

Epic, the Oral Community, and the Memory of Emancipation in Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth*

As the recently published epistolary collection reveals, Ralph Ellison was an unabashed Americanist, for better and for worse.¹ Ellison's faith in American identity and the democratic process, which is evident at the end of *Invisible Man* in the protagonist's determination to "affirm the principle on which the country was built [and not the men who did the violence]" (574), is again manifest in the posthumous novel, *Juneteenth*.² According to John F. Callahan, Ellison's literary executor, the novel celebrates "the indivisibility of the American experience" (*Juneteenth* xvi). James Alan McPherson (the African-American writer to whom Ellison showed a portion of his uncompleted work in 1969) concluded that in his writing Ellison seemed to be "trying to solve the central problem of American literature. . . [and] to find forms invested with enough familiarity to reinvent a much more diverse world for those who take their provisional identities from groups" (*Juneteenth* xxi). The "central problem" to which McPherson points is one of an American identity drawn from a variety of cultural forms but based in a common past. *Juneteenth* is an epic narrative that crafts a national memory out of local (read African-American) idiom.

The idea of epic is central to my reading of *Juneteenth*, and I argue that the novel's epic narrative is evident chiefly in the "oral" portions of the work, namely the character's speeches and sermons.³ By epic, I refer to the classical genre, which is primarily oral and based in past time. Bakhtin distinguishes epic from the novel by the emphasis of the former genre on "the national heroic past, a world of 'beginnings' and 'peak times' in the national history" (15). In this way, epic, as David Quint argues of Vergil's *Aeneid*, is central in the construction of a national identity, since it serves as a charter for character

and heroic action within a given community. In *Juneteenth*, the epic narrative of speeches and sermons memorializes crucial periods in American history and identity, such as Emancipation, or the writing of the Constitution. While the local idiom of the African-American sermon marks the Emancipation experience, for example, as one that primarily affects blacks, Ellison uses a racially-ambiguous character (Bliss) to include all Americans in the call to remembrance.

In the first half of this paper, I explore the characters and symbols that shape the epic experience in *Juneteenth*. In the second half, I focus specifically on Alonzo Hickman's sermon for Juneteenth, a holiday celebrated within African-American communities that commemorates June 19, 1865, the day on which slaves in Galveston, Texas first learned that the Civil War had ended (discussed in *Juneteenth* xxiii). Hickman's sermons, which, as I argue, weave together a timeless, oral community, serve as one focal point of the epic narrative. Hickman's Juneteenth sermon, within the context of the novel's symbols and characters, calls Americans across ethnicities to bear witness to the significance of Emancipation to their lives.

Throughout *Juneteenth* Ellison uses the individual as a metaphor for a broader American experience. The characters in the novel symbolize a message that Ellison reiterated throughout his life in various ways: Americans share in a past that is racially-marked, even if they claim 'whiteness' as their identity.⁴ American identity, with which even new immigrants grapple, features the collective memory of slavery (culminating in Emancipation), the role of ethnicity in the American experience, and the need for all Americans to be reconciled to a common past, one that is often unpleasant to remember. Alonzo Hickman, a black preacher, and the orphan that he raises, Bliss (who appears white but is never clearly defined) are reflective of the diverse and wide-ranging world that is America, the world of which James Alan McPherson spoke in his evaluation of *Juneteenth*. Hickman, called "Daddy" not only because he raises Bliss from birth but also for his leadership in the church, is the type of character that Walter Ong defines as a "heavy" figure, a person "whose deeds are monumental, memorable and commonly public" (70). Such a character serves "to organize experience in some sort of permanently memorable form" (70) and is more a figure from heroic legend (epic) than the novel. Throughout *Juneteenth* Hickman, a one time jazz musician and descendant of slaves, embodies the contradictions between America's racist past and its democratic principles—or the possibility of rebirth that Emancipation makes

real. Within the novel Hickman's transformation awakens the hope of a fruitful interaction between black and white Americans, an awakening that ironically begins with his brother's lynching.

As an American social practice (albeit an ugly and unpleasant one to remember), lynching takes root after 1877 (Woodward 43), and within the context of an American cultural polemic, lynching, as Elizabeth Alexander and others have argued, is a ritual concerned with guarding against miscegenation between blacks and whites. The symbolism of lynching in *Juneteenth* connects Hickman to a racially-marked past. In the scene where Bliss is born (a flashback in chapters 14-15), the memory of the lynching of Hickman's brother underscores the taboo contact (also narrated as a flashback) between Hickman himself and the white woman pregnant with Bliss. From what the reader can tell, the woman, who seems to be a childhood friend of Hickman, opts to blame a black man (Robert, Hickman's brother) for her pregnancy by claiming rape rather than telling the truth. Bliss is the offspring of America's past, because America's race discourse (even if the child is not black) marks his life. Hickman is faced with the challenge of raising Bliss, a child abandoned by his mother immediately after his birth. In this way Hickman, a 'heavy' American character, is connected to an uncomfortable, racially-marked past through the symbolism of lynching, and the taboo contact between himself and a white woman.

Through the memories of his contact with Bliss' mother and his brother's lynching, Hickman recollects a painful area of his (and the nation's) past. He recounts the moment of Bliss' birth, remembering "[his] own black hands going in and out of those forbidden places" (301). Hickman, an older African-American man (he is repeatedly described as an "old man" on the novel's opening pages), is weary with the experience of race in America, as we see in the description of "[his] strong old slave-borne body" (272). A character that represents the inheritance of slavery, and one that Ellison was conceiving from the late 1950s through the 1980s, Hickman is connected to a blues vernacular prevalent during this period.⁵ He sings the blues, meditates upon the mysteries of God and humanity, and dreams of transcending his social death.⁶

In this way the symbols surrounding Daddy Hickman—the memory of a slave past and Emancipation, the social institution of lynching, and the associated, taboo contact between black and white Americans—connect him to a national past that is recollected throughout the novel. As a black preacher and former jazz musician, he embodies an African-American discursive mode. But

we see that, despite his slave past, his existence is not always one of social death or, to borrow the dominant metaphor of Ellison's previous novel, invisibility. Hickman is part of a broader American experience that Bliss' white mother calls upon in her time of need, and one that Bliss himself will come to exploit once he is an adult.

Juneteenth's focus on an American epic past that evokes a national memory is epitomized throughout the novel not only in characters such as Hickman, but also through symbols, such as the Lincoln Memorial, which appears at crucial points in the narrative.⁷ Hickman recalls one occasion when he and his congregation traveled to Washington, D. C. to see Bliss, at this point an adult and a race-baiting senator (renamed Adam Sunraider):

And the stone seemed to live and breathe then, its great chest appearing to heave as though, stirred by their approach, it had decided to sigh in silent recognition of who and what they were and had chosen to reveal its secret life for all who cared to see and share and remember its vision (280-81).

A member of Hickman's congregation, who calls Lincoln "Father Abraham" in a voice "like the cry of an old slave holler" (281) draws the reader's attention to the fluidity between past and present, myth and reality. For the black congregation Abraham Lincoln is a legendary, mythical figure, as the appellation "Father Abraham" shows, and they link him to the biblical hero, the unlikely patriarch of Israel.⁸ Along with the connection between Hickman, the black congregation, and their shared slave heritage, the personification of the statue of Lincoln, which "heaves" and breathes a "silent recognition," revives the epoch that freed the slaves and brings the "father" of that vision, Abraham Lincoln into present-time. The figure of Abraham Lincoln is a sphinx, and we see that the paradox of America—that of a democracy built upon slavery—depends upon the revelation of the statue's "secret life."

Both Hickman ("Daddy") and Lincoln are "father," because their own human struggle brings them to an idea of leadership. Each has the vision to reconcile himself to the past, thus solving the sphinx's riddle. As Hickman sees it, a man like Lincoln "gets hold of the idea of what he's supposed to do in this world. . . [and] lets that idea guide him as he grows and stumbles and sorrows" (282). Through suffering he achieves "his own individual and lonely place in this world" (282). Hickman's reflections regarding the Lincoln Memorial seal the connection between America's (racist) past and its present

hope. Hickman sees the same image on Lincoln's face that the members of his black congregation bear, namely "[an] air of peace and perception born of suffering" (282). Lincoln and the black congregation share in a collective experience: a common past, common problems, and a common solution. In *Juneteenth* both Hickman and Lincoln are epic heroes, because, as Ong argues of such figures, they appeal to a collective memory and shared values through their own heroic action.

Before moving to the Juneteenth sermon, which I read as an invocation to the oral community of Americans, it is worth briefly discussing Bliss, because while Hickman and Lincoln represent America's past, throughout *Juneteenth* Bliss is an allegory of America's present. If Hickman appeals to a collective memory through such symbols as lynching or his understanding of the Lincoln Memorial, Bliss is forgetfulness. "I'll call him Bliss," Hickman says, "because they say that's what ignorance is" (311). Although raised within the local idiom of the African-American community, Bliss transforms himself later in life into a race-baiting senator, who singles out blacks as not being "true Americans" (60), as "a putrid offense in the nostrils of every true red-blooded American" (61). Bliss stands in for the ignorance of racial polarities in America, a country whose past, present, and future are all racially-marked. In Bliss Hickman "had hoped to raise" a man like 'father' Abraham (282), but the child forsakes his birthright and becomes a prodigal son. Bliss' rhetoric echoes his wandering, and whereas Hickman quickens the memory of America's slave past, Bliss represents America as cultural wasteland. Ever in search of the mother that abandons him at birth, he is in perpetual boyhood, unlike Abraham "the father."

Thus *Juneteenth's* dimensions—its treatment of America's racial heritage through a black preacher and a white senator that are father and son—cause its editor John Callahan to label the novel "multifarious, multifaceted, multifocused, multivoiced, multitonned" (*Juneteenth* xxi). The novel's resonance, its epic depth, is best heard in its featured oratory. Throughout the work, the speeches are mythical narratives, timeless pieces that, like the "heav[ing]" Lincoln Memorial, break down the barriers between past and present, myth and history.⁹ The *spoken* word is of particular significance because, like the oral community that it invokes, it is living. As Ong argues, "the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups. When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker" (74). The communal importance

of oral discourse is one that is not lost on the traditional black preacher. Lyn-drey A. Niles notes that “sermons in the Black tradition were not written to be read. Much of the real impact, therefore, is lost unless the critic knows how the words would have sounded” (44). Thus the black sermon, like the epic that Bakhtin and Ong describe, is oral in composition. The oral sermon, moreover, plays a role in the creation and maintenance of common values and identity, as has been argued, for example, of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s oratory (Callo-way-Thomas, et. al.).

Ellison uses the genre of the black sermon throughout *Juneteenth* as a call to the community of Americans. The sermon invokes the community through a narrative that appeals to the memory of the past.¹⁰ As with other sermons in the novel, the Juneteenth sermon recollects a forgotten time—primarily Emancipation, but also the Middle Passage—through its use of a heroic narrative of biblical legend. Like the descriptions that distinguish Hickman as a slave descendant, and the symbolism of the Lincoln Memorial, the Juneteenth sermon, which riffs on Ezekiel 37, 1-12, brings the past to bear upon broader American experiences. The biblical story, as Gary Layne Hatch sees in his analysis of C. L. Franklin’s variation, is itself widely celebrated within the African-American church because of its emphasis on the hope of regeneration in the midst of social decay and moral destruction.

In the biblical story, the prophet Ezekiel is brought in a vision to a field of bones, which the reader later learns represents the people of Israel, who are in captivity and therefore dead (at least socially), like the dry bones. In the vision, God asks the prophet if the bones are able to live. The prophet declares his faith, and the result is a resurrection of the dead:

Again he said unto me, Prophesy unto these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you and ye shall live. . . So I prophesied, and there was noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone (Ezekiel 37: 4-5, 7).

The parallels between the biblical legend and the African-American experience are the foundation for the epic narrative in the Juneteenth sermon, as they are in C. L. Franklin’s sermon.¹¹

In *Juneteenth*, the preacher reaches into the Bakhtinian absolute past when members of the timeless community were “[brought] here in chains. . .

and in boats that history tells us weren’t fit for pigs” (120). Hickman leads Bliss in a call-and-response that culminates in an allusion to the biblical legend:

. . . Count it on your finger, see what cruel man has done. . .
Amen, Rev. Bliss, lead them. . .
We were eyeless, tongueless, drumless, danceless, hornless, songless! . . .
What was it like, Rev. Bliss? You read the scriptures, so tell us. Give us a word.
WE WERE LIKE THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES (123, 125)!

Throughout the sermon, the speakers conflate past and present time, myth and history to create an epic drama that can only be resolved by heroic, legendary figures. The present community of “we” that the preacher invokes throughout the sermon mingles with slave ancestors over four hundred years old. Throughout the sermon, the appellation of “sister” and “brother” familiar to the black-church context reifies a timeless community, and the preacher expresses its unity through the idiomatic notion of a “rebirthed” nation. (There is also an irreverent humor in phrases like “God must have wept like Jesus” [121]). Shared pain and suffering, hope and laughter make the community one.

Hickman recalls the African-American holocaust of the Middle Passage through images like “many-named floating coffins,” but the sermon’s tone is ultimately one of hope. The association of the oceanic journey with that of the biblical prophet Jonah (121) points to epic heroic potential, since in the end Jonah’s journey accomplishes a greater purpose. Within Ellison’s fictional framework, heroism would not only be for the African-American to transcend the unpleasant aspects of his experience, but also for other Americans to learn from a common past. The Juneteenth sermon reaches into epic time to retrieve the whole community, including white-Americans, or Americans at large. The preacher reminds his audience, for example, that “[the] Mayflower boat that you hear so much about Thanksgiving Day was a *Christian* ship—amen!” (120). In this context “*Christian*” becomes a marker that highlights the values of the oral community, which now extends to the first (read white) Americans, who in their practices “had turned traitor to the God who set them free from Europe’s tyrant kings” (120). In the end the sermon insists that no matter the magnitude of the experience in the belly of the whale the African-American community returns, like Jonah, with a divine message: dry bones *can* live.

Despite its noted shortcomings in terms of narrative coherence and relevance to contemporary matters (Menand 1999), *Juneteenth*’s strength is

precisely in its appeal to the past, and more specifically to the memory of slavery and Emancipation. As we have seen throughout this analysis, the novel makes its appeal to the past through its characters, symbols, and its featured oratory. Because the past always impacts upon the present, *Juneteenth's* central concern is one of continuing relevance. The integrity of American identity is articulated throughout the novel as the epic narrative of an ongoing, heroic struggle to recollect a common past.

The "American cloth" (285) about which the novel speaks is woven throughout by its two main characters, Alonzo Hickman and Bliss. While Hickman embodies the local, African-American idiom to which Ellison claims that all Americans must inevitably refer, Bliss symbolizes "whiteness," which within the novel is the culture's tendency to forget. Bliss is a prodigal son, whose acquisitiveness and wandering is symbolic of America's never-ending quest for novelty, and its forgetfulness. Within this context the Juneteenth sermon, as with sermons throughout the novel, exhorts Americans to bear witness to the common, absolute past of ethnic holocausts. In the end Bliss reminds the reader that it is the fate of Americans "to be interrogated not by our allies or enemies but by our conduct and by our lives" (14).

Finally, given the discussion of epic and community, it is perhaps significant that the Juneteenth celebration—in fact the sermon itself—is interrupted. A white woman, who claims Bliss as her son, causes a disturbance by attempting to take him away. The woman is perhaps the literary counterpart to similar characters in early American captivity narratives, such as Mary Rowlandson, because there are parallels with the ritual atmosphere of the revival, the intrusion into a cultural experience foreign to the 'white' captive, and the attempt at escape (or retrieval).¹² As is the case in the stories of captivity, the intruder creates a rift between the 'white' and ethnically-marked community; she accuses the black congregation of "[robbing Bliss] of his birthright" (155). Although she is a pretender, not unlike the "traitor[s]" from the sermon's Mayflower generation, she occasions an important reflection on the meaning of Juneteenth. If the birthright of America is freedom, it is the institution of slavery and its remnants throughout American society that rob the country of its collective birthright. Recognition of our common mother frees all Americans.

Patrice D. RANKINE
Purdue University

Endnotes

1) See especially Ellison's correspondence from Rome, dated between 1955-58, where some punchy ruminations on American identity—and longings for home—can be found.

2) On the problem of narrative coherence, see Menand.

3) Menand notes the text's orality but sees the feature as a shortcoming: "Forms that were designed to be received by the ear, like sermons, are not displayed to their best advantage in forms designed to be received by the eye, like the novel" (6). I implicitly argue against this point throughout the essay.

4) See, for example, Ellison's essay "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," in *Going to the Territory*, 104-112. For an overview of 'whiteness' as an identity, see Hill.

5) For studies of the blues vernacular, see Murray (1973), Baker, and O'Meally.

6) The imagery of dreaming ("Yes, almost convinced that I was in a dream," 301) and death (beginning with the lynching) pervade Hickman's memories regarding Bliss' birth. I read the irony here not as a pessimistic commentary, but the antitheses of life and death, dream and reality point rather to the impact of the historical experience of African-Americans upon our everyday realities. For more on this, see Ellison's "Harlem is Nowhere," in *Shadow and Act*, 282-9. On slavery as a type of 'social death,' see Orlando Patterson's work.

7) In addition to the passage cited here, note that the novel opens with Bliss' senatorial speech in front of the Lincoln memorial. Hickman reflects on Lincoln throughout chapter 14, which begins the recollection of Bliss' birth.

8) The biblical Abraham is an unlikely patriarch because he is barren into his old age and finally has only one son, Isaac. See Genesis 20-22.

9) As Hickman once told the six-year old Bliss, "Words are your business, boy. Not just the Word. Words are everything. The key to the Rock, the answer to the Question" (44).

10) In his treatment of the spoken word and the invocation to community in *Invisible Man*, Dolan Hubbard speaks of the call to an "aesthetic community," namely the African-American one. See Hubbard 64-93. My argument differs from Hubbard's in that I see Ellison reaching beyond the black community to form an 'American' one through the sermons and speeches.

11) Note, for example, the following passage from Franklin's sermon: "Babylon represented a valley to Israel, a valley of depravity, a valley of disfranchisement, a valley of hopelessness, a valley of dry bones, a valley of lifelessness. . . But to the Negro. . . America to him was a valley: a valley of slave huts, a valley of slavery and oppression, a valley of sorrows" (Hatch 81).

12) Conference-organizer Wendy Harding suggested this parallel during the discussion session. For a literary analysis of captivity narratives and their significance to the formation of American epic narratives, see Slotkin.

WORKS CITED

- Alexander, Elizabeth. "Can you be BLACK and look at this?": Reading the Rodney King Video (s)." *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. Ed. Thelma Golden. New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1994. 91-110.
- Baker, Houston. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980.
- Bakhtin, M. M. "The Epic and the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. and trans. Michael Holquist. Austin: Texas University Press, 1981. 3-40.
- Calloway-Thomas, Carolyn, and Louis Lucaites, eds. *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*. Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press, 1993.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 1952. New York: Vintage, 1995.
- . *Shadow and Act*. New York: Signet Books, 1966.
- . *Going to the Territory*. 1986. New York: Vintage, 1995.
- . *Juneteenth*. Ed. John F. Callahan. New York: Random House, 1999.
- Ginzburg, Ralph. *100 Years of Lynchings*. Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1962, 1988.
- Hatch, Gary Layne. "Logic in the Black Folk Sermon: The Sermons of Rev. C. L. Franklin." *Journal of Black Studies* 26 (1996): 227-244.
- Hill, Mike, ed. *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.
- Hubbard, Dolan. *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination*. Columbia: University Press of Missouri, 1994.
- Menand, Louis. "Juneteenth." *New York Times Book Review*. 20 June, 1999: 4-6.
- Murray, Albert. *The Hero and the Blues*. New York: Vintage, 1973.
- Murray, Albert, and John F. Callahan, eds. *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*. New York: Modern Library, 2000.
- Niles, Lyndrey A. "Rhetorical Characteristics of Traditional Black Preaching." *Journal of Black Studies* 15 (1984): 41-52.
- O'Meally, Robert G. *The Craft of Ralph Ellison*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.
- Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Routledge, 1982.

- Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Quint, David. *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. 1973. Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 2000.
- Woodward, C. Vann. *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. 3rd. rev. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.