definitions—and inherently, limitations. Bliss cannot be Sunraider; if he could, Sunraider would have never been constructed. The sexual liaison functions, in part, as Sunraider's means of embracing his new identity, in shrugging off the younger, asexual Bliss self and becoming a man.

His constructed identity is also directly related to the transformational sex act and the issues of language at work in the scene. Sunraider perceives himself as a filmmaker, an author of visual texts. His fantasies of his companion indicate that this way of seeing the world as mutable, as raw material for his authorial vision, is not just the way he constructs film, but the way he constructs reality. As filmmaker, Sunraider is able to assimilate unrelated matter and combine it into a whole that reflects a meaning determined by him. To a large extent, this is what happens during the sex act. Sunraider ignores what might be obvious cues to readers that his companion is not an innocent as he wants her to be, that her motives are not as pure as he wants to believe they are, and instead remembers the love tryst only as a moment that changed him and allowed him to mold his companion into what he wanted her to become. The scene, then, serves not only as an affirmation of identity, but an affirmation of the

literacy myth as well. Sunraider has acquired greater power to construct reality with language. He has acquired a greater degree of literacy. His choice to exercise this power, and his belief that becoming someone else is “good” reflects Sunraider’s embracing the literacy myth.

In *Juneteenth*, the love tryst is spliced into the same chapter as the scene in which Sunraider is making a movie in a small town, perhaps the same town on the outskirts of which the love tryst takes place. Whether or not Ellison intended for these two scenes to be placed in this relationship to one another is unclear. Callahan’s notes about the editorial process tell us that he made chapter divisions and in places determined the sequence of actions (“Afterword” 367). How or if this affected the interplay between the two scenes in Chapter 5 of the novel cannot presently be known. Nevertheless, both scenes deal with Sunraider’s constructed identity as a filmmaker, and it is the construction of this identity and not the interplay between the two scenes that are important to this discussion.

The alternate scene pertains more directly to Sunraider’s filmmaking than does the love tryst. Sunraider and Donelson wander around the Southern town looking for scenes to shoot for their film. Donelson suggests “What about doing the Boston Tea Party . . . with these coons acting both the British and the Beantowners. That would be a riot. Make up some as Indians, take the rest and Harvard-up their talk. Even the camera would laugh. Too bad we can’t film sound. We could out-do the minstrels ‘Lasses White and all” (90). Donelson’s suggestion that he and Sunraider exploit the Afro-Americans for comic purpose is barbaric, but not at all uncommon. Donald Bogle points out in his history of representations of Afro-Americans in the American

film canon, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, that from very early in American film history (1903), white American filmmakers have almost without exception represented Afro-Americans in five stereotypical roles: the tom, “the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy, and the brutal black buck” (3-4). Donelson’s suggestion that he and Sunraider cast the “coons” in the film for comic effect might merely be a careless use of the epithet. Yet Ellison’s choice to include the term “coons” might also be meant to invoke the “coon” stereotype. As Bogle explains of the role of “coons,” “They appeared in a series of black films presenting the Negro as amusement object and black buffoon” (7). Indeed, this seems to be the representation of Afro-Americans that Donelson is looking to make. When a filmmaker chooses to portray Afro-Americans—or any other ethnic or racial group, for that matter—in a negative way, it suggests that the filmmaker perceives himself or herself to be in a position of privilege, usually the privilege of whiteness. The choice to denigrate others through defining them (by a representation) is also a choice to define one’s self in relation to them as “other.”

Thus, when Donelson poses the idea to represent the Afro-Americans as the comic “coons,” Sunraider’s reaction to the idea defines him in relation to the group as well. After encountering Sunraider initially in the novel as the senator who refers to the Cadillac as the “Coon Cage Eight,” we might expect his response to Donelson to be unqualified approval. Yet in this scene, Sunraider meets Donelson’s request with surprising hostility. Sunraider tells Donelson, “No . . . it’ll be a modern romance. They’ll have dignity and they’ll play simple Americans. Good, hardworking, kindly ambitious people with a little larceny here and there. . . . Let’s not expect to take their

money and make fools of them while doing it” (90). Again, Donelson affirms his view that the Afro-Americans in the town should be exploited, saying, “What! And how the hell are we going to make these tar babies look like God’s fair chosen creatures?” (90). At this point in the text, it seems that both Sunraider and Bliss reply to Donelson’s question. Sunraider says, “That’s your problem, Donelson” (90). Underneath that, Bliss’ line from the scene where he squares off with the conjurer is repeated. “*God’s going to turn you into a crow for that*” (90). The context suggests that Bliss’ rebuke is aimed at Donelson, not Sunraider. Both responses are interesting as literate acts. Bliss’ threat is, of course, a warning of God’s power, and seems to be a reversion on the part of Sunraider to his belief in the authority of “Good Book” English. That Bliss’ words appear now may mean that Sunraider is still caught between his two identities. On the other hand, it might be an affirmation of the literacy myth, for we note that Sunraider’s response to Donelson is not delivered in the form of an Afro-American vernacular, word-play retort.

Still more interesting in this scene is Sunraider’s vision of the film he intends to create. Sunraider’s choice to depict the Afro-Americans as “good, hardworking, kindly ambitious people” with their “dignity” (90) suggests both his sense of kinship with and distance from the Afro-American community. That he intends to depict the community in terms other than exploitative suggests his respect for and closeness to them. His planned film sounds much like the “race films” made at the beginning of the 20th century by Afro-American filmmakers like Oscar Micheaux. The “race films” were usually Afro-American-controlled productions which, as illustrated in the 1928 film, *The Scar of Shame*, feature “Black upper-class culture as that which should be

emulated by lower-class Blacks in order to humanize themselves” and in which Afro-Americans are “at the center as subjects of narrative development . . . neither marginalized as a problem, or singled out as villainous stereotypes such as Hollywood constructs in its films” (Diawara 7). Sunraider’s desire to show Afro-Americans in a positive way, to resist the stereotypes seems to demonstrate the same sort of commitment evidenced by Afro-American filmmakers. Yet at the same time, Sunraider’s held notion that he has the power to *allow* them to “have dignity” suggests a degree of distance (a criticism that could also be levied against the early Afro-American filmmakers, in all fairness). Thus, Sunraider simultaneously embraces and resists the common way for whites to depict Afro-Americans in American films in the 20th century.

The literate acts that represent Sunraider’s experience as a filmmaker may reflect a number of things about Ellison and his thinking during the time that he wrote *Juneteenth*. Why Ellison chose for Sunraider to become a filmmaker we can only begin to guess. Perhaps it was Ellison’s sense that in the 20th century the novel was quickly replaced by the cinema as the primary form of middle-class entertainment. Ellison may have realized that where novels once shaped the mass culture’s views of society through words, the cinema now shaped the country’s perceptions through the dialogue and visual representations that compose the text of a film. He may have believed that the cinemas provided not just a way for people to define and identify others, but a way for them to identify themselves. That Bliss becomes fascinated with the pictures because he believes his mother is one of the actresses projected on the screen (240-5) suggests that Ellison saw films as a powerful source of self-

identification. If indeed Ellison did, then his choice to have Sunraider begin as a filmmaker represents the author's view that filmmaking as authorship constitutes one of the most powerful forms for constructing identity, for communicating to others the nature of self. Indeed, films may be for the 20th century the most obvious example of "arts of the contact zone," for within many of these works, the filmmaker-author projects his or her vision of her language and culture in relation to the language and culture of another group of a different social position. That Ellison depicts filmmaking, both in the love tryst and in the disagreement between Donelson and Sunraider, as a process through which definitions of race and identity are negotiated and changed, that he shows the forming of these definitions in scenes where power is given to some and taken from others, suggests that he may have seen films as a way that individuals "write" culture.

VI. Senator Sunraider: A Compiled and Incomplete Identity

If Ellison's protagonist's transformation from Bliss the boy preacher to Adam Sunraider the filmmaker is mysterious, Sunraider's transformation from filmmaker to New England Senator defies explanation. The text of *Juneteenth* offers virtually no clues as to how or when or why Sunraider moved from behind the camera to the Capitol. This might again be because of editorial decisions, or because Ellison had not yet finished the explanation in his writing, or even perhaps because Ellison found the explication unimportant to the final work he had in mind. Whatever the reason, the gap is again something that cannot be bridged without great abuse to Ellison's authorial intent. Instead, I will focus on the ways in which Sunraider's speech on the Senate floor relates to and departs from the other literate acts I have discussed in this

chapter. Specifically, I will again focus on what this literate act seems to say about Sunraider as a literate subject, and what Sunraider's speech might reflect about Ellison's interests as an author.

Sunraider's speech on the Senate floor appears to engage the literacy myth handed down by Hickman much more specifically than either of the scenes that deal with Sunraider's literate acts as a filmmaker. In the Senate floor speech, Sunraider invokes both the words and the metaphysical vision of the New England literary movement, in such ways that have the effect of appearing both to embrace and reject the literate tradition of "Good Book English" represented through Ralph Waldo Emerson. In examining the speech on the Senate floor as a literate act, we can see that it reflects Sunraider's attempt to gain acceptance (or more correctly, maintain acceptance) in the community by taking on the language of that community and constructing his ideas in their language. Yet at times in his speech, it also becomes clear that this is an identity—and a literary tradition—he cannot fully embrace.

That Ellison chose to include the New England literate tradition in *Juneteenth* is interesting but not surprising. The Emersonian legacy is more than a legacy Hickman passes on to Bliss in the fictional world of *Juneteenth*. For Ellison, as it is for his creation of Bliss/Sunraider, self-identity is bound inextricably to this tradition. Ralph Waldo Ellison is, after all, the namesake of Ralph Waldo Emerson, a fact that Ellison acknowledges shaped his "experience as a writer ("Hidden Name" 194)." In "Hidden Name and Complex Fate: A Writer's Experience in the United States," an address delivered by Ellison in 1964 that was later published as part of *Shadow and*

Act, Ellison explores his uneasy relationship with the name given to him by his father, an admirer of Emerson's writing.

For in the dim beginnings, before I ever thought consciously of writing, there was my own name, and there was, doubtless, a certain magic in it. From the start I was uncomfortable with it, and in my earliest years it caused me much puzzlement. Neither could I understand what a poet was, nor why, exactly, my father had chosen to name me after one. ("Hidden Name" 194-195)

Ellison recounts that his name often made him a comic subject for the community of adults who had a fuller understanding of his name than he and were "obviously amused by the joke implicit in such a small brown nubbin of a boy carrying around such a heavy moniker" ("Hidden Name" 195). Readers might speculate that Ellison's early sense of his name as a "joke" influenced his construction of the elusive Mr. Emerson and his homosexual son in *Invisible Man*, a scene from the novel that turns on the narrator (and readers) having an expectation of Mr. Emerson that does not match up with the reality.

Indeed, Ellison acknowledged that the heritage of his name affected the way that he perceived the scene of writing. As he remarks in the conclusion of "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," "I could suppress the name of my namesake out of respect for the achievements of its original bearer, but I cannot escape the obligation of attempting to achieve some of the things which he asked of the American writer" (209). Ellison seems to continue to be obligated to the Emersonian legacy in writing *Juneteenth*, and Sunraider's speech on the Senate floor reflects the complexity that legacy had for Ellison.

The speech might be thought of as having two parts. The first portion of the speech is a hopeful monologue about the indomitable American spirit and the power of the American landscape. The second, at least as the novel has been edited, is race-

baiting rhetoric that is intended to blame race relations for the nation's difficulties. I will focus my remarks primarily on the first half of the speech, for the second half (which refers to the Cadillac as the "Coon Cage Eight") is less certainly a product of Ellison's authorial intentions than it is a product of Callahan's editing. Ellison may well have intended for the Senator to shift from a discussion about the potential of the American people to racist rhetoric, but that is something—even more than in other places of *Juneteenth*—of which we as readers cannot be reasonably assured. In "Afterword: A Note to Scholars," Callahan mentions that he added "one paragraph from "Cadillac Flambé," inserted to give the Senator's speech in Chapter 2 greater continuity with the novel's final scene" (366). Since my faith in Callahan's editing process is not absolute, I will not look at the racist rhetoric in the Senator's speech, but will instead keep my analysis focused on what seems to have been less contentiously Ellison's thinking.

To begin to see how the Senator's speech engages the Emersonian aspect of the literacy myth, we might first begin by looking at the Emersonian view of the relationship between nature and history. In *Nature*, Emerson argues that individuals must free themselves from the shackles of history and reinvent themselves through a reacquaintance with nature. As Emerson writes in the introduction:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, though their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? (21)

For Emerson, the landscape holds the possibility for real human self-discovery. He presents a view of metaphysics in which the individual soul and nature are one, called

“nature” (Emerson 22); the body, other people and all that is not natural are ranked separately as the “not-me” (Emerson 22). It is in the relationship between self and nature that Emerson sees the origin of art. “*Nature*, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. *Art* is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture” (Emerson 22). Recalling Sunraider’s experience in the love tryst, Ellison’s character seems to have embraced this Emersonian view of nature. The Senator’s speech seems in part to also affirm or engage with the Emersonian perspective.

If Sunraider’s speech is meant to convey a purpose beyond what its words revealed, that is not made clear in *Juneteenth* (specifically, the speech does not support a particular piece of legislation). Sunraider’s words convey a need to re-envision the notion of American progress, through the American landscape. This begins, much like Emerson’s *Nature*, with a need to rethink the relationship with history.

“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, the Uncluttered . . .’

“God enclosed our land between two mighty oceans and, setting us down on the edge of this mighty continent, he threw us on our own. Our forefathers then set our course ever westward, not, I think, by way of turning us against the past and its lessons, although they accused it vehemently—for we are a product of those lessons—but that we should approach our human lot from a fresher direction, from uncluttered perspectives.” (*Juneteenth* 15)

While in *Nature* Emerson attacks history as “retrospective,” Sunraider seems somehow less comfortable making the same departure. Though Sunraider’s words presumably refer to the founding forefathers’ vehement accusation of history, he might as well be speaking of Emerson’s challenge to the value of the past. While Sunraider does call for “uncluttered perspectives” (a very Emersonian idea), he also

seems to want to position himself as a part of the great figures in history. Thus, here is an interesting tension in Sunraider's speech that reveals his dual purposes as a rhetorician. Sunraider wants to convey the idea, like Emerson, that new directions and progress are what are needed, but because he wants to be aligned with the white New England tradition within which he has constructed his identity, he must simultaneously reject and celebrate the ideas of those who have come before him. Sunraider is simultaneously the beneficiary and victim of his constructed New England identity.

Contradiction riddles the speech throughout. Sunraider at one moment tells the audience that the nation will "move ever from the known into the unknown," for the unknown holds "the idealistic core" (16), and in the next moment claims that "memory is all: touchstone, threat and guiding star" (16). Eventually the Senator's terms become amalgamated, as he tells the audience that they will move toward the "past-future" (16). The Senator's need to align himself with an established tradition overtakes his rhetoric so entirely that when he muses to himself, "*Am I drunk, going insane?*" (17), he is apt not to be the only one asking this question. The speech does not make much sense.

Though what progress means in relation to history for the Senator is unclear, his speech nonetheless calls for progress. In this call for progress, he again seems to be drawing on the New England literate tradition, reflecting in particular the Emersonian notion of art. Sunraider claims, "By the capacity of our inner eye for detecting subtleties of contour, landmark and underground treasure, we shape the land. Indeed, we *shall* reshape the universe—to the forms of our own inner vision" (17). He then points to the efforts of westward expansion, and reaffirms the nation's

commitment to such “creative momentum” (17). In his references to inner vision and reshaping nature, Sunraider again sounds not unlike Emerson in his great mystical moment in *Nature* when he writes:

Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature. (24)

Emerson’s words here assert the value of nature as a backdrop against which the individual can encounter a true sense of self, apart from the community. Ellison’s Sunraider seems to still be bound to the Emersonian notion that the individual can reinvent or rediscover the essence of himself in nature. Yet, Sunraider cannot fully embrace the Emersonian view of history—at least as it appears in *Nature*—for he wants so much to become part of the tradition. This is the double-edged sword of the literacy myth: to gain acceptance, one must embrace the ideas of the dominant literary tradition; yet binding one’s self to a tradition may not always result in the affirmation of the tradition.

There are other cues in the scene that Sunraider is attempting to align himself with the New England literary tradition. At one point, Sunraider says “*The land was ours before we were the land’s*. So saith the poet. And it is as it was in Eden” (20). The line of poetry to which he refers is from Robert Frost’s “The Gift Outright,” the poem delivered at John F. Kennedy’s inauguration. That Ellison selects a poem by Frost, and particularly this poem of Frost suggests interesting dimensions of the

speech as a literate act. As George Monteiro points out in *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance*, while Frost was thought of as a “New England poet,” he was in fact “not for the most part brought up on the farms of New England” (ix). Monteiro suggests that Frost, through his poetry, reinvented himself as a New Englander. How appropriate, then, that Sunraider draws upon the language of Frost to invoke his New England identity. What Frost was able to do seems to be precisely what Sunraider attempts to do.

Monteiro suggests that Frost took up the commitment authors of the New England Renaissance, especially Emerson, had to positioning themselves in relation to nature so that it could reveal truth to them (ix). “The Gift Outright” seems a reflection of this vision, its theme decisively Edenic. Referring to America’s departure from British rule, Frost writes, “Something we were withholding made us weak/ Until we found that it was ourselves/ We were withholding from our land of living,/ And forthwith found salvation in surrender” (l. 8-11). Frost’s words here suggest that the source of identity lies in giving one’s self over to the promise of the landscape. More deeply, though, his words invoke the Edenic notion that the landscape is the raw material out of which the individual can form an identity. “Such as we were we gave ourselves outright/ (The deed of gift was many deeds of war)/ To the land vaguely realizing westward,/ But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced” (l. 12-15). Frost’s use of the words “unstoried, artless, unenhanced” affirm a connection between nature and language, an assertion of the possibility of finding identity by shaping nature through the individual will and mode of expression. This seems also an extension of Emerson’s observation in *Nature* that “Words are signs of natural facts” (31). Again,

then, Sunraider's reference to Frost and "The Gift Outright" evoke the New England literary tradition, and by extension, the "Good Book English" myth of literacy handed to Bliss by Hickman.

Yet if we are to believe Hickman's account of Sunraider's speech on the Senate floor, the Senator's identity is complicated in other ways. Within Sunraider is the younger Bliss, the protégé of Hickman. Reverend Hickman remarks to Sister Neal, "There, there it goes. I could just see it coming—see the way he's got his head back and tilted to the side?" (34) trying to reassure her that Sunraider is indeed the long lost Bliss. Sister Neal replies, "Yeah—why, Reveren', that's *you!* He's still doing you!" (34). Indeed, at the moment when he is shot, Sunraider cries "Lord, LAWD . . . WHY HAS THOU" in "the hysterical timbre of a Negro preacher" and feels "a profound sense of self-betrayal, as though he had stripped himself naked in the Senate" (26).

The speech on the Senate floor ultimately suggests the limitations of the literacy myth. Ellison has placed his character in a place of the highest social rank, steeped him in the Emersonian vision, punctuating his speech with a "mock Elizabethan swagger" (23). Yet even at the moment when the literacy myth is most fully realized for Sunraider, his old identity lurks close beneath the surface. More specifically, his earliest associations with language and literacy remain with him and shape his mode of expression.

What this scene—along with the others I have focused on in this chapter—suggests about Ellison's thinking on the issue of literacy might well be his belief that while identity is constructed through language, identity can never fully be

transformed. Even as much as Hickman wants Bliss to master “Good Book English,” that way of speaking fails him in the social interactions with the conjurer. Likewise, Sunraider’s attempt to reinvent himself in the landscape, as witnessed in both the love tryst and the Senate floor scene, falls short. As a filmmaker, Sunraider both affirms and resists the dominant ways of representing Afro-Americans, suggesting that he does not have a fixed sense of identity as part of either group. Each of these scenes seems to suggest that for Ellison, language is a collective identity that in the contact zone of America never reaches a final emphasis.

Chapter 5: The Next Stage of Reading

When I finished reading *Juneteenth* and my feelings of disappointment with the novel had begun to subside, I began thinking about how *Juneteenth* relates to Ellison's literary legacy. The novel is not what I had expected, and if the sampling of reader reviews posted on Amazon.com is any indication, the novel is not what a number of Ellison aficionados had expected. *Juneteenth* is, I feel, much less finished than many readers wanted to believe it would be, and among those readers, I think we must include Callahan. The novel ends without reaching any sort of resolution of the drama. We do not know whether Sunraider survives the shooting, whether he and Hickman become reconciled, whether he continues to live as white New Englander, or whether he will turn from his race-baiting rhetoric and acknowledge his valuable cultural heritage. We never find out the identity of the assassin, or if his identity is important to the novel. As I tried to elucidate in the third chapter of this thesis, there are also holes in the narrative that do not directly relate to a resolution of the plot. We do not know who or when or why Bliss left Hickman to become Sunraider. We do not know how Sunraider transformed from a B filmmaker into a Senator. All of these issues are, of course, secondary to the problems with the narrative that I raised in the first chapter of this thesis. At most, *Juneteenth* could have been a complete version of part of a much longer novel, and it seems fairly apparent that it is not even that.

There are other reasons, however, that might account for why readers—myself included—have found *Juneteenth* disappointing. To begin with, the issues of race that are clearly foregrounded in *Invisible Man* are somewhat less tenable in this novel. That readers never fully discover Bliss'/Sunraider's racial identity makes the

representations of race in the novel slightly more difficult to understand. Perhaps this is a positive quality of the novel. Like it or not, readers are forced to resist categorizing Ellison's main character in one of the most fundamental of ways. This prevents, I feel, the issues of race from reaching any sort of final emphasis in *Juneteenth*. This could simply be a matter of the novel being an unfinished work; it might also be the intention of an author who resisted racial characterization.

Another aspect of *Juneteenth* that may account for its lukewarm reception is that it is a hard book to read. In *Invisible Man*, after the Prologue and through the Epilogue, all the events are relayed in more or less a chronological order. *Juneteenth*, however, moves from present to past constantly, and moreover, it is never entirely clear at what point in the past events take place or what their relationship to other events in the novel is. To further complicate the novel's chronology, the past sections of the novel are conveyed through the point of view of Sunraider, who slips in and out of consciousness. Not only are we as readers unsure of exactly when events are happening, we are perhaps not prepared to trust Sunraider's point of view enough to be sure whether or not they actually have happened.

This brings us to the issues of point of view and characterization. The sections of the narrative that seem to be taking place in the present moment of the novel are told from the point of view of a third-person narrator who is not developed enough for us to know much about. Likewise, the present-day Sunraider serves as the narrator for most of the scenes of the novel that are recounted in retrospect. Yet, we know so little about Sunraider as a character that, even if he were not slipping in and out of consciousness, it would be difficult for us to evaluate him either as a narrator or

merely as a character. Likewise, most of what we know of Hickman is revealed through the eyes of Sunraider. Critically reading what he brings to the novel as a character is, at least on some level, also not a possibility.

I reemphasize the issues about the novel's problematic readability that I outlined in Chapter 2 here to suggest not only that *Juneteenth*'s incompleteness raises problems for readers in the critical sense, but that in terms of the more fundamental approaches to reading literature—especially those which are likely to be taken up by young, inexperienced readers—the novel's incompleteness adds to the difficulty of reading what it seems would have already been a difficult text to read. When we consider Ellison's authorial legacy, then, we must consider how the difficulties this text presents affects how the novel is viewed in relation to the rest of Ellison's literary contributions, including *Invisible Man*, his short stories and his critical essays. It seems to me that there are three distinct possibilities for the fate of *Juneteenth*—either it will be read, or it will be misread, or it will not be read at all.

The first two possibilities are related, in that both assure that *Juneteenth* will be considered a part of Ellison's literary legacy, for if *Juneteenth* is not read, it will be forgotten altogether. If the novel is read, then its readers inherit all of the problems that I have outlined in the preceding chapters. This thesis has been aimed at suggesting one way of moving beyond these problems, to respect Ellison's intentions as much as they can be known and to examine *Juneteenth* in relation to Ellison's other writings. Of course, this thesis is by no means an inclusive reading of the novel. In my own writing, I found there were times when the scope of the project meant leaving the proverbial stone unturned; further investigation can be done according to the

methodology I have presented in this thesis. I also can certainly imagine other entries into the novel that attempt to respect the problematic nature of *Juneteenth* as an edited, unfinished text.

Perhaps the easier possibility for reading *Juneteenth* is to misread it, to fill in the blanks with suppositions and to take for granted that it is just as Ellison wanted it to be, save a thousand odd pages of missing text. If this is the case, then I imagine that *Juneteenth* will never be conceived of as much more than a let-down, a novel that never matched the greatness of *Invisible Man*. Where the approach I have outlined attempts to read the novel realistically, acknowledging that for all its incompleteness, Ellison still takes on in fine form his interest in the representations of multiple literate traditions, viewing the novel as entirely Ellison's creation and evaluating it in traditional ways is bound to have readers stumbling over the fragmentation of the text. I share with Menand his fear that this is to be the fate of *Juneteenth*. Readers generations from now may well remember it as a disappointing sequel.

The third possibility is that *Juneteenth* will not be read at all. Callahan promises a more complete scholarly edition of the text, which at the time I am writing has not seen the light of day. Callahan also promises that following the publication of this edition, the Hickman manuscript and Ellison's notes, already at the Library of Congress, "will be available to those interested in working with them" (368). I have no doubt, given the competitive nature of publishing in academia, which is forever fueled by the quest for "original research," that the Hickman manuscript will be read. Established Americanists and fledging Ph.D. candidates alike will flock to the hallowed halls, pour through Ellison's forty years of agony on paper and postulate

about what kept Ellison writing for so long (who knows but what this fate awaits me?). Perhaps someone will find the missing link, the elusive truth that Callahan missed that will make everything coherent. Or perhaps, like Ellison's invisible man, we will be kept running, never finding the promise fulfilled. At any rate, reading the Hickman manuscript is not the same thing as reading *Juneteenth*. The Hickman manuscript, along with Ellison's notes, is too unwieldy for the average reader (remember—ten boxes). It will be unlikely that non-academic, high school or even undergraduate readers will ever approach the text. The Hickman manuscript instead will be the domain of specialists. No doubt, these specialists will produce books *about* the Hickman manuscript, and some of these books might even be read by undergraduate, graduate or non-academic readers. However, the possibility of more than a handful of readers ever becoming directly acquainted with the Hickman manuscript is improbable.

Juneteenth, on the other hand, is tenable for non-specialized readers. Even though reading the work in an accurate way is challenging, it remains within grasp. *Juneteenth* may well be the only opportunity for readers to encounter the work into which Ellison poured so much of his authorial interest. For those interested in Ellison's authorial legacy, not reading *Juneteenth* may be just as bad as misreading the text. The task for readers, then, and those who direct readers, is to strive to read the text in ways which acknowledge its limitations and its strengths. It is only after this sort of reading has taken place that a fair evaluation of *Juneteenth*'s place in Ellison's literary legacy can occur. I suggest too that *Juneteenth* is best examined not in terms of "better than" or "worse than" *Invisible Man* (for even Ellison seems to have known

he did not top his first creation) but rather for what it tells us about an author who contributed much to the American language through his commitment to challenging its limits and reshaping its possibilities. I think this is how Ellison would have liked us to remember him, not as an author who never gave America the novel it expected, but the author who gave America a gift that enabled us to become something we were not before.

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