

Ralph Ellison and the American Pursuit of Humanism

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In the middle of a 1945 review of Bucklin Moon's *Primer for White Folks*, Ralph Ellison proclaims that the time is right in the United States for a "new American humanism." Through exhaustive research in Ralph Ellison's Papers at the Library of Congress, I contextualize Ellison's grand proclamation within post-World War II American debates over literary criticism, Modernism, sociological method, and finally United States political and cultural history. I see Ellison's "American humanism" as a revitalization of the Latin notion of *litterae humaniores* that draws heavily on Gilded Age American literature and philosophy. For Ellison, American artists and intellectuals of that period were grappling with the country's primary quandary after the Civil War: an inability to reconcile America's progressive vision of humanism with the legacy left by chattel slavery and anti-black racism. He saw writers like Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Henry James, George Washington Cable and others attempting to represent a different version of *the human* in literature while confronting the various forces that the Civil War unleashed upon American life.

As the Cold War and Civil Rights era reached their crescendo, Ellison's attachment to the Gilded Age ossified. By the late 60s, it took the romantic form of aesthetic and political conservatism. This process is part of his participation in what Francis Saunders called the "Cultural Cold War" against communism. For many – including Ellison – this participation made their aesthetic investment in modernism commensurate with their anti-communist ideology. In foregrounding the Cold War, I want to emphasize that the US State's intervention into the sphere of culture is a watershed moment in America's

conceptualization of Western humanism. The CIA and the State Department's role in funding academic literary and cultural periodicals, art festivals, fellowships and other institutions of knowledge during the Cold War is a chapter of American intellectual life that shaped Ellison's world as well as those of his contemporaries. Just as importantly, this moment illuminates the key roles African-American intellectuals played in America's pursuit of humanism.

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Kinship is not necessarily biological. It can also be willful. Enslaved Angolans during the seventeenth century would call those who survived the Middle Passage “melungo”, which means “shipmate.” Through usage melungo, or shipmate became synonymous with “countrymen”, “close friend” or “relative.” There are a few people who have accompanied me through this journey that I am honored to call my melungeon: Henry, Kirsten, Mari, Jason, Stefan, Chris, Jim, Shawn, Lee, Phillip, Amy, Betsy, Tania, Jo’ie, Corey, Melissa and Barry. To Molly: I am so glad you are in my life. Your love and insight helped me finish this arduous journey. Mavi, I love you very much. And finally to Christopher, my brother from another mother: You were here from the beginning son. We elbowed our way inside and got on. I could not have handled these hot pots of oil without you.

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Introduction: “an oh-so-urgently-needed new American humanism”

It was on the *USS Missouri* that World War II finally came to an end. Her deck, once a theater of war, was the stage for World War II’s final act: the signing of the Japanese Instrument of Surrender. Waving in the brisk winds that September day were two American flags. One was a fresh set of stars and stripes from the many spare flags on board the ship. The other was the same one waving from the mast of Admiral Matthew Perry’s ship, the *USS Mississippi*, when it entered Tokyo Bay in 1853. Presiding over the signing in 1945 was General Douglas MacArthur. As the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces and a direct descendent of Perry’s family, MacArthur was styled as the second “opener” of Japan. On VJ Day MacArthur had this past in mind and it weighed heavily on his present. But what sort of American past did Perry represent to MacArthur? After the ceremony, MacArthur approached a microphone to address the Americans who had tuned in to listen to this event on the radio. His comments give us some insight into how MacArthur understood Perry’s role in American history:

We stand in Tokyo today reminiscent of our countryman, Commodore Perry, ninety-two years ago. His purpose was to bring to Japan an era of enlightenment and progress, by lifting the veil of isolation to the friendship, trade, and commerce of the world. But alas the knowledge thereby gained of Western science was forged into an instrument of oppression and human enslavement. Freedom of expression, freedom of action, even freedom of thought was denied through appeal to superstition, and through the application of force. We are committed by

the Potsdam Declaration of principles to see that Japanese people are liberated from this condition of slavery. (Douglas as quoted in Feifer).

To MacArthur, Perry came to Japan as a liberator; an avatar and symbol of Western enlightenment. Such rhetoric is not new and puts MacArthur in a long line of past and future American political figures to cast the United States as the sole grantor of liberty from slavery in the world. Japanese imperialism was a consequence of modernity's misuse, the same that Perry brought Promethean-like decades earlier. But to suggest that Perry's gift – like McArthur's – is a benevolent is to ignore the profound paradoxes of the nineteenth century America, which that extend into the post-War present. We can see this in the specter of slavery that haunts McArthur's remarks, which he reduces to a mythological archetype of injustice; a rhetorical flourish that serves the purpose of transforming Perry into myth as well.

Like all Americans during the nineteenth century Perry's life was entangled in the materiality of modern chattel slavery. Indeed, as Emerson writes in his address on the Fugitive Slave Law, slavery had turned every dinner table into a debating-club and every citizen into students of natural law.¹ Congress – through the Fugitive Slave Act – strengthened the right of American slave holders to claim their property a mere two years before appropriating government funds to send Perry into the Pacific. The same Northern industrialists who would ultimately benefit from the Fugitive Slave Law desired more trade routes across the Pacific, which required the opening of Japan (Feifer).

Even before these events American slavery informed Perry's present in direct and indirect ways. Perry's flagship, *USS Mississippi*, could only be named because of two

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law" (1854).

expansions of US territory. First, the Treaty of Paris in 1783 and later, the Louisiana Purchase, America's land grab deal with the French in 1803. The events that followed the Louisiana Purchase: the opening of Key West, the Mexican American War and the later opening of Japan were outgrowths of this crucial land deal and all instances of what John O' Sullivan would call "Manifest Destiny." Abel Upshur was the Secretary of the Navy during Perry's service and believed in the right of Americans to hold human beings as property. Rather ironically, Upshur also controlled the American Navy's role in the African Squadron. Not only was Perry ordered to patrol the coast of Sierra Leone and Liberia looking for slavers but he was eventually ordered to shell the port city of Veracruz from the *USS Mississippi* in America's attempt to annex Texas. It was Upshur's secret dealings with US senators and the political representatives of the Texas territory that led to its annexation in 1844. And annexation was tied to expanding America's slave empire and adding more pro-slavery senate seats in Congress; a feat the Louisiana Purchase already – although not immediately – accomplished.

By the nineteenth century America thinkers and writers began to see the fate of the Pacific tied to America's own. As Wiley writes in Yankees in the Land of the Gods: Commodore Perry and the Opening of Japan, Perry strongly advocated American imperial expansion against British, French and Russian forces in the Pacific Basin, which for Perry was part of a necessary extension of white, Saxon domination on a global scale (Wiley, Perry 490). Even though Alfred Mahan would not publish The Influence of Seapower Upon History, 1660-1783 until almost forty years later, the economic and military rationale behind opening up Japan echoed Mahan's later conclusions about the power of the navy and the need for American global hegemony (Feifer 190). Perry's vision for American might in the world was fiscal, militaristic and also tied to the continued domination of the white race. So when this same ship anchored in

Tokyo Bay, Perry literally as well as symbolically extended the Mississippi – the symbolic Maginot Line of the Civil War – into the Pacific Basin. And with him came a foreshadowing of post-Civil War American imperial expansion and modernity; tied to the growth of state power as well as continued racial hegemony (Zakaria).

Perry's trips to Japan coincided with what literary critic F.O. Matthiessen would call the "American Renaissance." Matthiessen saw the literature written from 1850 through 1855 as a complex presentation of the country's burgeoning democratic sensibilities. Perry was not much of a writer but he published a three volume account of his travels to Japan: Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan (1856). He is not mentioned in Matthiessen's book yet Perry is as much an expression of our "first great age" as Emerson or Melville was. In fact, he asked Nathaniel Hawthorne for help writing his grand narrative, a request Hawthorne turned down. But Hawthorne did suggest another writer to Perry, Herman Melville. Matthiessen tells us that the writers of this period wrote about democracy in a "double sense" (xv). Perry and his ship were salient examples of this double sensed democracy. Just think, Perry might have asked Melville – the one writer who captured this "double sense" best – to write his narrative about crossing the Pacific and opening Japan. Melville, who had already written many novels about the Pacific and who was an ardent critic of autocratic power, in some ways had already written Perry's and America's narrative. Two years before Perry would lead an armada of naval vessels across the Pacific Melville published Moby Dick (1851). More than any other novel, Melville captured this double sense in the relationship between Ahab and Ishmael. The year Perry returned from Japan and asked Hawthorne for authorial assistance, Melville published "Benito Cereno" in his collection The Piazza Tales (1856). What Melville created in these works is a contiguous relationship between the slave, the ship and the sea. The

twin problems of race and power stand in the center of American modernity like “the Negro” did for Delano; Perry is a clear symbol of this inescapable fact.

Almost a century separated Perry and MacArthur. The two flags flying over the *USS Missouri* at end of World War II united them through this expanse of time. Perry’s *USS Mississippi* ran through MacArthur’s *USS Missouri* like the mighty Missouri River runs into the Mississippi. And at the end of World War II the shadow of the Mississippi has once again been cast into the Pacific. These two men were also united through the biological alchemy of kinship. The continuum established by blood and land is reinforced with the continuum forged by MacArthur’s willful act of memorializing. Waving in the winds high above the *Missouri* were not the wings of Walter Benjamin’s angel of history. Instead, it was the empty time the German thinker had warned about, the eternal picture of the past. Those two flags, fluttering high in the winds of Tokyo Bay in 1945 formed a bird of gold enameling fashioned into an artifice of American eternity. MacArthur, microphone in hand, brought Perry into the American present as a pristine, triumphant augur of the twentieth century. On September 2nd, 1945 Perry became a symbolic monument of America’s unageing intellect. Over the airways MacArthur sang to the men and women of America about the past, what is passing and what is to come.

MacArthur saw no “double sense” and neither had Perry ninety-two years earlier. That was left to Fredrick Douglass, Melville, Benjamin, Matthiessen and a merchant marine meaningfully named Ralph Waldo Ellison. In the early 1940s, Ellison would write a handful of short stories, “Flying Home,” “In a Strange Country”, “A Storm of Blizzard Proportions”, and “The Red Cross At Morriston, S.W.”, that captured this double sense in the midst of World War II. Ellison saw that America’s defense of democracy was not without its deep paradoxes. “In a Strange Country” captures this through the story of an African-American sailor named Parker,

who on shore leave in Wales is assaulted by American G.I.'s. The short story "Flying Home", about an African-American pilot who crashes his plane on a training mission, was the original seedbed for what Ellison thought would be his first novel. That book was to be the story of an African-American G.I., who by default becomes the commander of a group of white G.I.'s in a German prison camp.

Did the sea and his time in the Merchant Marines focus this double sense in Ellison? Beside Melville, who cast the sublime drama of American democracy on board the *Pequod* and the *San Dominick*, Mark Twain staged a similar drama on a body of water; this time on a raft floating along the mighty Mississippi. And so did T.S. Eliot. It was not on the Mississippi that we find in Eliot, although that river was just as important to him since he, like Twain, was born in Missouri. At the end of "The Waste Land" it is a boatman on the River Styx, which functions in a double sense. The potential rebirth of Eliot's poetic consciousness occurs on the precipice of its symbolic death. Ellison himself summons the most potent image of the sea and ship in his 1949 essay "The Shadow and the Act": the slave ship (304). Indeed, it was the vast drama of war and sea, the journey of the ship of state and the centrality racism had in all of it that enthralled Ellison's imagination after World War II.

The paradoxes that existed during Perry's time, which pushed the United States towards Civil War, still existed in Ellison's present. In the interim the institution of slavery had been dismantled but "the Negro Problem", as Senator William Campbell Bruce termed it, emerged as the defining American conundrum. A hostile critic to emancipation, Bruce argues in his 1891 tract "The Negro Problem" for the continued, willful separation of the races despite equality in the face of the law. Bruce concludes that the Negro problem is ultimately a cipher for a broader problematic. He writes that:

...when the Republican party is in power, he [African-Americans] not only remains a Negro but becomes the supple instrument of centralizing encroachments upon local autonomy, and therefore, proportionally the more obnoxious to the white race; lamentable to the white race, because Republican rule plants a Dublin Castle in the South, elevates to the local federal offices the most ignorant and irresponsible members of her population, damps hope, disorders industry, involves every Southern State in anxiety and turmoil, and distills blistering dews upon every olive branch that one section holds out to the other (Bruce).

Like Alexander H. Stephens and other post-Reconstruction senators Bruce viewed the Negro problem as testing the limits of governmental power. He invokes an interesting historical allusion in the Dublin Castle, which was the symbolic seat of Norman Conquest and British imperial rule in Ireland. Like many southern senators Bruce felt like the Civil War and Reconstruction were examples of the federal government acting imperially. By extension Bruce also suggests that the Negro simultaneously functions as an instrument of this imperialism since it is the cipher through which this power is expressed.

As early as “Study of the Negro Problems” (1898), W.E.B. Dubois understood the instrumental use of the Negro problem as a legitimization of white domination after Reconstruction, an idea he would later refine in “Reconstruction and Its Benefits” (1901) and that would lead him to rethink the epistemological task of sociological inquiry in his

underappreciated essay “Sociology Hesitant” (1905). As Ronald Judy tells us in “On W. E. B. Du Bois and Hyperbolic Thinking”, it is in “Sociology Hesitant” that Dubois sought to redirect contemporary inquires into the Negro Problem. Instead of Positivism, Dubois sought to “describe, to make explicit and analyze, that which remains ‘unknowable,’” which for Dubois was the potentiality of human intelligence and imagination (Judy 35).

The argument that “the Negro” was an instrument for “centralizing” the encroachments of the State was just as strong in 1945 as it was in 1891. It would be only eight years later that this fact would be on display in Topeka, Kansas and Little Rock, Arkansas. During the Cold War “the Negro Problem” presented another reason for governmental interest. As Mary Dudziak explains in her book Cold War Civil Rights, the “Negro Problem” gained international stature during the Cold War. America’s involvement in World War II, which was against regimes built upon state sponsored racism, was seen as a paradox given the persistence of Jim Crow segregation and lynching in the United States.

As the Cold War set in, Dudziak tells us that there was significant federal interest in remedying racism, since the American government knew Soviet propaganda played upon this very paradox. When the United States did use countermeasures against such propaganda it was most often done within the sphere of culture. Many recent books have highlighted these concerns: Frances Saunders’ The Cultural Cold War: the CIA and the World of Arts and Letters (2003) and Gil Scott Smith’s The Politics of Apolitical Culture: The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA & Post-War American Hegemony (2001). Peter Coleman’s The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle of the Mind of Post War Europe (1989) was one of the first books to elaborate a history of this institution after the outrage (symbolized in Christopher Lasch’s The Agony of the American Left (1969)) accompanying the

CCF's outing in the pages of The Saturday Evening Post and Ramparts in 1967. Saunders and Smith document how the CIA materially supported the creation of American literary and artistic culture during the Cold War. Both suggest that the complex, seemingly "apolitical" nature of visual and literary modernism was used in the most thoroughly ideological ways. Saunder's book in particular highlights the role African-American artists – some consciously some not – had in this hegemony. Ralph Ellison himself was a member of the Congress of Cultural Freedom and participated in many other institutions and journals later found to be funded by the CIA and the American State Department, including the Salzburg Seminar for American Studies.

My study draws upon Ralph Ellison's work to study the intricacies of American hegemony during the Cold War. In particular I am interested in the relationship that literature and race within this hegemony. The fundamental question I ask is: What role does Ellison's "new American humanism" – and the Negro at its center – play in this hegemony? If Ellison, like Dubois, was trying to move our understanding of the Negro away from the sociological and "bio-political", then in what ways did Ellison's imagination respond to this hegemony and what can it teach us now? The funding of literary and academic periodicals, art festivals, fellowships and other institutions of knowledge by the CIA and State Department during the Cold War is a chapter of American intellectual life that shaped Ellison's world as well as those of his contemporaries. And through exhaustive research in Ralph Ellison's Papers at the Library of Congress, I contextualize Ellison's call for a "new American humanism" within this atmosphere. In particular I look at Cold War American debates over literary criticism, Modernism, sociological method, and finally United States political and cultural history in order to understand the Ellison elaborated this "new American humanism." My study begins in the at the end of World War II and ends in 1978, roughly ten years after the exposure of the Congress for

Cultural Freedom and at the moment when Ellison's works are on the cusp of academic canonization.

Aside from Saunder's and Smith's books, which directly address the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the books written about American Cold War culture are legion. In recent years studies focusing on specific authors and their relationship to the Cold War have emerged. Here D. Quentin Miller's John Updike and the Cold War: Drawing the Iron Curtain (2002), Lawrence H. Schwartz's Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Literary Criticism (1988) and Jon Lance Bacon's Flannery O' Connor and Cold War Culture (1994) are important works to note. Since the 1990s, scholarship written by "New Americanists" like Donald Pease, William Spanos, Robyn Wiegman, Gayle Wald and others have simultaneously exposed the Cold War ideological underpinnings of "American Studies" and suggested that we approach American literature and culture during that period in a more internationalist context.

Most of these works – as dazzling as they are – often ignore the fraught relationship African-American intellectuals and writers had to Cold War culture beyond the familiar binary of complicity or opposition. In other words, the towering intellect of a F.O. Matthiessen, and Lionel Trilling or the works of a Mary McCarthy or Flannery O' Connor seem to warrant subtlety but not their African-American counterparts like Zora Neale Hurston, Chester Himes, Ann Petry, George Schuyler and of course Ralph Ellison. In the past eight years there has been scholarly interest in putting American civil rights and racial politics in a broader, global perspective. Azza Salama Layton's International Politics and Civil Rights Policies in the United States, 1941-1960 (2000), Carol Anderson's Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955 (2003), Thomas Borstelmann's The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena (2003), and Mary

Dudziak's Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy (2002) all explore the intersection of American Cold War foreign policy and the civil rights movement.

The scholarly impulse to imbricate questions of race into broader understandings of American foreign policy and American projections of power has not been as strong in African-American literary and cultural studies as it has in the social sciences, history and related humanities fields. This is not to say that somehow the artists, scholars and intellectuals that contributed to African-American Studies were unconscious of their Cold War “consensus” environment. Alan Nadel's work is typical of the literary criticism and cultural studies work focused on race in the Cold War. Nadel's work is invested in the question of identity and culture as a site of struggle against racial hegemony. The Cold War provides a backdrop for many of Nadel's foray into these questions (Containment Culture: American Narrative, Postmodernism and the Atomic Age (1995) as well as his most recent book Television in Black-and-White America: Race and National Identity (2005)) since the impulse towards conformity during this era often times manifested itself in the guise of “whiteness” (Nadel). Nadel's work of literary criticism is mirrored in the field of history by Robin D.G. Kelly, whose many books – including his last one Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination (2002) – gives a diasporic, albeit Marxist, vision to Cold War African-American struggles against racial hegemony.

The scholarship surrounding Ralph Ellison's work intersects within these overlapping areas. And from the beginning Invisible Man was read within the ideological crosscurrents of the Cold War, whether it was Irving Howe questioning Ellison's “realism”, the condemnation of the novel by J. Saunders Redding and most other African-American literary critics or its immediate embrace by the New York literary establishment. Yet because of the politics of discipline formation Ellison's work was not always read within this complex historical

framework. Charting these politics means thinking about Ellison's work and its relationship to the foundations of African-American and American literary criticism. Critics like Ihab Hassan read Ellison within retellings of American literary tradition as well as within what Thomas Schaub called the "new Liberalism", which repackaged Popular Front Modernism in the service of Cold War consensus.² Both Redding's and John Oliver Killen's view of the novel in the 1950s also persisted into 1960s and 1970s Black Nationalism. Addison Gayle and Amiri Baraka viewed Ellison's avant-garde experimentation as a rejection of the black populist expression, a view that Raymond Mazurek suggests owes to the continued modes of romantic modes of Marxism (Mazurek).

Larry Neal's essay, "Ellison's Zoot Suit" (1974) as well as Robert O Meally's pioneering work The Craft of Ralph Ellison (1980) moved away from the strident rejections of Ellison's works – especially his criticism – and instead focused on Ellison's conscious use of "vernacular" modes of expression. The emergence of African-American vernacular literary criticism in the 1970s was in part a response to the heavily sociological and materialist readings by Black Studies scholars. As Christen Thomsen writes in "Inventing and Controlling the Vernacular", the vernacular turn shares its parallel with the foundations of American Studies and in particular Leo Marx's foundational 1958 essay "The Vernacular Tradition in American Literature" as well as the work of critic Stanley Edgar Hyman (Thomsen). Just as Marx's essay was part of the vital center tradition of new liberalism and a certain anxiety about American "modernization", Madhu Dubey suggests that the work of African-American critics like Robert Stepto, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Houston Baker and others expresses a parallel resistance rooted in a moral critique of the

² See Ihab Hassan's Radical Innocence Studies in the Contemporary Novel (1961) and Richard Chase's The American Novel and Its Tradition (1957). Ellison does not appear in Chase's work but the romantic tradition Chase traces is one Ellison is immersed in.

urbanizing ethos of the 1970s (Dubey). Where Marx staged the confrontation of black and white characters as the genesis of the vernacular in American literature, this new version of the vernacular posits a confrontation between blacks and their own folk past. And it is out of this reintroduction to the jazz, blues and black idiomatic expression and dialect language that the origins of African-American literary expression are found. As Ronald Judy demonstrates in (Dis) Forming the American Canon, this critical direction was rooted in the competing impulses constituting Black Studies as a field of knowledge (Judy 10, 61), which by the late 1970s was beginning to move towards professionalization (Judy 3).

Ralph Ellison's work as a fiction writer and critic was crucial to this new, professionalized version of African-American literary criticism (Thomsen, Warren, Judy). His celebration of the "vernacular" component of American culture was used strategically to celebrate an eclectic, non-essentialist version of African-American literary expression yet elaborate an authentic, autonomous African-American literary canon (Thomsen, Judy). It also allowed the use of emergent Structuralist as well as Post-Structuralist methods of interpretation, which was crucial in legitimating African-American literary studies as a profession (Judy). It is the former impulse – a celebration of an eclectic American modernism – that defines the work of Alan Nadel, John Callahan, Harold Bloom and others.³

These two vectors of criticism have defined the field of Ellison Studies throughout the 1980s and 90s. In 1995, one year after Ralph Ellison's death, the Modern Library published a complete edition of Ellison's essays and other writings. The insightful essays contained in this volume led New York Times book critic Richard Bernstein to say that Ellison had regrettably

³ See Alan Nadel's Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon (1991), John Callahan's "Introductions" to Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison (1995), Flying Home and Other Stories (1998), Juneteenth (1999), In The African-American Grain: Call and Response in Twentieth Century Black Fiction (2001) and Harold Bloom's Ralph Ellison (1986).

“faded from the public mind, occupying what might be called a highly respected position on the sidelines of the general consciousness” (NY Times 1995). Times have changed since Bernstein lamented Ellison’s irrelevance. I think it is safe to say we are in the midst of an Ellison revival. In 1995, Bernstein thought Ellison had faded from the public mind because he was “integrationist in his very marrow and in these times of intense identity politics and multiculturalism that puts him outside the contemporary trendy mainstream” (Bernstein).

Bernstein’s invocation of what is commonly known as the “Culture Wars” does weigh heavily in more recent receptions of Ellison. The publication of his collected essays in 1995 helped focus attention on the vast critical and intellectual work Ellison had published since the 1940s. This was followed by the publication of Flying Home and Other Stories (1998) and Juneteenth in 1999. Ellison’s long awaited second novel stoked incredible interest. But the handling of Ellison’s 2000 pages of manuscript by John Callahan, the executor of the author’s literary estate, was met mostly with disappointment. Juneteenth’s publication elicited groans from many. The Trotskyite turned conservative Norman Podhoretz titled his review of the novel “What Happened to Ralph Ellison.”

Despite the ideological punditry of Podhoretz’s review, his question is quite apt. Podhoretz sees Ellison, who appeared to have no literary antecedent in Invisible Man, as haunted by the overwhelming influence of William Faulkner in Juneteenth. Given what Raymond Mazurek sees as Callahan’s purposeful sanitation of Ellison’s ties to the Popular Front, perhaps the Faulknerian spirit haunting Juneteenth is more than just stylistic. Lawrence Schwartz has argued that Faulkner’s legacy was in part manufactured by Cold War political priorities and perhaps the same could be said about Ellison’s posthumous consumption? If Ellison’s death happened during the height of “identity politics and multiculturalism”, Ellison’s reemergence has

happened during what Michael Milner calls the era of “post-post-Identity” politics in the academy, which he describes as a profession wide “sense of exhaustion around the whole project of identity” (Milner). This professional exhaustion – akin to Barth’s exhaustion with literature during the 1960s – has led to open skepticism of identity’s value for literary and cultural study. In the intellectual mainstream it has been characterized by contemporary attacks on Post-Structuralist theory, African-American cultural studies and identitarian discourses by neo-conservatives and others invested in dismantling certain American intellectual traditions of critique.

We can see these post-post identity battles being fought around Ellison’s legacy. For instance Houston Baker reversed his stance on Ellison since the 1980s. In his 1999 essay “Failed Prophet and Falling Stock: Why Ralph Ellison Was Never Avant-Garde” Baker allies Ellison’s Invisible Man with the “end of ideology” thought of Daniel Bell and the conservatism of T.S. Eliot. Jerry Gafio Watts’ Heroism and The Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics and Afro-American Intellectual Life (1994) was published the same year that Ellison died and to a large extent rehashes the reading of Ellison offered by Marxist critics of Ellison – that he was a mandarin, bourgeois intellectual. Watts’ version of Ellison is severely restricted since he treats the author as a political philosopher not as a fiction writer or literary critic. The most recent demythologizing effort was Arnold Rampersad’s recent biography Ralph Ellison: A Biography, by far the most comprehensive effort at assessing Ellison’s legacy since Lawrence Jackson’s Emergence of Genius (2002), In Rampersad’s book, Ellison is a failed race man in part because he was enamored by his own gilded status and willfully distanced himself from the political struggles of African-Americans.

For a generation of African-American literary critics, particularly those who were so foundational to the field, the reassessment of Ellison's life comes off as chastising a lost black genius. They also stand in stark contrast to the other vector of recent, posthumous Ellison reassessment. Ellison's dogged resistance to categorical thought has led critics like Ross Posnock, Walter Benn Michaels and Kenneth Warren to use Ellison as a wedge against what they would read as the implicit identitarian politics found in the above critics. While Posnock and Benn Michaels read Ellison (and Dubois) as heralds for pragmatic neo-liberal anti-racism, Warren reads him against the romantic modes of professionalized philology of Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Houston Baker.

Warren's monograph So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism furthers the argument he began in his 2000 essay "The End(s) of African-American Studies." In this earlier essay he calls the attempts of literary critics to diagnose social problems through literary analysis "hubris" (Warren 653). Politics should be left to the institutions of civil society not critics or intellectuals. In So Black and Blue Ellison becomes the figure through which Warren reads the "cultural turn" in African-American and American studies as a turn away from what he calls "direct political action." The very nature of African-American literary criticism, despite its altruism, does not nor cannot precipitate change in lived material circumstances. Despite the power of his argument what stand's in for African-American literary criticism is a specious, antiquated version of it. While Gates, Baker and others are the most important figures in African-American literary criticism they are presented as the only figures. What Warren creates is the boogeyman of identitarian politics that spends its midnight hours sitting on the chest of every neo-conservative. In his book, Warren – like Benn Michaels and Posnock – never asks broader questions about these traditions of criticism nor whether they are still the dominant.

More importantly, Warren ignores the question of power in favor of a return to logic, common sense and pragmatics within criticism and politics alike.

Out of all of the posthumous assessments of Ellison's work it was John Wright's Shadowing Ralph Ellison (2006), the collection of essays edited by Jonathan Arac and Ronald Judy for Boundary 2 (2002), as well as the works of Lawrence Jackson, James Smethhurst and others that have attended to the long span and deep interchange Ellison had with writers and critics within the interwar and Cold War period. Smethhurst's work in particular has focused on African-American artists on the Left and Jackson's work has been more akin to literary history and not criticism.⁴ Jonathan Arac's discussion of Ralph Ellison in his book Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time is one of the places where African-American intellectual production is contextualized within the complexities of the Cold War. And Ronald Judy's opening remarks for the special issue of Boundary 2 suggest Ellison's import for thinking the "formation of American intelligence in the post-war period" (Judy 1).

Along with these above writers, recent books have sought to understand the nexus between race and the Cold War in new and innovative ways. Penny M Von Eschen's Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War (2006), looks at the complex role Louis Armstrong played in Cold War American hegemony and represents recent work that takes a different approach to African-American artists, writers and intellectuals. In Black Fascisms: African-American Literature and Culture Between the Wars (2007) Mark Christian Thompson suggests that we have overvalued the presence of left progressivism in many African-American

⁴ Here I am thinking of James Smethhurst's The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s (2005) as well as his "Something Warmly, Infuriatingly Feminine': Gender, Sexuality, and The Work of Ralph Ellison" and of course Lawrence Jackson's Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius (2002) as well as his "'Ralph Ellison's Integrationist Politics" (2003).

writers and intellectuals. Michael Soto's The Modernist Nation: Generation, Renaissance and American Literature (2004), Manuel Martinez's Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomás Rivera (2003) and Brent Hayes Edwards' The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism (2004) force us to rethink the relationship between the interwar and Cold War period, especially when we put Black diasporic intellectuals into this context. Oscar Williams' biography George Schuyler: A Black Conservative can be counted in this category since much of the biography discusses Schulyer's reactionary politics within the context of the Cold War.

What these more recent works reveal is the dynamic nature of American power in the midst of Cold War civil rights discourses. "The Negro Problem" poses much more than a moral conundrum or an academic exercise but – as Ronald Judy suggests – the problem of "governability" and the extension of state power into civil society. This point was not lost on Antonio Gramsci who in his famous entry on "Intellectuals" ponders whether American Negroes will become eventual tools of twentieth century American hegemony on the African continent. As we have already seen this was already anticipated by both W.E.B. Dubois and William Campbell Bruce's articulation of the Negro problem. These works force us to think the "Negro Problem" in a much more dynamic way. Each attempt at solving returns us to this problem of "governability."

Ellison belongs to a generation of African-American artists and intellectuals who embody the complex ways Cold War anti-communist ideology mixed with an emergent post-war critique of categorical racialist thought. Ralph Ellison was greatly influenced by the iconoclastic, internationalist nature of this interwar generation but it cannot be said that he took the way of Thompson's "black fascism", Schuyler's conservatism or Wright's socialism. Instead, Ellison

found great affinities to what would be called the “vital center” during Cold War; an affinity that would explain his close – if antagonistic – relationship to people like Stanley Edgar Hyman, Lionel Trilling, Hannah Arendt, Irving Howe, Robert Penn Warren and many others.

Because of this it is safe to say that Ellison – more than Richard Wright or Langston Hughes – met with a level of public success very few African-American intellectuals enjoyed during the Cold War. Despite his contrarian stance towards the majority of this “center” – Ellison enjoyed unprecedented access to the institutions of Cold War literary and academic culture; institutions that were closely watched and at times influenced by the American State. In “The Ineluctability of American Empire” (2005), Paul Bove urges us to ruminate upon the logistical successes of American power as a way of accounting for what institutional and material forms this power takes (Bove). I invoke Bove’s assertion in order to draw attention to the fact that Ellison’s version of solving this problematic, his “new American humanism” is greatly informed by the centrist liberal discourses of his moment. By no means did Ellison’s humanism successfully solve “the Negro Problem” nor can his relationship to the center be easily translated into an example of such success. But we should ask why Ellison achieved institutional success during his moment as well as in our own. Since we understand the work of African-American intellectuals, artists and writers as against racial discrimination, is their work necessarily oppositional with regard to American global hegemony? How do we reconcile Ralph Ellison’s relationship to the State during the Cold War with the modernism lying behind his “new humanism?” What does it mean that Ellison’s modernism, which is intricately tied to his radically humanist, anti-racist, liberal politics, is also wrapped up in ideological battles waged by the American State during the Cold War? Thinking to our own times, how do we account for the

foundational if contentious place Ellison occupies in the discipline of American and African-American literary and cultural studies?

One way to approach the literary nature of Ellison's "new American humanism" is as another attempt to solve the "Negro Problem." And given the Cold War context it also presents a way for us to think the operations of hegemony within the sphere of American literary culture. I see Ellison's "new American humanism" as a revitalization of the Latin notion of *litterae humaniores* that draws heavily on post-Reconstruction American literature and philosophy. For Ellison, post-Reconstruction American artists and intellectuals were grappling with the country's primary quandary after the Civil War: an inability to reconcile America's progressive vision of humanism with the legacy left by chattel slavery and anti-black racism.

Like General McArthur, Ellison too was haunted by the nineteenth century. But were Ellison's meditations about this past "timely" like McArthur's monumentalizing approach to it? Or is his "new American humanism" an untimely endeavor, "critical" in Nietzsche's sense of how we should approach history? Either way, we should not be surprised that Ellison's meditation appears only one month after General McArthur closed the curtain on World War II. If the shadow of the *Mississippi* still haunts the end of World War II then Ellison seems to sense this in his book review "Beating That Boy." Published in The Nation in October of 1945, it is a review of his friend Bucklin Moon's anthology, Primer for White Folks (1945). Moon's anthology, Ellison tells us, "will be prized for the oblique light it throws upon an aspect of American writing which was not its immediate concern" (Ellison 147). As a way of further introducing my study I would like to suggest that Ellison's review also throws an oblique light on the roots of his new American humanism and the forces that influence it.

Perhaps there is no coincidence that Ellison, fresh from his duty as a Merchant Marine would refer to America's racial situation as an "irrational sea" upon which "Americans flounder like convoyed ships in a gale" (Ellison 145). As Ellison writes, his title, "Beating that Boy" is a euphemism for discussing what is commonly known as the "Negro problem" (145). The phrase also seems to be Ellison's indulgence in gallows humor. While it suggests an engagement with the topic of race relations in America "beating that boy" simultaneously suggests that the engagement is often a symbolically – if not – physically violent. Immediately Ellison's short story "Battle Royal" comes to mind, especially since the author was most likely writing that story right around the time he was drafting this book review.

Ellison's phrase is accurate in more ways than one. Moon's book comes at a time when this boy has come in for a beating once again. Returning black soldiers who had fought against fascism and black laborers who had contributed their labor force to wartime industry demanded an end to Jim Crow and equal rights as guaranteed by the constitution. So in a very literal Americans have come back from the war and are forced to return to the question of civil rights for African-Americans. Remedies for America's race problem did not come swiftly, so instead of clarifying the terms and concepts of democracy or recognizing the humanism of African-Americans, World War II has contributed to this tumult. Democracy, Ellison writes "is still discussed on an infantile level" and the Negro "discussed in pre-adult terms" (Ellison 145). Moon's book, like Ellison's essay is aimed at addressing the continued paradoxes that racism presents in post-World War II America. Ellison writes that the short stories, essays and other works in Moon's anthology bear upon "the tense period we have just entered" (Ellison 146). They are "the most democratically informed discussions of the racial situation to appear in print since Pearl Harbor" (146).

Moon felt the same paradoxes of democracy as Ellison, something that we can see in Moon's own novelistic endeavors. His social realist novel, The Darker Brother (1943) chronicled the difficulties of Northern life for African-Americans who migrated from Southern Florida. Like his acquaintance and sometime collaborator Zora Neale Hurston, Moon demythologized Northern migration and the idea that cities like New York were havens against racial prejudice. Moon does not end his novel with the sort of resignation found in Hurston but instead Moon has his novel's main character Ben vow to fight for America in WWII despite the injustices heaped upon him by his country: "We got tuh fight for what we got comin to us over here. We been waitin uh long time. We liable tuh get knots beat all over top uh our heads. We goin to get shoved around. But we got tuh keep fightin" (Moon 245).

As Lawrence Jackson writes in "Bucklin Moon and Thomas Sancton in the 1940s: Crusaders for the Racial Left," Moon – along with Sancton – predicted that African-American literature would go through a second renaissance after World War II (Jackson 83). His work as an editor at Doubleday during the 1940s was motivated by his desire to see this happen. Moon tells Negro Digest in 1946, "The unknown Negro writer has a better chance of book publication today than ever before, including the so-called Negro Renaissance of the twenties. Not only that, once his book is published the chances of it being successful are also better" (Moon 79). To back up this statement, Moon befriended and tried to publish the work of the best black writers of the 30s and 40s. Many of them he knew personally, including: Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Ann Petry, Chester Himes, James Baldwin, Owen Dodson, and Langston Hughes (Jackson 83).

It should be no surprise then that Moon's anthology included many of these figures and that Moon asked Ellison to write a review for his book. The New Republic gave Ellison his first exposure to a broad readership. Despite the laudatory nature of Ellison's opening remarks, he

did not like all that he read in Moon's anthology. Ellison felt that most of the fiction in the book - like American society itself - "cannot escape the blight of hypocrisy implicit in our social institutions" (Ellison 147). Many of the stories "mix appeals for fair play with double talk...."

Ellison never names names in his critique. Whether they are tales about the South, like in Richard Wright's autobiographical "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" and Sara Hardt's "Little White Girl" or the ironies and hypocrisy of the liberated north in Langston Hughes' "Slave on the Block", James T. Farrell's "For White Men Only" or Dorothy Parker's "Arrangement in Black and White" - many of the stories in Moon's anthology chronicle, with very little subtlety, the hard and fast borders created by the color line. In the introduction of Primer for White Folks Moon suggests that the time for subtlety is over. His book was written for the average American who "is disturbed by the rising racial tensions which he feels around him and by the paradox of white and Negro relationships in a democracy waging a war of liberation and equality" (Moon xi). Just as Moon's own fictional work is informed by social realist technique and proletarian naturalism, much of the fiction in his anthology reflects this, with the exception of writers like Dorothy Parker, whose witticism is in keeping with the traditions of satire stemming from Wodehouse and Mencken.

Perhaps it is the strong presence of social realism that Ellison is calling attention to when he suggests that most of the fiction in Moon's anthology are representative of post-depression American writers. James T. Farrell, who was part of the Trotskyite left, was a realist and one could see how Ellison's complaints that contemporary fiction was obsessed with "mere physical violence and pain and overemphasized "understatement" could be directed towards Farrell's contribution to Moon's anthology. That same complaint could be made about Richard Wright. It is important to recall Ellison's long standing criticisms of Wright and in particular, Wright's

adherence to proletariat naturalism. The same cannot be said of Hughes, who clearly embraced modernist literary techniques but in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” grounds the responsibility of African-American artists in a racialized, folk sensibility and aesthetic. While Hughes did not share Wright’s sense of art he certainly shared in his ideological politics – even splitting with the CPUSA during the 1940s. By distancing himself from Hughes – *the* towering figure of the Harlem Renaissance – and Wright, one has to wonder what kind of relationship Ellison had to this aesthetic moment?

It is “the absolute concept of “democracy” – the very one Moon thought imperiled during the 1940s – which Ellison says these authors are fearful of. He describes them as “circl[ing] above it...like planes being forced to earth in a fog” (Ellison 147).⁵ But more importantly, democracy is tied to another concept Ellison sees missing but fundamental to the writing of American fiction: humanism. Here, as Ellison writes, the boy comes in for a “bit of a beating.” He notes that these writers seem “concerned most often with patching up the merry-go-round-that-broke-down than with the projection of that oh-so-urgently-needed new American humanism” in their fiction (147). In a tongue-and-cheek, Demanian fashion Ellison suggests that the blindness these writers have towards this “new American humanism” is in fact an insight. Moon publishes Primer for White Folks at a time when the liberalism defined for some many decades by the Popular Front and championed under the banner of social realism or the dry wit

⁵ This image is in keeping with the wartime metaphors throughout Ellison’s review. And as I discuss in chapter two of my dissertation – the metaphor of war and in particular Civil War is something Ellison is continually fascinated by. It is interesting to note that this aeronautical metaphor can also be found in two of Ellison’s earlier works of fiction “A Party Down at the Square” and “In a Strange Country.” Both feature a very similar image – the downed aircraft – as a way to comment on the complexity of black/white relations in America. In “In a Strange Country” the aircraft metaphor is much more explicit since the story is about an African-American airman training for WWII. Where as in “A Party Down at the Square” an aircraft is literally forced to land in the midst of a lynching. Because of foggy conditions the pilot in Ellison’s story mistakes the fires of a lynch mob for a landing beacon. In “Strange Country” it is after being forced to the earth that the pilot finds some sense of racial and national belonging. “A Party” on the other hand presents this forced landing as a bit of irony since the lynching represents the most undemocratic spectacle of American national and racial sentiment.

of writer like Dorothy Parker has to contend with the New York Intellectuals, their critique of liberalism and a move towards centrist anti-communism. Judging from the list of authors Moon solicited for his anthology, Ellison's critique has much to do with this change in politics and the effect it had on his understanding of American literary tradition. Many of Moon's writers were central figures in New York's literary scene as well as the leftist politics of the Popular Front era. Upon his arrival in New York in 1936, it was Hughes and Wright that Ellison met. Through them Ellison became tangentially involved with the Communist Party of the America. Both encouraged his earliest experimentations with fiction writing through the CPA magazine The New Masses as well as the Federal Writers Project (Rampersad). In fact it was Wright and Hughes who began introducing Ellison to the prefaces of Henry James, the works of Zola, Malraux, Dostoyevsky and other writers who were important to the CPA and shaped Ellison's understanding of literary craft. And ultimately Hughes and Wright put Ellison in the orbit of publishers like Moon.

By the time he was commissioned to write a review for Moon's book Ellison had already begun to break from the techniques of proletariat naturalism and social realism marking his early stories. In 1944 he wrote "King of the Bingo Game", began writing "Invisible Man" (later renamed "Battle Royal") a short story that would form the cornerstone of his untitled novel in progress. Both of these stories demonstrated a shift in Ellison's literary experimentation. His Modernism was coming into the orbit of figures like Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Malraux, Kafka Steinbeck and Faulkner rather than Hemingway, Anderson and Wright. Even before this turn in his writing Ellison's letters to Wright during the late 1930s reveal that Ellison already detected a stagnating intellectual atmosphere within the CPUSA (Rampersad).

He was not alone in his dissatisfaction with the CPUSA. Like many African-American writers and intellectuals a sense of disillusionment crept in because of party wide changes occurring between the Sixth and Seventh World Congresses. In this ten year span, a more direct confrontation with the problem of anti-black racism in the United States was abandoned for coalition building against the rise of fascism in Europe. During his exchanges with Wright in the 1930s the CPA was splintering over Joseph Stalin's rise to power and the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The onset of World War II also created tension between CPUSA support for the war – something many African-Americans agreed with – and continued African-American dissatisfaction with Jim Crow segregation in American industry.

Running parallel to African-American dissatisfaction with the CPUSA was the resuscitation of Partisan Review in 1937, an event that had an equally important effect on Ellison's thinking. By breaking with the CPUSA, many of the writers involved with Partisan Review (including Alfred Kazin, Lionel Trilling, Mary McCarthy and others) embraced the stylistic and intellectual perspectives embodied in European modernism. It also served as a counter narrative to the anti-Modernist "cultural patrioteering" that emerged during the 1930s (Hemingway 30). As Alan Nadel, Ronald Judy, John S. Wright, Jonathan Arac and many others have shown we must understand Ellison's thinking in the midst of these events. Trilling and others associated with the Partisan Review embraced European modernism, literary formalism and a strong critique of liberalism. Even though Lionel Trilling's The Liberal Imagination would not be published until 1950 his novel, The Middle of the Journey appeared in 1947 and it is clear that Trilling's critical and aesthetic adherence to "negative capability" influenced Ellison's thinking. It could be said that in "Beating That Boy" Ellison agrees with Trilling that "not a single first-rate writer has emerged to deal with these ideas [liberalism], and the emotions

that are consonant with them, in a great literary way” (Trilling 94). For Ellison, it was the “Negro Problem” that had not yet been adequately represented in fiction. While Trilling stayed skeptical of politics behind the emergence of nationalist American literary criticism, Ellison was also attracted to the complex “patrioteering” of F.O. Matthiessen, Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford, drawing upon these figures despite the skepticism of this tradition he shared with the New York Intellectuals.

As was the case with the party internationally, the ideological changes that critics like the New York Intellectuals went through – which often entailed a critique of liberal attitudes about the Negro problem – mirrored a transformation in how the “Negro problem” was understood. The changing relationship the CPUSA had to anti-black racism was echoed albeit in a different fashion within the field of American literary criticism. The exclusion of black writers from Matthiessen’s American “renaissance” had as much to do with the conditions he set for inclusion as it did with a profound problem in American historicism of the time, as William Cain notes in F. O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism (1988). This observation in fact brings Cain to embrace Dubois as a critical and intellectual starting point (Cain). Not only was there an absence of acknowledged African-Americans in the American canon, but the dominant historicism of the time understood black emancipation as the reason why Reconstruction failed. Hence what is identified as the “renaissance” was followed by a period of decay and tragedy.⁶

These twin coincidences in part created the intellectual and aesthetic conditions Ellison is responding to. This historical period marks what Howard Brick in Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconciliation in the 1940s calls the defining ideological conundrum gripping the Left in America (Brick 22). For Ellison critics and

⁶ I elaborate this point extensively in the second chapter of my dissertation.

writers alike are unable to properly express the imbrications of racism, politics and aesthetics in America. While the attention New York Intellectuals gave to modernist European literature attended to the complex intertwining of alienation, experience and aesthetics, its attention to similar conditions in America for African-Americans – what Ellison called the “necessities of existence,” – are ignored. Ellison’s review in part chastises contemporary American writers for failing to resolve the “conflict in keeping with [their] democratic ideals” (Ellison 149).

Political failure finds its parallel in aesthetic ones. Written all over Ellison’s review is his eloquent outrage over this state of affairs. It would not be until the 1950s and 60s that Ellison would begin to critique the New York Intellectuals more forcefully. In 1945, Ellison aimed his sights at social realism and proletariat naturalism. Ellison’s sentiments echo Alfred Kazin’s thoughts at the conclusion of On Native Grounds. Before the 1940’s, Kazin detected a growing critique of the novel form, something Kazin felt sprung from social realism’s and proletariat naturalism’s inability to contend with the shifting nature of America’s social scene. As Kazin writes, much of the period’s proletarian writing did a better job of “identifying” than “comprehending” the social forces creating the American scene – something these writers owe to the journalist impulse that gripped a lot of American fiction (Kazin 487).

Ellison believed that American tradition could be reinvigorated and in fact he reclaims a new relationship to realism – a term he undoubtedly inherited from Hemingway. The influence of the New York Intellectuals and in particular Trilling also means that the “realism” Ellison desired sat between his overt rejection of social realism and embrace of experimental literary modernism. This much can be gleaned from his reply to a letter from psychiatrist Karl Menninger in 1947, who asked Ellison to describe the origins of his short story “Battle Royal.” Ellison responded that “for all the detailed description of the prose, the aim is not naturalism but

realism – a realism *dilated* to deal with the almost surreal state of our everyday American life” (Ellison, Rampersad, emphasis mine).

What is precisely meant by a *dilated* realism? Does Ellison literally want to “open” up realism and wrestle it from its literary association with the traditions of Zola or the social realists of the left? Perhaps this is why he separates it from “naturalism?” Dilation also has its roots in mathematics and physics. In both of these fields the term describes a feature of objects or laws that do not change if length scales (or energy scales) are multiplied by a common factor. One can imagine that Ellison, who finds himself in the midst of what Moon called the new Negro Renaissance, still finds the paradoxes of American democratic life that push the Negro the bottom of American life – including the way that life is presented in literature. It is no wonder then that the surreal for Ellison is the only way to describe African-American life. The energy of democracy as well as the legal, social and intellectual concepts by which we think human life has increased yet thinking about the Negro has for Ellison remained invariant.

Indeed, whoever can present this dilated realism and comprehend how the human can act in the midst of this “surreal state” is projecting a “new American humanism.” Ellison’s Trilling-like stance on the writers in Moon’s anthology tells us that he find no such writer in the pages of Primer for White Folks. In fact, he tells us as much. We are informed that the “most widely read authors of the between-wars period” are “conspicuously missing” from Moon’s anthology (147). He never tells us who is missing but given the subject matter one can imagine that William Faulkner’s absence is the most conspicuous. In “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity”, an essay Ellison would write one year later, he suggests that Faulkner brings into focus the relationship:

Between the Negro and contemporary writing...the social and the personal, the moral and the technical, the nineteenth-century emphasis upon morality and the modern accent upon personal myth. And on the strictly literary level Faulkner is prolific and complex enough to speak for those Southerners who are aggressively anti-Negro and for those younger writers who appear most sincerely interested in depicting the Negro as a rounded human being (97).

To Ellison, Faulkner connects us to Melville and Twain; both of whom bring us close to the “moral implications of the Negro” (97). Ellison draws the circle even tighter between Faulkner and Twain by comparing Malcolm Cowley’s advice to skip Lucas Beauchamp’s appearance in “The Bear” section of Go Down, Moses to Hemingway’s advice in The Green Hills of Africa that we skip the final section of Huckleberry Finn when Huck goes after Jim. In both Hemingway and Cowley’s criticism Ellison sees a continuation of the “moral problem” that emerged at the end of the nineteenth-century in America: the suppression of African-American humanity as a consequence of the Hayes-Tilden Compromise, which effectively ended the experiment of Reconstruction and restored white hegemony to the Southern United States.

For Ellison it is not Faulkner’s stature that would lend Moon’s anthology legitimacy but the kind of literary-historical continuity it would establish between the nineteenth century and post-World War II America. In “Beating That Boy” he writes:

...from 1776-1876 there was a conception of democracy current in this country that allowed the writer to identify himself with the Negro, and that had such an anthology been conceivable during the nineteenth century, it could have included

such writers as Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Mark Twain. For slavery (it was not termed a “Negro problem” then) was a vital issue in the American consciousness, symbolic of the condition of Man, and a valid aspect of the writer’s reality. Only after Emancipation and the return of the Southern ruling class to power in the counterrevolution of 1876 was the Negro issue pushed into the underground of the American consciousness and ignored (148).

This group of authors should be familiar. Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne and Melville are the five writers at the center of Matthiessen’s American Renaissance; a book published a mere four years before Ellison writes his review. The one addition to Matthiessen’s group is Mark Twain, who has a small, elusive but anticipatory presence in Matthiessen’s study. Twain’s appearance in this passage very much owes to the echoes of the Popular Front as it does with the oncoming realities of the Cold War. As Jonathan Arac writes in Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target: The Function of Criticism in Our Time, Twain’s most famous work was lauded for very different reasons after World War II. During the 1930s, critics like Bernard DeVoto used Twain’s work in a “nationalist celebration of the empire of democracy” (Arac 112). As the chill of the Cold War set in Huck became an “isolated, alienated individual” in the hand of critics like Trilling, Leo Marx and T.S. Eliot for whom Huck was a “vagabond” much like Eliot himself (ibid, Eliot). Even Faulkner’s ghostly presence – one that becomes flesh in later Ellison reviews – suggests Ellison’s affinities to Trilling and the New York Intellectuals (Arac). Tethering Twain and Faulkner (who is absent in “Beating That Boy”) to Matthiessen is a complex operation. It joins the new liberalist realities of the emergent post-War period to a figure like Matthiessen, whose leftist political position and sexual orientation would be left outside the centrist and

masculine politics of the Cold War. It also remarks on the absence of “the Negro” in Matthiessen’s work, something that would take more contemporary critics like Hortense Spillers, Eric Sundquist, Alan Nadel, Ronald Judy and the aforementioned William Cain to point out.⁷ That Ellison would join Matthiessen to this new reality necessitates a question about motive. Is Matthiessen a figure Ellison wants to channel? Or does Ellison integrate him into a new state of affairs after World War II?

It is Faulkner who Ellison tells us in “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” was “seeking the nature of man.” Faulkner’s act of recognizing Negro humanity has been so tabooed in the south “that the white Southerner is apt to associate any form of personal rebellion with the Negro. So that for the Southern artist the Negro becomes a symbol of his personal rebellion, his guilt and his repression of it” (98). In his private letters, Faulkner reiterates this but with a twist. After winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in part for his novel Intruder in the Dust (1947) he suggests that his forays into black/white relationships in the south were an inclusive affair that had nothing to do with the North. So despite what Ellison calls Faulkner’s rebellion it is one that is hyper regionalized and individualized.

Ellison reminds us we turn to Faulkner “for that continuity of moral purpose which made for the greatness of our classics”. And while Ellison finds this purpose in Moon’s book project it is still lacking the proper historical continuity. As I have suggested above, this continuity with “our classics” has as much to do with the “Negro problem” in the past as it does with a more lateral relationship with certain emergent Cold War liberal politics as well as the new field of

⁷ Here I am thinking of Hortense Spiller’s “Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed” (1989), Eric Sunquist’s, To Wake the Nations: Race and the Making of American Literature. (1993), Alan Nadel’s aforementioned Invisible Criticism, Ronald Judy’s (Dis) forming the American Canon and William Cain’s F.O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism (1988).

American studies. Matthiessen's politics might not overtly inform Ellison by 1944 but where Matthiessen's influence can be felt it is in Ellison's interest in literary language and form.

At the beginning of American Renaissance, Matthiessen informs his readers that all of the themes he has developed in his book are approached:

“through attention to the writers' use of their own tools, their diction and rhetoric, and to what they could make with them. An artist's use of language is the most sensitive index to cultural history, since a man can articulate only what he is, and what he has been made by the society of which he is a willing or an unwilling part” (Matthiessen xv).

Matthiessen's scrupulous attention to the modern relationships among language, culture and history can be traced to his invocation of Francesco De Sanctis' History of Italian Literature (1871). Matthiessen's own approach to American literature drew from the lessons he learned from De Sanctis; that criticism could be intimately tied to the process of creating a new political and cultural reality. Indeed Sanctis, who was exiled after the first failed Neapolitan Risorgimento in 1848, is a powerful if melancholic figure for Matthiessen to inaugurate his methodological approach to literary history. It suggests Matthiessen's own complicated relationship to doing nationalist literary study as well as the complex politics of the Interwar period.

Perhaps it was with this complexity in mind that Matthiessen was attracted to De Sanctis' concept of form, which was: “nothing else than the entire resolution of the intellectual, sentimental, and emotional material into the concrete reality of the poetic image and word, which alone has aesthetic value” (De Sanctis quoted in Matthiessen xii). We see this sentiment in

Matthiessen's aforementioned understanding of language as being "the most sensitive index to cultural history." If Dante is the father of Italian literature then so can Emerson be the progenitor of an American tradition. But in the same way that Dante is just as much a figure of the inherently comparative, international conception of Italian literature Matthiessen uses America's own "renaissance" to prove the precise same thing (Arac). Matthiessen's impulse towards the comparative and international aspect of literary language can be found in his "Acknowledgements" page where both H.L. Mencken's The American Language (1919) and Constance Rourke's American Humor: A Study of the National Character (1931) appear as well as his other references to Andre Malraux, Balzac and Shakespeare.

My rather long excurses back to American Renaissance is to suggest that Ellison's elusive reference to Matthiessen and Faulkner in "Beating That Boy" illuminates the stake and politics of Ellison's "new American humanism" at the dawn of the Cold War. Faulkner functions as Ellison's "sensitive index." The language his works speak provides a proper aesthetic model and conceptual model through which a roadmap of American literary tradition can be elaborated. He reminds the reader of the continuity between ethics and literary technique; politics and history. And with this Ellison situates Faulkner within the tradition of Twain and other writers of the nineteenth century. The most radical element of Ellison's feat is that he centralizes the "Negro" as the figural augur of a "new American humanism." Sitting at the intersection between these traditions, Ellison's humanism has the potential to shift the Eurocentric, Western construction of humanity. At the same time that Ellison seems to be positing a kind of classical Renaissance ideal of *humanitas*, founded upon a critical mass of classical works (both visible and invisible in "Beating That Boy") Ellison's keen sense of historicity suggests that what is equally at stake is a history of thought and the way in which our

knowledge of the human is organized in the United States – and that key to understanding this organization is a reassessment of Reconstruction and its aftermath. In its emphasis on historicity Ellison’s “new American humanism” breaks from the Christian sensibilities of the “New Humanism” of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More. Knowing the political and ideological tensions already defining his present, the question I explore in the four chapters of my dissertation is: How does this “new American humanism” play itself out in Ellison’s subsequent work?

In the first chapter, “Ellison’s ‘Battle Royal’: An Allegory of Modernism’s Negro Problem?” I read Invisible Man as an imaginative anticipation of the intellectual crisis defining American Cold War literary criticism. That crisis arose from a critical blindness inherited from interwar anti-fascist literary criticism. Despite the roots of this criticism in “American Renaissance” and Popular Front idealism, neither properly theorized the “Negro Problem” as a substantial complication of America’s own democratic sentiment. I read Ralph Ellison’s early essays and eventually Invisible Man as anticipating critics like Irving Howe, who believed that African-American literature could not attain the proper aesthetic distance to engage in the anti-fascist, democratic work of modernist literature.

To end this chapter I focus on the short story and novelistic portrayal of “The Battle Royal.” Instead of political or social allegory, I argue that Ellison is invested in presenting what he calls “the complex ambiguity of the human” through a *figura* of the human, which in the story is contained in the narrator’s self-identification as a “nigger-boy.” And here I will rely on Erich Auerbach’s discussion of the difference between allegory and figuration in Scenes from the Drama of European Literature and Mimesis. That Ellison chose to have this figure emerge in a nightmare is a symbolic testament to his investment in modernism. Further it represents a

particular version of modernism that distinguishes him from contemporaries like Ernest Hemingway and Richard Wright.

Coming on the heels of his declaration of a “new American Humanism”, it is apparent that “the Negro” and modernism have a central role in the humanism Ellison desires. After winning the National Book Award for Invisible Man, Ellison would travel to Austria in 1954 and teach in the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies. Established in 1947 by the Harvard University Council, its mission was to expose Central European students to American culture. At some point, the U.S. Army and the State Department, in its effort to create “ideological conformity,” exerted veto power over who could and could not be invited to teach at the Seminar (Wagnleitner).

Once there, Ellison would revisit many of these concerns in a class called "The Role of the Novel in Creating the American Experience." And while there is no doubt Ellison would present the American Negro in all its complexity, one wonders to what end Ellison’s ideas were becoming enmeshed in the complex ideological operations of America’s Cold War. All of this raises the question: Is Ellison’s “Negro” an instance of the State’s logistical success within the realm of culture? Does it evade it? Or is the truth more uncertain than this binary allows?

These questions guide the second chapter of my dissertation, “Ellison in Exile: ‘Telling It Like It Is, Baby’ and The Problem of Renaissance.” Here I traces the roots of Ralph Ellison’s “Tell It Like It Is, Baby” (1965) to the author’s participation in the American Seminar in Salzburg, which occurred under the auspices of the State Department in 1954. In this chapter, I read Ellison’s essay “Tell It Like It Is, Baby” as an allegorical staging of America’s historical and literary continuity with the “renaissance” past through the figure of Hamlet. As my reading

of Ellison's essay will show, placing America in this past proves as tenuous for post-Civil War America as it does of America in 1965.

In Ellison's version of Hamlet, Lincoln occupies the role of the King of Denmark and Ellison's dream-self, a "literate-slave" is an orphaned Hamlet. Lincoln and Hamlet represent America's connection to what F.O. Matthiessen conceptualizes as the "rebirth" of democratic sentiment. In "Tell It Like It Is, Baby," Ellison expresses his pessimism about this figure's capability to do such a thing. Ellison's pessimism makes "Tell It Like It Is, Baby," a counter narrative to F.O. Matthiessen's version of America's literary continuity with the humanistic past. Matthiessen, like Emerson before him invokes Hamlet as a tragic figure to establish this continuity in American Renaissance. Replacing Hamlet with a "literate slave," the essay reveals Ellison's attempt to infuse the "tortuous ambiguity" of the Civil War into Matthiessen's version of American literary traditions and their historic relationship to Renaissance Humanism.

Through archival research in Ralph Ellison's Papers at the Library of Congress, I show that Ellison began writing this counter-narrative in 1954, a year before he began writing the essay at the American Academy in Rome and 10 years before "Tell It Like It Is, Baby" is published. By looking through the syllabi and lecture notes from a course he taught as part of the Salzburg Seminar in America Studies in Austria, we can see the continuity of thought linking Ellison's revision of Matthiessen's "American Renaissance" to the ideas about American literary tradition he takes up in "Tell It Like It Is Baby."

As the Cold War and Civil Rights era reached their crescendo, Ellison's attachment to the Gilded Age ossified. By the late 60s, it took the romantic form of aesthetic and political conservatism. This process is part of his participation in what Francis Saunders called the

“Cultural Cold War” against communism. For many – including Ellison – this participation made their aesthetic investment in modernism commensurate with their anti-communist ideology. I explore this nexus in the second half of my dissertation.

Chapter Three “Arendt and Ellison Speak for the Negro” is where I read Ralph Ellison critique of Hannah Arendt in Who Speaks for the Negro (1965) and other writings as a broader indictment of Arendt’s reliance upon Kant’s *sensus communis*, especially as she applies Kant’s idea to understanding American political traditions. I use “Reflections on Little Rock” as an occasion to discuss Hannah Arendt’s conceptualization of American political traditions. Arendt’s “Reflections” was the beginning of a three year study of American political culture that culminated in On Revolution in 1961. Her suggestion that desegregation is a deviation from America’s own political “common sense” at the beginning of “Reflections on Little Rock” reveals her nascent interpretations of America’s foundational political ideas. As I will show, Arendt’s interpretation of American “common sense” is linked to her misreading of Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on Virginia. This misreading began in The Origins of Totalitarianism and extends through “Reflections on Little Rock” and On Revolution. In both of these works Arendt suggests that racism in America is a social concern not one that suggest a problem with American political thought. By mistaking anti-black racism as a social instead of a political problem, I suggest that Arendt cannot properly interpret the “common sense” of America’s political traditions.

In the second part of this chapter I draw attention to Ellison’s description of the events at Little Rock, and its connection to Arendt’s misunderstanding of American “common sense”. I read Ellison’s response as a critique of Arendt’s reliance upon Kant’s *sensus communis* to

conceptualize political speech. Instead of the rational “common sense” speech of Kant, Ellison suggests that American literary and vernacular traditions should be the origin for any conceptualization of political and social belonging. Ellison gives an example of these literary origins in two ways: First through his sublime, modernist description of the black children at Little Rock and secondly through his aesthetic representation of Martin Luther King and African-American protesters during his interview with Robert Penn Warren. I argue that his use of the concept of the sublime and other literary allusions to describe black protest are conscientious invocations of his version of *litterae humaniores*. I conclude this chapter by suggesting that Ellison’s concerns about the emergence of Black Nationalism in the 1960s begins to politicize his artful conception of human life.

In my final chapter, “An Integrative Vernacular” I read the “vernacular” turn Ellison’s work took in the late 1970s as his attempt to think the problem of race and American social cohesion in the post-Civil Rights era. Focusing on his famous essay “The Little Man at Chehaw Station” as well as other published writings and materials from Ellison’s archived papers; I suggest Ellison was trying to articulate a poetic understanding of what he calls the “integrative, vernacular note” of American experience. More specifically, these writings show that Ellison’s understanding was focused though his use of William Graham Sumner’s notion of “antagonistic cooperation.” Ellison’s adaptation of Sumner’s sociological term into an aesthetic one allows Ellison to expose the racialized metaphysics underlying most visions of American social cohesion, including the benign categorical thought guiding federally mandated integration policies. But as I show, Ellison’s “little man” and his use of Sumner also symbolize a broader political and aesthetic anxiety over the relationship contemporary African-American culture had to American life in the post-Civil Rights era.

To close this chapter I will read his melancholic optimism about the present into the Dantesque coal-heavers vignette that ends the essay. Instead of being the moment of transcendence found in Canto XXXIV, I will read it through Canto X of the Inferno. Drawing parallels to Gramsci's reading of Canto X in "Canto X of Dante's Inferno", I argue that Ellison is making a similar non-metaphysical, material claim to language and expression through the "little man" and coal heavers. For Ellison, the question is not about the problem of "leadership" as Paul Bove reads into Gramsci's interpretation. Instead it is an attempt to displace the epistemological assumptions behind the question Farinata asks Dante and Virgil: "What is your name and race?" Ellison's "heretical" portrayal of the little man and coal heaver's challenges the dogmatic political meanings these questions had during the time Ellison wrote his essay.

By casting this "little man" amidst the chaos of the 1970s, Ellison reveals the forces threatening the literary and historical significance of his little man. Just as the Gilded Age roots of Ellison's little man suggest a profoundly radical version of the human, at the same time, Ellison's "little man" reminds us of his own complex political stance. Ellison's feelings about Black Nationalism are tinged with remnant, Cold War, anti-communist sentiments. At the same time Ellison "little man" rescues a crucial element of America's humanist past and suggests its necessity for the future I read him as also indicative of the author's own exile and inability to properly see his present.

Chapter 1: Ellison's "Battle Royal": An Allegory of Modernism's Negro Problem?

In interviews after the publication of Invisible Man in 1952, Ralph Ellison attested to the historical reality of the Southern smoker on which he based his famous 1947 story "Battle Royal." In an address at West Point in 1969, Ellison tells a group of cadets that he came to realize that real battle royals were used to "project certain racial divisions into the society and reinforce the idea of white racial superiority" (Ellison 529). Later in his address Ellison says that his fictional representation of the battle royal had to mean "something more than a group of white man having sadistic fun with a group of Negro boys" (529). It came to represent a symbolic "ritual through which important social values are projected and reinforced" (529).

It is upon his claims of "realism" and social commentary that critics ranging from Irving Howe and Robert Bone to Hortense Spillers, Houston Baker Jr. and Lucas Morel have allegorically interpreted this episode. This is not to say that these critics or others do not appreciate the highly imaginative and symbolic portray of racial violence in the Ellison's episode. But the consensus on Ellison's story is its meditation upon the surreal but fundamentally brutal nature of racism in America. Ellison himself says that the metaphorical value of "The Battle Royal" rests in its presentation of the absurd nature of racism in America.

The battle royal's place in the novel definitely supports these readings. Structurally, the nameless protagonist chooses to open and close his framed narrative with the image of racial chaos and riot. Like many of the novel's opening moments, the battle royal is a portent for later narrative events. So this episode functions as an augur for the race riot that closes the novel. Both events, as Nicole Waligora-Davis argues in her reading of the battle royal "Riotous

Discontent: Ellison's "Birth of a Nation", mirror a particular aspect of American inter-colonialism (Davis 388).

But what if we were to read Ellison's story as another kind of allegory? Instead of dealing solely with the problem of racism within modernity, is it possible to read this episode as an imaginative presentation of the problem of race within modernism? Such a suggestion would not neutralize the power of Ellison's overtly social and political critique of American racism. Instead, it shifts focus to Ellison's profound investment in thinking the problem of racism as an aesthetic one as well. Throughout Ellison's work racism is understood as a failure of the imagination, whether that imagination is employed in the conceptualization of American democracy, the writing of fiction, or in the task of literary criticism.

"Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity", one of Ellison's earliest critiques of American letters was published in 1953 but was written in 1946, a year before "Battle Royal" was published. Seven years later, when he approached a podium in New York to accept the National Book Award, Ellison gave another version of the same polemic found in "Twentieth Century". Invoking Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck and William Faulkner, the reigning modern novelists of his time, Ellison gives an homage to his aesthetic forbearers by suggesting their failure as fiction writers and – perhaps this is where the invocation of James is relevant – critics of American literature. Even into the 1960s, a version of this polemic can be read into his exchange with Irving Howe on the pages of The New Leader. The questions that open up Ellison's 1963 essay "The World and the Jug" could have been just as easily asked in 1947.

Ellison was interested in recuperating an American literary tradition that presented forms of irony and cynicism akin to the avant-garde literary modernism he was exposed to during the 1930s and 40s. But this tradition is one Ellison thought should portray the “complex” humanity and ambiguity of the Negro that certain versions of literary modernism seem to have abandoned. It is here that Ellison’s reading of Mark Twain against Hemingway in “Twentieth Century” is crucial. Hemingway’s famous advice to readers of Huckleberry Finn is to stop reading Twain’s masterpiece when Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys since he calls the rest of the narrative after that “cheating” (Hemingway 22).

For Ellison, Hemingway’s advice is a moment when the failure of the Naturalist’s art also becomes a moral and ethical failure on the level of the imagination. Twain’s conscientious use of idiomatic and folkloric traces of African-American culture are connected to what Ellison calls Twain’s desire to “Americanize” his style. Denying this source, which Jim symbolizes in the novel, is to evade certain moral and ethical responsibilities that Ellison reads into Twain’s art. Just as and if not even more important is the connection Ellison makes between Twain’s investment in Jim and the necessary presence of skepticism in American literature; a presence that Ellison finds absent in the interwar period and beyond. For Ellison, the disappearance of the “human Negro from our fiction coincides with the disappearance of the deep-probing doubt and a sense of evil;” both of which lead to an understanding of the “nature of man” (Ellison 91).

Ellison’s investment in “the Negro” is his investment in literary humanism. And it is this investment that I see demonstrated in the 1947 version of “Battle Royal.” These humanistic and literary concerns from the interwar period take on a more profound meaning when “Battle Royal” is thought of as the “threshold” to Ellison novel, Invisible Man. I take the term “threshold” from Sandra Morris’s work on Ralph Waldo Emerson. Morris argues in “Through

a Thousand Voices: Emerson's Poetry and 'The Sphinx'" that Emerson's "The Sphinx," which introduces his collection Poems (1846) occupies a genre she calls the "threshold poem" (Morris 778). This "genre" functions as an "overture to the material that follows them" and as Morris further suggests "ask for a distinctive and heightened attention by virtue of their liminal position" (Morris 778).

In "The Sphinx" Morris sees Emerson making a self-conscious decision to open his book of poetry with one that is itself conscientious about the difficulties of poetic expression. Particularly in the case of Emerson's "The Sphinx", Morris reads the "threshold" genre as one that is both ironic and paradoxical since they are often poems about the inability to write poems. Further accentuating this theme of difficulty is Emerson's appropriation of a commonplace nineteenth century American literary figure, the enigmatic Sphinx itself, which also held an important place in the work of Melville and Poe (Morris 779).

My appropriation of Morris's term is not an attempt to make a facile connection between Ellison and Emerson (although, it is interesting that Ellison's grandfather, whose bewildering riddle at the beginning haunts the entire novel, functions as a sphinx-like figure at the threshold of Ellison's book.)⁸ As important as the "Battle Royal" is to the thematic concerns of Invisible Man, it is just as important when understood outside of its novelistic context. The story obviously comes at a crucial moment in Ellison's transformation as a critic and fiction writer. Reading the battle royal episode as a "threshold" allows us to think how Ellison's novelistic

⁸ It is productive to think whether Ellison had Emerson and his poem "The Sphinx" in mind when he decided to place "Battle Royal" at the beginning of Invisible Man. The other and more provocative connection to explore would be between Ellison's "sphinx" like grandfather and Melville's invocation of the sphinx in both Moby Dick (1852) and his epic poem Clarel (1876), which along with Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War compose Melville's post-Civil War work and reflections. With Ellison's grandfather functioning as a figural presentation of reconstruction I wonder if his sphinx-like presence can be read as Ellison's own understanding of Reconstruction as a riddle America has yet to solve.

battle royal is the author's self-conscious treatise on the necessity of thinking the Negro problem within both humanism and modernism.

Given "Battle Royal's" place in Ellison's post-War reassessment of interwar modernism as well as its place in Invisible Man's Cold War reception, we can see that the threshold Ellison pulls us through as a complex one. As critics and writers simultaneously questioned the conventions of proletarian realism and their politics, Ellison found that their attitude about the representation of "the Negro" in literature had fossilized. Either the "Negro problem" was absent for Hemingway and other modernists or in the case of Irving Howe's review of Invisible Man in 1952, the Negro could be neither modernist nor literary but only representative of pure experience.

Through "Battle Royal" the threshold Ellison pulls us through resonates as a Said-like "beginnings," rooted in Ellison's criticism during the late 1940s. As I will show in this chapter, much should be read into the profound ambivalence Ellison expresses towards Ernest Hemingway in "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity." In taking Hemingway to task Ellison signals his own complicated break with his self-identified "ancestor" and the dominant modes of modernist American fiction during his time (Ellison 185).

We should also read this essay as Ellison's self-conscious declaration of an alternative "beginning" to American modernist literary tradition, one in which Ellison boldly interprets and centralizes the "Negro problem" within the traditions of western literature. In many ways it is a more fleshed out companion to Ellison's review of Bucklin Moon's Primer for White Folks where Ellison surveys America's post-War intellectual landscape and declares that we need a "new American Humanism" (Ellison 147). I will show that this critical "beginning" echoes

throughout much of Ellison's criticism and informs his debate in the 1960s with Irving Howe in the The New Leader. Ellison's debate with Howe, which is about the relationship between politics and aesthetics, allows us to look back at Ellison's self-fashioned beginning in 1947 as pivotal for the direction the author would take during the Cold War.

To end this chapter I focus on the short story "The Battle Royal." Not only does this story rearticulate Ellison's ideas in "Twentieth Century" but more importantly it foreshadows Ellison's aesthetic direction in Invisible Man by demonstrating the "complex ambiguity" of the human he sought to represent in American fiction. Replying to a letter about his story from the famous psychiatrist Karl Menninger, Ellison tells Menninger that "Battle Royal" was a "*near-allegory*" and "for all the detailed description of the prose, the aim is not naturalism but realism – a realism *dilated* to deal with the almost surreal state of our everyday American life" (Ellison, Rampersad, emphasis mine).

If his sentiments to Menninger are taken to heart, it appears that Ellison's evasion of pure allegory is somehow tied to a notion of realism that was unlike the Naturalism that Ellison critiques in "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity." To explicate how this plays out in "Battle Royal" I will rely on Erich Auerbach's discussion of the difference between allegory and figuration in Scenes from the Drama of European Literature and Mimesis. Ellison's investment in presenting what he calls "the complex ambiguity of the human" appears in a *figura* of the human, which in the story is found in the narrator's self-identification as a "nigger-boy." Ellison's choice to have this figure emerge in a nightmare is a symbolic testament to his investment in modernism. Further it represents a particular version of modernism that distinguishes him from contemporaries like Ernest Hemingway and Richard Wright.

Ellison's critique of Naturalism in "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" begins on a statistical note. Between Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck, Ellison counted no more than "five American Negroes" in their novels. For Ellison the problem is clearly more than statistical. From this observation Ellison eventually identifies the roots of this literary problem in a tradition of "intellectual" evasion rooted in post-Civil War America. In Henry James and particularly Ernest Hemingway, Ellison notices that American writers were distancing themselves from writing about African-American characters in literature, a problem that rests on a rather complex paradox.⁹ American fiction, according to Ellison, either ignored or misrepresented African-American characters he also felt that the stereotypes that do exist are not forcefully engaged with enough. Despite his stylistic indebtedness to Ernest Hemingway it is through him that Ellison elaborates the history of this literary problem.

Ellison begins his critique of Hemingway by pointing to an absence of what he calls the "American scene" in Hemingway's fiction (Ellison 93). This is rather ironic since Hemingway sees himself within the lineage of post-Civil War American authors, specifically Mark Twain. It is to Twain that Hemingway owed the sardonic stance and meticulous attention to language evident in his minimalist, vernacular style. But this technique, as Ellison observes, was applied to the treatment of non-American subject matter in Death in the Afternoon as well as The Sun Also Rises.

Twain's satire, irony and language were not the product of a detached, disinterested stoicism as Hemingway reads it. As Ellison writes in "Twentieth Century Fiction and The Black

⁹ Ellison's point here is fascinating. It is obvious that Ellison's comments in "Twentieth Century Fiction" is directed at a specific style of modernist writing that came about at the turn of the century. Having said that, what is so incredibly fascinating is his silence on the Harlem Renaissance and its literary forerunners like James Weldon Johnson, Paul Dunbar, Charles Chesnut, George Washington Cable and others. I do not think Ellison is ignorant of them but his silence, which continues throughout much of his career, is loud in a moment like this.

Mask of Humanity,” it was the product of a celebratory yet tragic attitude. The pivotal moment in Huckleberry Finn (as well as American fiction) to Ellison is when Huck decides to go to hell and rescue Jim. This scene, which Hemingway called the moment Twain cheated, is for Ellison “a reversal as well as a recognition scene (like that in which Oedipus discovers his true identity), wherein a new definition of necessity is being formulated” (Ellison 87). This recognition or what Aristotle calls *anagnorisis* is the moment of “intelligent recognition” in classical tragedy. Huck’s recognition is not just a moral insight. Aristotle defines *anagnorisis* in the Poetics as a character’s transformation from ignorance to knowledge, which ultimately leads to self-knowledge as well as knowledge of one’s true situation. Recognition then is two-fold for Huck: his desire to free Jim reveals to Huck who he is and simultaneously it allows Huck insight into the fundamental paradox defining American society. And as is the case in Twain’s novel, this moment is Huck’s recognition of the paradox lying between “property rights and human rights” (Ellison 87).

Huck’s “low down business” is his recognition that acting morally, which is recognizing Jim’s as well as the humanity of African-Americans, is an act of hubris against American de jure and de facto racism. Ellison’s point is that Hemingway’s use of Twain does not acknowledge the relationship between Twain’s poetics and the author’s historical situation. Huck’s “low down business” has its analogue in Twain’s literary technique. Twain’s style metaphorically depended on a “free” Jim. Not only does he function as a dramatic necessity to Twain’s novel but he is also one of many vernacular muses for Twain.

Jim is a figure through which Twain can hear American speech and modes of expression and at the same time contemplate the way slavery and racism determines his Gilded Age present. By describing Hemingway’s craft as “an end in itself,” Ellison understands Naturalist prose as an

instrument without this knowledge and intelligence behind it. Doing away with the ending of Huckleberry Finn misses the stylistic and intellectual import of Twain's work. Between his mention of Henry James and Hemingway in "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" and his later debate with Irving Howe, Ellison reveals a stylistic crisis as well as a crisis in American literary criticism. After the Civil War, Ellison accuses both James and Hemingway of evading the American scene. Twain's use of vernacular and dialect language, which was crucial to late nineteenth century concepts of realism in America, was the technical basis of Hemingway's hard-boiled style. Hemingway's technique did capture the tragic element of life. But for Ellison it also symbolized the abandonment of Twain's critique of Gilded Age America. Hemingway was right to detect Twain's irony and satire as a repudiation of Gilded Age materialism. What Hemingway missed was the crucial link between Twain's irony and the fundamental paradox of American post-bellum culture – America's new found sense of freedom and the simultaneous denial of African-American humanity. Similarly, after World War II, Ellison's sees in Howe and many other American literary critics an analogous evasion. While critics from Irving Howe, Lionel Trilling, Hannah Arendt, Arthur Schlesinger and later Mary McCarthy saw the United States as the world's moral and ethical center, they all located literature's contemplative sensibility in Europe rather in the United States.

One of the most crucial moments in "Twentieth Century Fiction" is Ellison's use of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe as a way to begin his discussion of American literary craft and criticism. For Ellison, a problematic feature of nineteenth century American literature is the way writers "disguised" the conflict between "democratic beliefs" and "anti-democratic practices" by ignoring African-American characters or relying on stereotypical representations of them. Ellison traces the roots of this problematic back to the eighteenth century and the absence of an

American version of Defoe's Friday. In this context, his identification of Robinson Crusoe as a Romantic novel becomes a curious misreading. Defoe's novel was published over 60 years before Romanticism begins. As Ian Watt suggests in The Rise of the Novel, however, Defoe and other British novelists anticipate the concerns that would be picked up by the Romantics in the late Eighteenth Century (Watt 309). Ellison's misreading is made more peculiar by his use of Defoe in order to begin a discussion of race and humanism in Western literature. By reading Robinson Crusoe as a Romantic novel Ellison presents the conundrum of where does one locate the novel's expression of individualism, in its Protestantism or in Crusoe's mercantilism? Ellison's emphasis on racism and chattel slavery in Defoe allows us to see the complex nature in which the theological and commercial articulations of individualism are yoked to racism and coerced labor.

Ellison makes his case that from their first appearance African-American characters suggested the existence of a "tragic sense" at the heart of modern Western literature. By reading Defoe as a "romantic" Ellison reveals that "Friday," who dwells in the nexus between racial slavery, Protestantism and mercantile individualism is a beginning point for America's literary responsibility to African-American characters. The connection between Friday and America occurs in "Twentieth Century Fiction" through Ellison's "misidentification" of Friday as a "Negro" (Ellison 88). As Roxanne Wheeler writes in "'My Savage,' 'My Man': Racial Multiplicity in Robinson Crusoe," race as a category was in transition between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The specificities of racial identification as we understand them now do not come into play until later in the eighteenth century. This makes racial identification in early British novels a complicated enterprise. As Wheeler points out, Friday's racial identification shifts throughout Crusoe's account, never settling on one signifier (Wheeler 840). Despite

Ellison's erroneous identification of Friday as a "Negro," there is much that can be made from this misreading.

By reimagining Friday as a "Negro" Ellison performs a powerful revision of Western literature and the problem of humanism within it. Ellison uses Friday to represent the founding literary moment in the literature's contemplation of modernity's "Negro problem." At the same time, Crusoe's (and Defoe's) actions also represent the countervailing actions taken to deny Friday's humanity. Seen in this way, Robinson Crusoe unearths an archetypal literary example of the "Negro's" importance in Western literary traditions. Crusoe makes Friday both a worker and Christian. Through his attempts to humanize the savage Friday, Ellison sees Defoe's attempts to lessen his own guilt for breaking with what Ellison calls "the institutions and authorities of the past," (Ellison 89). As a fictional representative of the change toward bourgeois mercantile capitalism and propriety rights, Crusoe's domination of Friday straddles the line between the managerial and sovereign, the secular and the providential. Ellison's analysis of Robinson Crusoe reveals the conundrum Friday poses to Crusoe's freedom. The question is how does Crusoe exercise his freedom yet hold dominion over Friday? Tied to this process of change in Defoe's novel are the swift changes occurring during the eighteenth century. It is in this period that the meaning of citizenship is connected to labor, the industrial revolution and the nation-state. Not only are these changes historical and social, but they are also poetic.

When Ellison states that Crusoe takes to the desert isle "certain techniques, certain values, from whence he came..." he is referring to both Crusoe's complex relationship to the past and how he tells his story (Ellison 759.) This later fact is borne out stylistically in Defoe's novel. Crusoe's account is both providential narrative yet cast in the confessional mode. It also contains a mix of prose forms from "dialogue" to Crusoe's "Journal." Along with these more

traditional prose and narrative styles is Crusoe's literal accounting of his and Friday's labor through extended bookkeeping sections in the novel. The combination of providential and propriety account is emblematic of the conundrum appearing in Defoe and the Romantic tradition.¹⁰ Crusoe's Christian and propriety relationship to Friday is not that of equals. Friday, both pagan savage and slave laborer, is still Crusoe's inferior. As Robert Marzec argues in "Enclosures, Colonization, and the Robinson Crusoe Syndrome: A Genealogy of Land in a Global Context," these very literary techniques become a synecdoche for Crusoe's collapsing of Friday with the island's raw materials (Marzec 131). In spite of all this, Ellison concentrates on Crusoe's figurative place on an uncharted island and separation from "whence he came" as presenting a *tabula rasa* upon which Crusoe can remake himself. Ellison interprets Defoe's Romanticism in Crusoe's relationship with Friday, which he reads as a similar *tabula rasa* moment. The same way Crusoe can remake himself Ellison suggests that Friday can too. Ellison identifies in Defoe a crucial liminal place in Romanticism. Despite the very real presence of oppression and inequality it does not yet express the rigid hierarchy of racial categorization.

Ellison's analysis of Robinson Crusoe shows his attempt to adapt the trans-historical problem of the "Negro" to the humanistic concerns it raises in American literature. The question of Crusoe's displaced guilt and the Robinson Crusoe's source of concern over Friday's humanity is tied to social revolutions and transformations in the Europe that begin during the late eighteenth century. This revolutionary and romantic impulse is something simultaneously

¹⁰ Here I am referring to Daniel Headrick's book When Information Came of Age: Technologies of Knowledge in the Age of Reason and Revolution 1700-1850 (Oxford University Press, New York 2000.) During the 18th Century with the rise of statistical analysis "natural" theologians in Britain and Germany began to use mathematics and population rates to argue for the existence of Divine Providence. Christians during the 18th century were encouraged in Church to look toward mortality rates and other population rates in order to reflect on their own morality and commitment to Christianity. I do not think it is a far stretch to see Defoe's Crusoe as doing such a thing in the novel except applying such an accounting to labor and production.

played out during the American Revolution. Curiously, in “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,” the American eighteenth century has no historical or literary presence in Ellison’s thinking. To account for the “Negro” Ellison begins with Defoe and does not introduce American literature until the nineteenth century and the “renaissance” authors of Emerson and Hawthorne. In both, Ellison identifies the Romantic impulse to probe the clash between “democratic beliefs” and “anti-democratic practices,” but it is only Melville that adequately deals with the central problematic of racism.¹¹

Defoe illuminates links among literary Romanticism, Christianity, propertied bourgeois individualism and the problem of racism. Romanticism’s value for Ellison is that it marks the literary moment when the modern human predicament is intimately tied to the “figure of the Negro” around which the “human implications” of modernity can truly be thought. The “break” that Crusoe makes, while having its double in the American Revolution, does not draw a proper historical parallel. This is where Ellison mistaking Friday for a “Negro” is important. America’s and Haiti’s late eighteenth century revolutions occur when the discourse of race and slavery had calcified around ridged racialized categories. There is a transformation from the varied articulation of race in Robinson Crusoe or Defoe’s “The True Born Englishman” (1701) to Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on The State of Virginia (1801).

By the nineteenth century thinkers expressed a more scientific and anthropological articulation of race and humanity. The effect of this is to further blur the lines between Romantic ideas of freedom and these new concepts of racism and slave labor in America. When Ellison insinuates that there is no American “Friday” to bring up the “human implications,” of literature, it does not necessarily mean that African-Americans do not appear in American literature. It

¹¹ This is a point I explore in the second chapter of my dissertation.

does signify that Friday's ambiguous status lends him the sort of "turgid" possibilities Ellison saw missing in American literary representations of African-American characters until Mark Twain. When contextualized in the shifting concepts of race between the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the disappearance of Friday's potential in American literature makes sense. It is not as if these characters do not exist, but they are the literary equivalent of rigid empirical and scientific fact. The "turgid possibilities" that come from Friday's ambiguity are lost in the United States because African-American characters are not literary symbols but petrified objects of empirical fact.

Ellison's rumination on Friday's absence reveals his concerns about American post-Civil War literature. While Ellison wants to affirm the principles underlying the North's victory during the Civil War, he cannot help but detect the traces of slavery's recalcitrant feudal arrangements of labor and power in America. Unlike Defoe who wrote in a historical situation where Friday's humanity was in flux, American post-Civil War literature – while building upon the triumph of individualism and democratic feeling – simultaneously calcified all that was anti-modern, inhuman in the scientific discourses of anti-black racism. Instead of seizing upon the "tragic sense" this paradox created in Defoe and later in America's own Romantics, Ellison sees a willful turning away from the question of the Negro in all but a few American novels.

Straddling the line between oppression and freedom Friday's symbolic function in literature is analogous to the "irrational nature" of symbolic action that Kenneth Burke discusses in The Philosophy of Literary Form, a book that greatly informs Ellison's thoughts in "Twentieth Century Fiction."¹² Burke views this irrationality as directly linked to the complex resonance of

¹² Burke is careful in The Philosophy of Literary Form to draw a distinction between the philological study of language and language as a poetic act. Philology for Burke approaches language from an accretion model of its use.

poetic language. Like Burke, Ellison draws a vast web of “interrelations” around “the Negro” and initiates them in “active membership” with the beginnings of modern fictional prose – something we see in his use of Defoe (Burke 38). Donald Pease describes Ellison’s use of Burke as a way for the author to explain the “shadow acts” of American civil society. As Pease writes, racist logic represents the “socially unacknowledged activities that took the place of officially motivated symbolic actions” (Pease 73). To Pease, Ellison’s rumination on the stereotype in “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” revises Burke’s notion of the scapegoat. In Pease’s eyes, Ellison found Burke’s definition inadequate since the problem of race lay outside the “symbolizable” terrain of Burke’s method (Pease 74).

The “shadow” that Pease identifies can be read throughout “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity.” Friday can be very clearly seen as Crusoe’s “shadow”. When discussing the absence of African-Americans in American literature, it clear that Ellison’s thinking is influenced by Burke’s “scapegoat,” which provides the shadowy synecdoche to the real, material problem of anti-black racism. The poetic potential of the Burke’s scapegoat can be read into Ellison’s thoughts about Friday’s and Crusoe’s “turgid possibilities” of freedom. Burke begins his discussion of the scapegoat by referencing the Romantics, who put forth a “neo-primitive” self as their insignia in opposition to poetic insignias of “social status” (Burke 37). The insignia is as a figure of group identification and is representative of putting forth a “new

There is an original mimetic moment where words and language originates but then each subsequent use obscures this original intent. But by emphasizing the spoken, phonetic use of language, Burke sees language used in a different way than this evolutionary, philological model. The “nonsensical” usage of tonalities and syllables in poetry for example reveals the situational nature of language use. These phonetic acts become an allegory for the way writers deploy particular “acts and images...personalities and situations” through their works (Burke, 20). Burke understands poetic motives and meaning created within the structure of a work by the “associational clusters” these “acts and images” create.

self;” one that is “sloughs off (the) ingredients that are irrelevant to this purpose” (Burke 38). It would be interesting to know whether Ellison’s had Burke explicitly in mind in his “Romantic” reading of Defoe and the Negro; especially since he reads Crusoe as involved in a similar sort of “neo-primitive” identification with Friday. Like Burke, Ellison clearly sees Crusoe’s identification as part of his break from the institutions of the past. If there is any moment when Ellison corrects Burke it is here where Ellison casts the “shadow” of race upon Defoe and the Romantics.

Burke’s scapegoat serves another relevant function to Ellison’s thoughts about the Negro and its relationship to literary humanism. As Burke writes, the scapegoat is also a symbol of deep-seeded moral ambiguity. The transgressions and sacrifices visited upon the scapegoat reveal the complex interweaving of two essentialisms, good and evil. Regardless of the morality of its act, the scapegoat always breaks the law and is punished for it. The danger and sublimity of this moment is precisely what poetic language allows us to confront. More importantly, Burke suggests that the moral ambiguities contained within the scapegoat tell us more about the “ambivalence of power,” that creates such moral certitudes than their actual existence. Literary works are strategies through which the ambiguities and irrationality of these symbolic acts are both approached and contained. Ellison’s rumination upon Friday and the roots of the Negro problem” reveals a similar understanding of the stereotype. The “shadow” Ellison casts upon Western literature overlaps with the ambivalent nature of freedom and democracy emerging out of the Enlightenment and represented in Romanticism. What “the Negro” (or its absence) reveal are authorial attempts to probe this ambivalence. So for Ellison there is equivalence between America’s evasion of the Negro in its literature and its inattentiveness to the complex nature of democracy, racism and power in America.

Ellison's rumination on Hemingway and American literature in "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" proves to be a moment of profound transformation for the author. This essay seems as much a declaration of Ellison's distance from Marxism as are the more forceful repudiations he would make in private letters to Richard Wright. It is hard to say that Ellison kills his father in critiquing Hemingway, especially since later on he would wholly embrace him as an "ancestor." However, his critique of Naturalism in "Twentieth Century" is part of a move away from Naturalism and proletariat realism by many of his contemporaries.

Written almost a decade after Ellison's appears to split with the Popular Front and six years before the publication of Invisible Man, Ellison's critique reveals his understanding that as a poetic "strategy," Naturalism could not fully express the ambivalence and irrationality nature of power in America before and after World War II. Not only do Burke's own comments on Naturalism in The Philosophy of Literary Form bear this out, but Ellison's ideas returns us back to Kazin's comments at the end of On Native Grounds. Like Kazin, Ellison was wondering whether naturalism could "comprehend" the social forces in American and not just describe them. As Daniel Brick writes in Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconciliation in the 1940s, this period before and after WWII brought about a crisis in the radical socialism at the root of American liberal critique.

The crisis Brick identifies occurs simultaneously with the abandonment of the "Negro problem" as the central political principle in American Socialism and Communism. Ellison felt that these methods of critique never took seriously enough the crisis anti-black racism posed to the possibilities of democracy and freedom. Where this lack of seriousness seemed most glaring for Ellison was in both the craft and criticism of American literature. Ellison's retelling of

American literary history shows that he feels the reverberation of Reconstruction's failure echoed in his own moment. Its synecdoche is in the collapse of the Popular Front in America. *The Negro*, which is produced out of this ambivalent "shadow act," represents for Ellison the survival of an "intelligence" within American literary traditions. Twain's Jim reveals a paradox within our ideas of human freedom. The complex literary associations around "the Negro" that Ellison elaborates in his essay force us to think the effect slavery and anti-black racism have had upon American ideas concerning literature, democracy and freedom. While not a "Negro" in any biological sense, Ellison suggests that Friday becomes a fabricated, imaginary beginning of the Negro problem and the way racism subsumes the "turgid possibilities" of his humanity. And for Ellison the critic Friday becomes Ellison's own threshold and beginnings. Through him Ellison legitimates his own interpretation of literary humanism and its relationship to his understanding of modernism.

Ellison's ambivalence towards Hemingway in the 1940s was part of his attempt to elaborate an American humanist tradition centered on the Negro and yet connected it to modernist skepticism. The publication of "Battle Royal" and *Invisible Man* after "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" are his stylistic response. To a certain extent Ellison's ambivalence also signaled a political transformation. Both of these changes inform his post-*Invisible Man* criticism and in particular his interactions with Irving Howe. By turning to Ellison's subsequent engagements with Howe we can see the connection between Ellison's assessments of the interwar period and how they relate to his emergence as a critic during the Cold War.

In his 1952 review of *Invisible Man*, Irving Howe suggests that African-American writers should approach modernist aesthetic and intellectual conventions cautiously. While Howe lauds

the verisimilitude of Ellison's work he is disturbed by "Ellison's wish to be intellectually up to date" (Howe). This is something Ellison should not aspire to since in Howe's estimation Ellison's character is "a victim of passive experience" (Howe). When it comes to presenting race in literature, experience is the rub for Howe. African-American novels should be mimetic and literally represent experience by "persuading or suggesting or simply telling" (Howe).

In a strange, rather ironic turn Howe condemns the novel precisely because the book is not ironic enough. As Howe writes, "Ellison cannot establish ironic distance between his hero and himself or between the matured 'I' telling the story and the 'I' who is its victim. And because the experience is so apocalyptic and magnified, it absorbs and then dissolves the hero; every minor character comes through brilliantly, but the seeing 'I' is seldom seen" (Howe). The problem for Howe is with Ellison's politics as much as with Ellison's stylistic presentation of his protagonist. In his review it appears that he cannot make up his mind about what to do with Ellison's style, which he calls too "feverish," or his politics, which makes caricatures out of the "Harlem Stalinists" (Howe). Five years after his review Howe would give a series of lectures about the confluence of politics and literature at Princeton's Gauss seminar. But Howe's view of Invisible Man shows the problem he – like many other critics – would have placing African-American literature in any discussion of politics and literature.

Ellison's skepticism of Howe and others is well known and rooted in his experiences with the Federal Writers Project and the American Communist Party during the Thirties. In his mind, the close connection critics made between Naturalism, Proletariat Literature and American Communism stifled the imaginative possibilities of African-American writers. Politics and poetics held too strong an acquaintance for Ellison's taste. It is not until Ellison's attack on the relationship between ideology and fiction in his exchange with Irving Howe in The New Leader

during 1963-4 that we get a more specific picture of Ellison's critique. Ellison's first response, "The World and the Jug" was a rebuttal to Howe's essay "Black Boys and Native Sons," initially published in The New Leader in 1963. In his second response titled "A Rejoinder," Ellison elaborates his concerns about ideology's relationship to literature even further. "The World and the Jug," recalls Ellison's position on the problem of literary criticism as it confronts African-American Literature.

In "Black Boys and Native Sons" Howe values Wright's literary works as a more authentic portrayal of African-American experience. He charges both Ellison and James Baldwin with being "literary to a fault." As Howe writes, the novel is "inherently (an) ambiguous genre; it strains toward formal autonomy and can seldom avoid being public gesture." Formal autonomy is synonymous with the "literary" nature of writing for Howe. Placing Wright in a more privileged position than either Ellison or Baldwin means Howe's perception of African-American "public" experience is a particular one. And it is here – where public experience meets literature's gesture toward formal autonomy – that we will find Howe's own intellectual predilections when it comes to the works of African-American authors. Before "Black Boys and Native Son's" or his exchanges with Ellison, Howe's position towards the novel and the relationship between literature and ideology was in flux. Politics and the Novel, the published version of his 1956 Gauss Seminar at Princeton, represents Howe's most fully fleshed out statement on literature and politics. As Alan Wald writes in The New York Intellectuals, during the Forties, Howe was already in a feud with many writers associated with the CPA over this very problem. Beginning in the summer of 1945, Howe's debate over the works of Arthur Koestler showed his growing understanding of literature's unique way of communicating politics and ideology (Wald 311).

As with so many debates over literature from the Thirties onward, the central issue was the problem of “realism.” Howe saw the concept of “realism” stagnating into a code word for ideological doctrinism in critical discussions of literature. Howe’s papers at the Gauss seminar are the fruition of an ongoing problematic Howe and other New York Intellectuals were working through. In the first chapters of Politics and the Novel, Howe defines the “political novel” and ideology’s presence in it in the following terms:

In the political novel, then, writer and reader enter an uneasy compact: to expose their opinions to a furious action, and as these melt into the movement of the novel, to find some common recognition, some supervening human bond above and beyond ideas. It is not surprising that the political novelist, even as he remains fascinated by politics, urges his claim for a moral order beyond ideology; nor that does the receptive reader, even as he perseveres in his own commitment, assent to the novelist’s ultimate order (Howe 24).

Howe’s ideas about literature are very sympathetic to Ellison’s own perspectives concerning ideology, politics and the novel. Having said this, we must take seriously one crucial omission from Howe’s discussions in Politics and the Novel. As Lawrence Jackson’s observes in “Ralph Ellison’s Politics of Integration” Ellison, who might have been in the audience when Howe was delivering these lectures, had to have noticed Howe’s neglect of African-American writers and the problem of race during his lectures (Lawrence 194). Coming on the heels of Invisible Man, Ellison’s acceptance speech for the National Book Award and his intellectual transformation in the late 1940s, Ellison’s objections would have ran much deeper than what Alan Nadel sees as Ellison’s attempt to democratically “integrate” the canon; especially given Ellison’s own

ambivalence towards African-American writers and their work.¹³ Ellison would have been strongly attracted to Howe's use of Dostoyevsky, Stendhal, Conrad and others, since these are the very pool of "ancestors" Ellison refers to in his own writing.

Howe's exclusion of African-American authors from Politics and the Novel is a problem that he corrects in "Black Boys and Native Sons." When comparing his analysis of literature and ideology in "Black Boys" to that of Politics and the Novel we can see Howe's ideas in sharper focus. Concerning the "political" nature of novels, Howe sees a historical and geographic break between Anglo-Romanticism and literature written in a continental European context.

According to Howe, Anglo-Romanticism represented social structures as "gradations" whereas the author's of Howe's "political novel" can identify the unpredictable state of society. Further, these "political" novelists are concerned with the "fate of society itself" (Howe 19). Society's "fate" is what permeates the consciousness of writers and the characters populating mid and late nineteenth century European novels. As he states, the characters in Dostoyevsky, Stendhal and others are now contentiously thinking in terms of "supporting or opposing society." Whether in The Red and the Black or Demons, Howe sees both Stendhal and Dostoyevsky positioning their characters at the ideological ramparts of their respective fictional world.

Implicit in Howe's categorization of these writers is the historical conundrum Napoleon posed. The French Revolution and its brutal transformation of the continent tore the assumed relationship between Enlightenment, reason and freedom asunder. Therefore a heightened sense of "contradiction" permeates many nineteenth century European novels (Howe 19). Napoleon is used by Howe to illustrate the blindness of Anglo-Romanticism since he was rarely mentioned in

¹³ Alan Nadel has written most extensively about this in his book Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon and his recent essay "The Integrated Literary Tradition".

nineteenth century British fiction. Juxtaposed to this, Howe saw the effect of the French Revolution generating tremendous stylistic self awareness in European authors. It is hard not to take this identification as somehow an allegory of the political crisis and disillusionment enveloping American and European intellectual since the late Thirties and into the post-World War II period. In this sense, Howe's lecture can be seen as staging the problem of aesthetics and politics in late-nineteenth century as a lesson about similar, contemporary concerns with Communism and American liberalism. The debates pitting "realism" versus high modernism that defined the aesthetic divide is the contemporary equivalent of the late nineteenth century problem Howe identifies.

Besides Howe's exclusion of the problem of race, Howe neglects a similar historical and political crisis in the United States: American slavery. Slavery was *the* defining philosophical and political conundrum to the democratic experiment. The failure of Reconstruction in the late nineteenth century created a similar "anxiety" that Howe locates in Europe. What of Howe's similar concern of societies "fate" in American literature? Making all of this worse is what Howe does with African-Americans as a literary and social phenomenon in "Black Boys and Native Sons." Caught up in perpetual "plight and protest," African-American writers are not in line with the aesthetic or literary project Howe sees Dostoyevsky and others involved in. In describing Dostoyevsky, Howe makes some critical points that become common places throughout his book.

Dostoyevsky's books, particularly Demons and The Idiot reveal that ideology "can cripple human impulses, blind men to simple fact, make them monsters by tempting them into that fatal habit which anthropologists call 'reifying' ideas" (Howe 17). More importantly, Howe sees Dostoyevsky along with the other authors as examples of how "intelligent men survive,"

amidst hostile political, aesthetic and material conditions. When Howe does attend to America it is to reinforce a point that Americans abhorred “political and public life,” and that our political ideas never “crystallized as in Europe” (Howe 177). Howe does not go so far to say that American writers are not concerned with these things, but when we turn back to “Black Boys and Native Sons” he clearly sees African-American experience as outside of America’s and the West’s “fate.”¹⁴ More to the point, Howe does not identify the works of Wright, Baldwin or Ellison as positing a similar preservation of “intelligence,” which for him is the central concern from Stendhal through Dostoyevsky and into twentieth century writers like Orwell and Koestler. This is not surprising given the frame Howe puts African-American literature into. In “Black Boys and Native Sons”, Ellison becomes the boundary towards which African-American literature should approach but not cross since to cross it means the failure of literature’s “public gesture.”

Of the three writers Howe discusses, he singles Ellison out for attempting to gain the “aesthetic distance” that defined mid-twentieth century American writing (Howe 112). However, Howe states that gaining this distance is impossible since “plight and protest” are the phenomenological facts of “the experience of a man with black skin...in this country,” (Howe 100). Howe continues by asking “...how could he so much as think or breathe without the impulse to ‘protest?’” (Howe 100). The rhetoric of Howe’s language, which collapses phenotypical traits (“black skin,”) biological functions (“breathing”) and the activities of reason and art (“thinking” and “writing”) constructs the “idea” of blacks as pure sensation. Aesthetic distance for Howe is synonymous with the capability of literature and its authors to achieve the possibility of understanding the social conditions that inform poetic creation. Any other way of

¹⁴ Howe cites Henry Adams’ *Democracy* alone in this enterprise. And while he says Adams prophetically anticipated the “age of ideology,” he also says that Adams lacked “insight.”

writing and understanding is impossible for African-American literature since there is nothing more to see within African-American experience than “plight and protest.”

African-Americans are objects to be documented rather than human beings out of which understanding or literature can emerge. This last statement does not mean Howe believed African-Americans could not think nor write. It does suggest that Howe could not see African-American experience and expression as a literary perspective from which a deeper intelligence about society could be achieved. Instead, this experience becomes the realm of what Hegel called “sensuous experience;” unable to generate understanding of itself or anything around it. Despite Howe’s own understanding that “realism” put complicated ideological burdens on Marxist and neoliberal critics, it was still the stylistic bounds he read African-American literature within. African-American literature was more of a “public gesture,” meaning, an empirically documented phenomenon, than a space for “autonomous” literary reflection. Howe asserts that the novel’s “inherent ambiguity” make its indulgences into sociology (which, it seems is a codeword for realism,) necessary since it is this sociological impulse that makes the novel a “public” form of expression. These comments enter into the long standing debates concerning the novel since the eighteenth century. At the same time that the novel has been seen as an unstable and what Lukacs calls a “hazardous”¹⁵ form, Erich Auerbach suggests that the European

¹⁵ This is Lukacs’ description of it in The Theory of the Novel (MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 1996.) As Lukacs argues, the novels indeterminate status is reflective of a larger problem concerning modernity. The world, since the Greeks, has lost its sense of a shared communal association so there can no longer be stories that can tell a tale and have it be about everything and everyone (like the Iliad for instance.) Neither the teller nor the hero of stories can stand for us all, a condition that Lukacs sees reflected in the transformation of literary language from that of poetry to modern prose. The pneumatic function of poetic and lyrical language found in ballads for instance changes in the modern era where the description of things is dominated by prose, which, unlike the lyric remarks upon man’s profoundly estranged and therefore human relationship to the world. The hero is never estranged and therefore do not have the human capacity for longing or desire; instead it is representative of its community and Gods. For Lukacs the novel remarks on this separation but attempts nonetheless to recreate this community. Ellison, who I do not believe read Lukacs (since I am certain no translation of Lukacs’ Theory of the Novel appears in the U.S. until the Seventies) sees the novel functioning in a similar way.

novel began to aspire towards these more grounded “public” gestures in the nineteenth century.¹⁶ African-American literature fails when it is not reducible to such public gestures for Howe.

This is the idea of the “Negro” Ellison rejects in both “The World and the Jug” and, “A Rejoinder.” This later essay extends his polemic into a more specific critique of ideology. The most important characteristic of Ellison’s rebuttal is its negative invocation of the word “idea,” a term not as important to “The World and the Jug.” In the most powerful moments of his argument, Ellison suggests that he finds it far less painful to experience segregation than to avoid reduction “imposed by ideas...,” (Ellison, 169). Not only is Southern anti-black racism cast into the realm of ideology, but Ellison also suggests that Howe’s reduction of “the Negro” into abstraction is on a continuum with this form of power. Ellison’s thinking here suggests that the material institutions of segregation and racism are not as powerful as the ideologies that inspire their existence.¹⁷ When Ellison rebuffs Howe’s comment that he is caught up with the “*idea* of the Negro,” Ellison states “I have never said that I could or *wished* to [be caught up in the idea of the Negro],” (Ellison 177). The wording of Ellison’s rejection is important: it is not “Negroes,” he rejects, but the “ideas” (or ideology) surrounding them. By connecting the problem of Richard Wright’s literary craft, Howe’s myopia concerning the aesthetic possibilities of African-

¹⁶ In *Mimesis* Auerbach’s discusses the French novel and writes that many late Nineteenth Century French novelists saw the novel as the proper medium to depict the masses. Beginning with an extended quotation by Gaucourt from the preface of *Germinie Lacerteux*, Auerbach looks at many of the French naturalists and argues that there is a stylistic generation gap between the later naturalists and earlier novelists like Proust and Stendhal. That Ellison singles out writers like Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and other Russian novelists is interesting since Auerbach similarly sees the Russian novel and its influence on French writing in the late nineteenth century as something unique. Both Ellison and Auerbach see it as simultaneously rejecting the dominating modes of romance in European literature yet offering something quite different than the naturalist aesthetic which held up a mirror to the world. Auerbach explains the lack of certain techniques in Russian novelists as the lack a realist tradition until the middle Nineteenth Century, which is symptomatic of the absence of an “enlightened, active bourgeoisie, with its assumption of economic and intellectual leadership, which everywhere else underlay modern culture in general and modern realism in particular....”

¹⁷ Ellison makes this allusion on pg 169 and more explicitly states this on pg. 181 where he says “I fear the implication of Howe’s ideas concerning the Negro writer’s role as actionist more than I do the State of Mississippi.”

American writing and Southern segregation, we can extend Ellison's concern over ideology critique into a deeper consideration of literature as a vital sphere of human action.

His "fear of Howe's ideas" provides a crucial moment to reflect on this connection. The power of Southern segregation is exerted simultaneously through two forces of law: the juridical and biological, both of which determine the horizon of what is or is not human. Such laws, to use Howe's language, are the "public gestures" that determine the social as well as imaginative relationships between humans in civil society. And indeed, Howe is right to see such a state of affairs as hellish for African-Americans, since African-Americans are seen as the exception to the apparent equality of these laws. The point however, is that the enforcement of *aesthetic law* (in the form of "protest" literature) blurs the lines between the public and the poetic in a way that allows the obvious failures of the public sphere to discipline the actions of the imagination. This does not mean that the poetic realm is lawless, but that the deterministic laws expressed in racial segregation are radically different than those found in the crafting of a novel. As mentioned earlier, Ellison agrees with Howe on the question of literature's problematic relationship to politics. But clearly, African-American literature for Howe is answerable to the laws that are closer to the social sphere (what Howe means by the "public gesture") than those related to the "formal autonomy" of novel writing. Ellison is not seeking to sever the relationship between the public and the poetic, but he is attempting to reverse the priority Howe assigns them. This reversal is where the stakes of Ellison's dogged defense of his right as a writer reveals itself. Being "literary to a fault" is where Ellison sees the laws governing poetics as the necessary corrective to the failures of the "public gesture." Secondly, it is through this "literary" realm that the survival of the human "intelligence" Ellison found in Friday and Mark Twain's Mark Jim becomes crucial in understanding America.

Comparing segregation to Howe's observations on literature reveals the way in which an ill mixture of politics and literature truncates the possibility of the literary imagination. As Ellison would say in a 1961 interview, "in the realm of the imagination all people and their ambitions and interests could meet" (Ellison 71). Political critique for Ellison is more absolute compared to the "crudeness" of segregation's social repression (Ellison 177).¹⁸ Howe's on the other hand leaves little room for African-American writers to create themselves between "his racial predicament, his individual will and...broader American culture" (Ellison, 160). This self-fashioning, or what Ellison calls the "willed affirmation" of being a "Negro," is already negated by the "idea of the Negro" Howe discusses in his essay. If, as Ellison suggests, words can "suggest and foreshadow overt *action*," Howe's brand of racial politics disguises "the moral consequences of that *action*."

We can see connections between Ellison's critique of Hemingway in "Twenty Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" and his later critique of Irving Howe during the Cold War. Just as Howe sought some continuity between Stendhal, Dostoyevsky and Orwell that suggested the survival of "intelligence men" within modernity so has Ellison. And while Ellison appears to have written himself within this tradition he does this by seeing himself in the tradition of nineteenth century American writers such as Herman Melville, Stephan Crane and

¹⁸ The difference is that material segregation still allows for the possibility of human action, which he understands as the Negroes making a "cultural heritage...shaped by the American experience." Ellison's use of the term "cultural heritage," might strike one as being oxymoronic since he spends so much of this essay and disabusing Howe of assuming such generalizations about African-Americans. However, as one reads down the list of things composing what he calls the "concord of sensibilities" constituting the "Negro experience," he ends it saying that this condition is a "willed" one. Being a "Negro" stands for an "affirmation of self as against all outsidess pressures – an identification with the group as extended through the individual self which rejects all possibilities of escape that do not involve a basic resuscitation of the original American ideals of social and political justice. And those white Negroes (and I do not mean Norman Mailer's dream creatures) are Negroes too – if they wish to be." (pg.179) In other words, for Ellison, it is a universal condition created by the forces of modernity, but is also one that comes as a product of thinking since it is "willed" into being. So it appears that Ellison is stating that it is possible to be African-American and not a "Negro" as whites can be "if they wish...."

most importantly Mark Twain. For all of them, “the Negro” suggests an expression of intelligence about the human that Howe’s criticism did not see.

In “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” and “The World and the Jug,” Ellison creates a threshold through which a line of post-Civil War authors – Herman Melville, Stephen Crane, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner – can become the touchstone for a humanistic literary tradition centered on “the Negro.” These authors form a countervailing tradition to the stylistic and philosophical problems Realism presented for Ellison in the Thirties. As a writer caught between the elitist, Modernism of the New York Intellectuals and the nascent American canon exemplified in F.O. Matthiessen, Ellison’s feat as a critic is to make the case that Melville and Twain spoke to Dostoyevsky and Stendhal, Joyce and Malraux. As an inheritor of European and American literary traditions, Ellison, like many of his Modernist peers, sought to create some form of continuity between traditions. The concern in Ellison is how this continuity is established and how can Western literary humanism accommodate the humanistic quandary of “the Negro.” Irving Howe, Mary McCarthy and others make it clear that American literature at the turn of the twentieth century (with few exceptions) breaks with the speculative energy of Europe. Ellison saw otherwise and it was around the fallout of the Civil War and the American problem of racism that he saw this speculation occurring in American literary traditions.

Just as important as his critical response to Hemingway and Howe is his poetic response. Along with opening up a “threshold” through criticism Ellison also used his fiction to make a similar point. In the final section of my chapter, I will read “Battle Royal” as Ellison’s own “Sphinx.” Like the complex beginnings Ellison created through “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” I see “The Battle Royal” as Ellison’s literary presentation of a

similar beginning. “Battle Royal” is sandwiched between his break from Hemingway in “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” and Ellison’s reiteration of this break in “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion,” the speech he gave upon winning the National Book Award. As the self-acknowledged dramatic centerpiece of Ellison’s then novel in progress this episode functions as more than a metaphorical broadside on the complexities of American racism. Taken in the above context, it can also be read as Ellison’s imaginative intervention into the aesthetic debates about interwar literary modernism, a debate that constructed a very particular place for the fiction written by African-Americans of the 1930s and 40s. The change in Ellison’s fiction after World War II coincides with his questioning the efficacy of naturalism and realism as an aesthetic in representing certain post-war American realities. The “crisis” Ellison would point out in the American novel during his 1953 acceptance speech had already happened and “Twentieth Century Criticism...” is Ellison’s initial testament to its existence.

And so is “Battle Royal.” In “Twentieth Century”, Ellison laments the absence of African-American characters in Naturalist fiction. As Ellison writes Naturalist fiction writers “seldom conceive Negro characters possessing the full, complex ambiguity of the human. Too often what is presented as the American Negro (a most complex example of Western man) emerges as an oversimplified clown, a beast or an angel” (Ellison 82). Ellison’s move away from naturalism in “Battle Royal” is shown in his clear embrace of the kind of ironic distance, dense literary allusiveness and brutal cynicism that marked the figures championed by the literary left at the end of the 1930s: Dostoyevsky, Joyce, Kafka, Malraux, and Koestler. Not only does Ellison’s embrace of these authors denote a change in his politics – as well as those of the left – but more importantly they allude to the aesthetic transformation Ellison had gone through.

“Battle Royal,” was America’s first taste of the direction Ellison’s aesthetic education took after the 1930s. But it is not a complete break since there are some elements in it that harkens back to Ellison’s earlier fiction. “Battle Royal’s” powerful juxtaposition of the common place with the surreal reads very much like “A Party Down at the Square,” which was written about ten years earlier (Callahan xxii). The “party” at the center of his story is in fact a lynching that occurs during a coming cyclone. Similar to the naïve narrator of “Battle Royal,” Ellison chose as his narrator a small nameless white child from Cincinnati who was visiting an uncle in Alabama and bears witness to his first and last “party.” The absurdist center piece of “A Party” comes when a commercial airliner, mistaking the fires of lynching for landing flares, attempts to land and eventually crashes in the town square. Ellison’s juxtaposition of the coming storm and the brutal lynching is very similar to Richard Wright’s story “Down By the Riverside,” where Wright uses the moody backdrop of a natural catastrophe to comment on the persistence social and racial violence. The matter of fact vernacular reportage of his nameless, naïve child narrator becomes a device for the story to build tension between the sublime horror of the events and the rigid restraint of the child’s language. Such a technique is very much keeping with Ellison’s stylistic relationship to Hemingway.

But “Party Down at the Square” like “Boy on a Train” and “I Didn’t Learn Their Names,” clearly bears the trace of Ellison’s early allegiance to the tropes of proletariat fiction found in Wright, Frank Norris and others. Symbolically, the coming storm says as much about the irrationality of Alabama’s racial violence as it does the possible political changes coming to this fictional town. Images of disenfranchised, disenchanted and “hungry white folks” whose mouths “won’t keep shut for long” close this story along with the suggestion of an investigation into the plane crash and lynching. The absurd and sublime scene of racial violence is linked to

the material conditions of hunger and scarcity. “Battle Royal” similarly displayed Ellison’s mastery over the key tropes of proletariat realism and Hemingway’s naturalism. *Battle Royal* also seems to push beyond the aesthetic horizons set before him in the 1930s. His self-styled tutelage in the techniques of avant-garde modernism is just as apparent as these earlier styles. The mimetic power of place found in “A Party”, “Boy on a Train”, which are connected to Wright, Hemingway and Anderson is absent in “Battle Royal.” Ellison’s “south” in “Battle Royal” is not a place but a mood.

His emphasis on atmosphere and mood as opposed to realism of place can also be seen in “King of the Bingo Game”, published in 1944. If Ellison is practicing a form of realism in the “Battle Royal” it is realism akin to Franz Kafka’s, who in writing his novella *Amerika* (1919) saw himself as a realist in the vein of Charles Dickens (Kafka xxvii).¹⁹ Kafka’s America is thoroughly symbolic, especially since he never set foot in America but fabricated it out of travelogues and accounts from friends. Ellison, who spent an extended period of time in the south at Tuskegee, is not a southerner either. Like the battle royal itself, the south and the smoker are symbolic of something American. Two key elements of his story express the “complex ambiguity” Ellison sought in modernist presentations of “the Negro.” First is the self-conscious, yet anxious aspect of the narrator’s storytelling. The naiveté of his earlier narrators was a way for Ellison to deploy a Hemingway-esque matter of fact reportage. In the battle royal,

¹⁹ It is also important to note that Kafka’s unfinished novella bears great similarity to Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. The German title of *Amerika* was *Der Verschollene* or the “The Man Who Disappeared.” Karl Rossmann, the protagonist of Kafka’s novel is a similarly aged and equally naïve character as Ellison’s narrator; both of whom quest through the American landscape. There are two narrative points of particular interest. First, Karl ends his travels in Oklahoma, which had barely been a state by the time Kafka had conceived and written his unfinished novel. Kafka himself had said that he wanted to end his novel on a note of reconciliation and it is interesting that he chose to do so in one that was barely formed and perhaps the most ethnically diverse in the union. The second is also one of the most puzzling moments in Kafka’s book. Rossmann, after ending up at the Nature Theater in Oklahoma as a day laborer, signs his employment documents with the name “Negro.” Whether the “Negro” held some symbolic meaning in Kafka’s works before or after *Amerika* I do not know. But it is incredibly fascinating that Karl’s Americanization in the novel is for Kafka thought analogous to being a “Negro.”

Ellison creates a narrative consciousness that has a profound if uncertain mastery over the efficacy of storytelling itself. His narrator's mastery is reflected in Ellison's own self-conscious allusions to the confessional and the bildungsroman genres at the beginning of his novel. Instead of using them to give an unmediated sense of the narrative self, Ellison uses them to heighten the skeptical and ironic tone of the novel. The other is the narrator's nightmare self-recognition as a "nigger-boy." One part dark comedy and one part brutal observation, I read this figure in the context of Ellison's attempts to insert the Negro problem within the traditions literary modernism. The "Nigger-boy," like Friday and Jim is a crucial self-reflective beginnings, the threshold through which Ellison's narrator understands himself and Ellison the author can think the complex ambiguity of "the Negro" in America.

There are no radical changes to note between Ellison's short story and the episode as it appears in Invisible Man. However, the addition of a prologue to the novel significantly changes how we understand the narrator of Ellison's short story. The prologue foregrounds the narrator's naiveté through juxtaposing his "present" and "past" consciousness. This clash is best seen in the narrator's determination to give his valedictorian speech despite the dehumanizing context of the Battle Royal (Ellison 18, 25, 29). The praise that the narrator received after his speech, despite his simultaneous dehumanization affirms for him that the Booker T. Washington inspired ideas of progress and humility are not "traitorous" ones as his grandfather intuits on his deathbed. In fact, the narrator feels like his conforming to the idea of "progress and humility" wards off his grandfather's dying curse since he is rewarded with a college scholarship for his actions (Ellison 32).

Like Dostoyevsky's narrator in Notes From Underground, Ellison's use of the confessional mode foregrounds the narrator's attempt to convey the event as he experienced it at

the time, but also to conscientiously saturate this retelling with his past naiveté. This has the effect of making the process of storytelling an active reflection on the past. Compared to stories like “A Party”, “A Boy on a Train” or Ellison’s Buster and Reilly tales, Ellison has created a level of self-consciousness about the act of storytelling itself. Confession produces one particular frame for his narrative. It emphasizes the distinction between the narrator’s present, albeit uncertain knowledge, the act of storytelling and the “tale” itself. With the use of the confessional mode, Ellison makes use of the performative aspect of enunciation. The narrator makes himself a protagonist in a story that, as he suggests in the “Epilogue”, he has told many times and in many different ways. Ellison presents him as an active consciousness attempting to infuse significance into these past events by using multiple devices to infuse the narrator’s present into the story’s “past.” For instance, there are multiple parenthetical interjections of his present observations – which are often derisive – on his past actions (like his dogged determination to give his speech at the beginning of the novel).

Despite the narrator’s constant self-criticism, it is not a narrative consciousness that ever arrives at a final judgment about his own actions. Not only is this expressed in the ambivalence of the novel’s famous final lines (“*Who knows but that, on lower frequencies I speak for you?*”) but also the narrator’s own skepticism about his own decision to frame his story in the confessional mode. At the beginning of the epilogue, we are told that “Well, now I’ve been trying to look through myself, and there’s a risk in it. I was never more hated than when I tried to be honest. Or when, even as just now I’ve tried to articulate exactly what I felt to be the truth. No one was satisfied – not even I,” (Ellison 573). The lack of satisfaction Ellison’s narrator feels with the “truth” or “the absurd” leads us to believe that what we have been privy to throughout this story is not the mimetic revealing of narrative events through a confessional mode, but

instead a contrived, often told tale that has yet to satisfy any sense of meaning in and of the world, (Ellison 573).²⁰ As the narrator tells us, part of the risk in telling his story has been related to “trying to look through myself.” If anything, the story (and the novel) just reveals more absurdity concerning Ellison’s narrator, his world and consequently the kind of world that the novel makes known to us. The narrator’s uncertainty at the end of the novel points to two things: both his failure to fully understand the events he has been involved in but more importantly, whether his story is coherent at all.

Further, as Ellison the critic is attempting to write himself into the traditions of literary humanism, Ellison the author is clearly playing with these same literary tradition and conventions in this story. The irony Ellison produces from the beginning of the novel emphasizes his protagonist’s present insights as much as its confessional mode emphasizes his past ignorance. But the narrator’s “present” mode of storytelling, which reveals his development of a consciousness different than the one he formally had also suggests the novel’s relationship to the bildungsroman. As a modernist writer attempting to meld Marx and Freud’s observations about the past’s uneasy coexistence with the present, Invisible Man transforms common place understandings of the bildungsroman. Traditionally, development in the bildungsroman is accomplished from the “outside” and in order to create harmony between the actions of the private individual and larger civil and state institutions as Todd Kotje states in The German

²⁰ Directly preceding the above quotation, Ellison’s narrator tells us that “On the other hand, I’ve never been so loved and appreciated as when I tried to ‘justify’ and affirm someone’s mistaken beliefs; or when I’ve tried to give my friends the incorrect, absurd answers they wished to hear. In my presence they could talk and agree with themselves, the world was nailed down and they loved it.” Absurdity is mobilized in a very different and in fact celebratory way near the end of the novel as well. During the riot scene in Harlem, the narrator upon seeing Ras upon his horse states that through this image, he recognized the “absurdity of the whole night.” This absurdity however is linked with “the simple yet complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate, that had brought me here still running, and knowing now how I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion and impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine” (559).

Bildungsroman: History of a Genre (Kotje 5). Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship farcically presents this process throughout his novel. Wilhelm painfully realizes that the life he thought was the product of his own willful actions was in fact "directed" by a secret society who engineered many of his experiences throughout the novel. The third person narrator in Goethe's novel allows the reader to see this farce since Wilhelm remains clueless to the end.

A similar trajectory of development is used in Invisible Man. Unlike Goethe's novel, the narrator's self-conscious enunciation constantly foregrounds the forces that aid or hinder his ability to think and act. Through this technique, *bildung* is constantly undermined by the narrator who is attempting to highlight the clash between his own individual understanding and those civil institutions seeking to shape him. The effect of this is another instance of Ellison's employment of irony through his use of traditional narrative form. Despite the narrator's early acceptance of the ideology of "progress," Ellison situates the narrator in a way to offer up his story to reveal the fraught nature of forward movement. Through his allusions to the confessional mode and the bildungsroman, Ellison constructs the narrative of Invisible Man in a way that situates the narrator's story as one always up for speculation. Instead of hiding the machinery of narrative production, the novel foregrounds the narrator's conscientious intentions to narrate and create meaning. By focusing on the narrator's self-conscious attempts to narrate, Ellison's novel creates a connection between the *how* of storytelling and the kind of knowledge that could be produced out of it. From the beginning Ellison's novel is in fact attempting to solve the riddle of humanity his grandfather set before him. But as we know from both the prologue and epilogue, the narrator has not quite figured this puzzle out.

Traditionally the novel's confessional and bildungsroman modes are associated with positivistic, Enlightenment ideals since, as narrative modes, they are associated with the

emergence of reason and the individual human consciousness (Kotje 9 and Watt 15). But Ellison's use of these conventions in Invisible Man calls these positive humanistic values into question and illuminates the discursive way the self is constructed. Despite the "complete anarchy," the narrator describes during the Battle Royal, the actions of the burlesque dancer ("flung herself about with a detached expression on her face"), the narrator ("I spoke automatically and with such fervor...") and all the boys involved ("fighting automatically") are described as "automatic" and "impersonal" (Ellison 19, 24, 30). All of these descriptions and in particular the narrator's "automatic" speech highlight a lack of agency on the part of the narrator and those around him. Ellison's emphasis on "unwilled" actions shows how Ellison turns both the idea of individual progress (bildung) and self-revelation (confession) on their heads.

The content and form of the narrator's speech at the end of the Battle Royal gives us insight into how Ellison's novel portrays this reversal. What has been given the most critical attention is the ideological content of the narrator's speech. There are snatches of Booker T. Washington's infamous phrase, "cast your bucket where you are", which clash with Dubois' radical call for equality at the end of the nineteenth century. In "Failed Prophet and Falling Stock: Why Ralph Ellison Was Never Avant Garde," Houston Baker reads the narrator's speech as emblematic of Ellison's own fear of "White" disciplinary power. The narrator's speech in Invisible Man and its violent setting mark a paranoid fictional mind unaware that this power can be escaped. For Baker, the play of ideologies in the speech is a red herring for stasis and the status quo (Baker 8).

Baker is right in the sense that the narrator's value to the men assembled at the Battle Royal is in his ability to "automatically" reproduce this power (Baker 9). The narrator's supposed "intelligence" and self-styled sense of being a "potential Booker T. Washington" is

ironically the product of this very discipline. He is literally bloodied and beaten by the south's racialized system of caste as the White townsmen cryptically tell him to progress by "developing as you are," (Klein 113 and Ellison 32). This violent disciplinary force "encourages him in the right direction," yet also calls into question the inherent value of the narrator's own "past" revelations and desires, something Ellison's persistent mode of irony foregrounds.

Further lending to this anarchic situation is the narrator's accidental slip replacing the phrase "social responsibility" with "social equality." His mistaken utterance of a "phrase I had often seen denounced in newspaper editorials, heard debated in private" introduces an idea ("equality") that goes against the ideology of social responsibility enforced by white men of his town (Ellison 31). Social responsibility in the novel is a paradox since responsibility is not to the self but to the racial hierarchies of power in the South. "Equality", which the narrator states he read in a newspaper, also stands for what I see as Ellison's self-conscious insertion of contemporary events into the beginning of the novel. Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 study An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy attacks the juridical and philosophical pillar of Southern life: the absence of social equality for African-Americans (Myrdal).²¹ Ellison's review of An American Dilemma critiqued Myrdal's sterile "scientific" approach as inadequate to capture the mercurial forces of myth and history that under-gird power and race in

²¹ While not the intent of this chapter, it would not be hard to read Ellison's scene at the Battle Royal as a profound engagement with Gunnar Myrdal's An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy. Myrdal, who bases the argument of his book on the problem of "social equality", says the following about the source of inequality: "The kernel of the popular theory of 'no social equality' will, when pursued be presented as a firm determination on the part of the whites to block amalgamation and preserve 'the purity of the white race'" (Myrdal 956). Gunnar Myrdal expands on this by stating that: "The fixation on the purity of white womanhood, and also part of the intensity of emotion surrounding the whole sphere of segregation and discrimination, are to be understood as the backwashes of the sore conscience on the part of white men for their own ore their compeers' relations with, or desires for, Negro women" (958).

America (Ellison 338). So while “equality” creates a powerful disturbance during the battle royal it also becomes another duplicitous idea within its chaos.

All of this lends some credence to Houston Baker’s ultimate reading of the battle royal as Ellison’s cynical and quietist vision of the “public sphere” (Baker 11). But I wonder if we cannot see the vision of chaos Ellison presents is his attempt to represent the mercurial discursive forces of myth and history that also constitute the public sphere. The plastic nature of “progress”, “equality” and the “self” in this scene echoes Ellison’s critique of Myrdal’s American Dilemma, where he states Myrdal “avoids the question of power” and the functioning force of history in his analysis (Ellison 338). What Ellison shows in the Battle Royal are the ambiguous, shadowy operations of power on these very concepts. So instead of their assumed positive humanistic value they are also used for repression.

In Mimesis Erich Auerbach writes that enlightenment ideas of progress and modernity were met with profound skepticism by Dostoyevsky and many of his Russian contemporaries. Auerbach describes these continental European ideas as coming into “shocking,” and violent collision with Russia’s culture during the nineteenth century (Auerbach 523). The violence of this collision is important in understanding how Dostoyevsky and other Russian novelists represent their characters. In Dostoyevsky, Auerbach sees characters acting “almost without transition”, displaying “tremendous and unpredictable oscillations” or in “words and acts,” revealing “chaotic instinctive depths...” (523).

Dostoyevsky’s Notes from Underground demonstrates Auerbach’s observation. The narrator in Notes from Underground consistently describes his attempts to show affection and “sentimentality” as “artificial” and “bookish”, (Dostoyevsky 81). Even at the very end, when Liza returns to the narrator he describes his rejection as “not an impulse from the heart,” but one

that came “from my evil brain. This cruelty was so affected, so purposely made up, so completely a *product* of the brain, of *books*, that I could not keep it up for a minute....” (Dostoyevsky 81). The narrator realizes that his abstract ideas concerning human emotions and affection come out of sentimental French literature. As I have suggested through the use of Auerbach, Ellison’s battle royal scene is staging a similar violent collision. Along with the use of novel genres, the very content of the royal itself suggests this clash. The general description of the scene is peppered with circus imagery (Ellison 33). The burlesque dancer is described as having hair “like that of a kewpie doll,” a face formed into “an abstract mask,” eyes “the color of a baboon’s butt,” breasts “firm and round as the domes of East Indian temples,” (Ellison 19). And so is Tatlock, whom the narrator describes as a “stupid clown” (Ellison 25). The controlled anarchy of a circus is a fitting metaphor for the battle royal. We are not given an actual location since the locale of the smoker and the town it occurs in goes nameless. The battle royal and for that matter the south we see in the first parts of Ellison’s novel is a thoroughly symbolic presentation of American life. It is a surreal “collision” of progressive democratic idealism, social uplift and their connection to the powerful violence of anti-black racism.

As Ellison himself remarks in “Going to the Territory”, the battle royal serves as a metaphor for the workings of history and politics itself which “appear to be basic to our conception of freedom, and the drama of democracy proceeds through a warfare of words and symbolic actions....Since the Civil War this form of symbolic action has served as a moral substitute for armed warfare...” (Ellison 595). The battle royal, the South and America are presented to us as a deep eddy where a multitude of historical and ideological forces have pooled together – not placidly, but in open contestation, violence and organized anarchy, which Ellison crystallizes in the nightmare that ends the story. Baker’s “quietist” reading is also hard to see if

the battle royal is taken in the context of Ellison's intellectual protest of both Myrdal's sociology and the unimaginative sociology of Naturalist prose. To use Auerbach's terms, the nightmare reveals the "chaotic depths" that rest underneath the battle royal's surface. That Ellison frames these depths as nightmarish is a common place in his writing. It is part of the way Ellison expresses the "complex ambiguity" of racism in America and I would also say his modernism. Throughout his essays Ellison uses the nightmare to comment on what he sees as America's irrational and unconscious "preoccupation" with race.

Sleep, dreams and the unconscious are a powerful trope in Modernist literature in part because of the influence of both Freud and Jung. Freud's influence upon Ellison is written all over Invisible Man, most explicitly in the Trueblood incident as well as the narrator's encounter with Freud's Totem and Taboo (1913) later on in the novel. The "mixed character of nightmare and of dream" is what Ellison saw in Oklahoma City as well as America. And hence in the introduction of Shadow and Act Ellison takes this mixed character and transfigures it a "shadow" from which Ellison the critic emerged. But as Robert Abrams acknowledges in "The Ambiguities of Dreaming in Ellison's Invisible Man" the self [and author for that matter] that emerges from Ellison's interest in the unconscious is quite un-Freud like. Abrams continues and writes that Ellison's hallucinatory fantasies defy the Freudian perspective of the dream as an "equivocating yet decipherable idiom" (Abrams 593). Freud's "Metapsychological Supplement to the Theory of Dreams," bears this out. In the same way human beings "lay aside the garments they pull over their skin..." Freud writes that dreams are a similar "dismantling" of our minds (Freud 151). Most striking about Freud's description of this dismantling is the linguistic terms he frames it in. "As the work of interpretation traces the course taken by the dream work," Freud explains, it:

follows the paths which lead from the latent thoughts to the dream-elements, exhausts the possible meanings of verbal ambiguities and points out the words that act as bridges between groups of materials, we receive an impression now of a joke, now of schizophrenia, and are apt to forget that for a dream all operations with words are merely preparatory to regression to concrete ideas (Freud 157-8).

Where Freud sees language (“words”) bearing the marks of the unconscious yet ultimately leading to the “concrete idea” Ellison saw the operation of language as leading towards what he calls in the “Introduction” of Shadow and Act as “the surreal incongruity” of American life. The chaos of the dream brought us to an origins while for Ellison, the ambiguity of the shadow for a writer, the “incongruities” that emerged from it must defy the concrete ideas of “social hierarchy and order” in his world (Ellison 53). Ellison’s defiance fits the modernist use of the dream. The dream’s power of revelation is also the sign of something pernicious in Modernism. The “unconscious,” As Stephan Thompson writes in “Sleepwalking into Modernity: Bourdieu and the Case of Ernest Dowson” also appears in images “of unwilled action, representations that scramble the usual distribution of ideas of sleeping and waking.” Hypnotism, somnambulism, hysteria”, Thompson continues, “are dominant preoccupations of the psychological and medico-legal and other literature,” in Modernism (Thompson 502). As Merle Curti explains in “The American Exploration of Dreams and Dreamers,” these figures had a “powerful hold” on American literary and intellectual traditions in the twentieth-century (Curti 401-5, 426).

As a literary trope though, we could see that the nightmare’s influence on Ellison is also related to what William Maxwell calls Ellison’s “radical education” (Maxwell 59). As Maxwell states, despite the novel’s strong anti-communism, Ellison’ “Harlem” education is retained in Invisible Man’s commitment to the “folk” and folk cultural forms (Maxwell 82). Particularly in

Ellison's early Buster and Riley stories you can see his experimentation with folk forms. In "Battle Royal" and Invisible Man's use of the "nightmare" we can also see the influence of Karl Marx and in particular Marx's opening of The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte in which the problem of bourgeois ideology and France's imperial past is "...a nightmare on the brain of the living" (Marx, 15). Marx's opening to The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte brings to mind Thompson's observations about the nineteenth century's obsession with figures of "unwilled action." Besides Ellison's early "radical" training – which also bears the marks of Kenneth Burke's influence – more direct, figural representations of the unconscious and nightmares can be culled from Ellison's immediate literary influences and circumstances. From the beginning of Andre Malraux's 1931 novel Man's Fate to Arthur Koestler's 1941 novel Darkness at Noon and also Langston Hughes' two books of political poetry The Dream Keeper and Other Poems (1932) and Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951).

Ellison's intellectual context suggests that his interest in dreams, nightmares and the unconscious is not purely a psychoanalytic enterprise interested in the "self." In his constant ruminations on identity Ellison's criticism does allow any easy revelation of the "self" at all. Dreams and nightmares lead not to the concrete but a "complex ambiguity" about the human. In many ways Ellison's thinking anticipates Edward Said's use of Freud in Beginnings over 20 years later. Said reads Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams as revealing the "traces of the unconscious in language" (Said, 179). But these traces are "substitutions" which, according to Said, point away from definitive "origins" within the unconscious. Instead it is the human effort at "interpretation" that is crucial for Said in Freud. Literary language in other words is a way for humans to imaginatively reconstruct a beginning. For both Ellison and Said the novel is one prime example of this attempt. According to Said it tells the "biography" of our human and

literary attempts to create meaning in relationship to those forces “beyond the bounds of human biography” (Said 182).

The nightmare at the end of battle royal – just like Ellison’s novel – is the moment where this “beyond” is presented. It is not the beyond of Freud’s concrete idea but presents to us a thoroughly symbolic catachresis: the narrator’s self-identification as a “Nigger-boy.” Instead of exhausting the existence of verbal ambiguities, this figure crackles with the “complex ambiguity” of the human Ellison desired in American modernist traditions. Not only is the “nigger-boy” the narrator’s first scene of self-recognition but also the novel’s opening aesthetic salvo. Unlike the narrator’s participation in the circus-like atmosphere of the battle royal, he sits in attendance with his recently past grandfather “who refused to laugh” no matter what these clowns did (Ellison 33). Standing in the place of the school superintendent, the Grandfather turns the briefcase and the scholarship he wins during the fight into objects of ambiguous portent. Unlike the envelope containing his scholarship, the empty envelopes in his nightmare repeat themselves, revealing envelopes that seemingly have no end (33). The last engraved document found in the briefcase eloquently captures the complexity of the Battle Royal and the character at the center of it.

Its message, “To Whom It May Concern...Keep this Nigger-Boy Running” anticipates future events in Ellison’s novel to be. We can see this in the letter the narrator receives from Bledsoe, his work documents at Liberty Paints and the slip of paper with his new Brotherhood name. Most often, this message is interpreted as a metaphor for the perpetual oppression of African-Americans in a white world. But at this point I think it is important to recall Ellison’s concern over the “Negroes” disappearance in American literature and the absence of a necessary “deep probing” skepticism. With Ellison’s concern in mind, we should take the phrase as

something else. “To Whom It May Concern: Keep this Nigger-Boy Running” is Ellison’s parodic yet ethically informed advice for the American writer and critic. In a very direct way I see Ellison addressing what he saw as the absence of the stylistic and intellectual concerns about the Negro that produced Mark Twain’s “Jim.” The nameless narrator, like “Jim” is Ellison’s contribution to America’s aesthetic concern with “the Negro problem.” And Ellison has kept Jim “running” but puts him through the imaginative mill of his modernist literary education. Robert Abrams has read the nightmarish aesthetics of Invisible Man as Ellison’s recognition that “the modern American artist...is bereft of iconography in a problematic, dissonant world” (Abrams 603). I think Ellison is aware of this and what we see in “Battle Royal” as well as his post-War criticism is his creation of such an iconography for the Negro beginning with Twain. Instead of the “icon” I want to suggest another idea to describe Ellison’s “nigger-boy”, which is indeed a strange avatar for the human. Erich Auerbach’s understanding of *figura* seems apropos in light of Ellison’s own aesthetic and intellectual concerns. In his reading of Dante’s Divine Comedy Auerbach suggests that Dante strove not towards allegory but a figural and thoroughly historical interpretation of reality. *Figura* captures concrete historical reality by presenting a figure simultaneously with its potential or what Auerbach calls “fulfillment.” As Auerbach writes “For Dante the literal meaning or historical reality of a figure stands in no contradiction to its profounder meaning, but precisely ‘figures’ it; the historical reality is not annulled but confirmed by the deeper meaning” (Auerbach 73).

Ellison’s “nigger-boy” is in fact such a figure. Exploring the catachresis created by the phrase will allow us some insight into its value as *figura*. As Ronald Judy has shown the word “nigger” became synonymous with “work” and “labor” during the nineteenth-century. “The value of the nigger is not in the physical body itself but in the energy, the potential

force...standing-in-reserve" (Judy 321). With this definition in mind, Judy – invoking Dubois – explores the meaning of the nineteenth-century term “bad nigger; which he describes as “an oxymoron” since it suggests “rebellious property.” Judy writes that “In rebellion, the bad nigger exhibits an autonomous will, which a nigger as commodity is not allowed to exhibit. There is little more dangerous than a willful thing, since it reveals the impossibility of completely subjecting the will (321). According to the OED, “Boy’s” derogatory use in the U.S. – as a reference to slaves and servants of the aristocracy – derives from a similar historical moment. While reinforcing the derogatory nature of the word nigger, the word is also etymologically associated with “youth.” And it is this association that is germane to some of the formal aspects of Ellison’s novel. Here Goethe’s Wilhelm Meisters Apprenticeship becomes an important touchstone since Invisible Man formally invokes the bildungsroman. By the end of the eighteenth century youth becomes symbolic of the transformations in European society brought on by the Enlightenment and the disintegration of “status society.” The bildungsroman flourishes within these transformations as a since as a literary genre it privileges youth as the most meaningful stage of life (Moretti 3).

“Boy’s” juxtaposition with “nigger” therefore conjoins a thoroughly historical modern figure of oppression and potential with a modern literary and biological figure of human possibility. Perhaps it is now important to return to Ellison’s reading of Twain against Hemingway. For Ellison, Jim *and* Huck, nigger *and* boy – together – become the *figura* through which Ellison identifies a thoroughly literary and historical example of the human condition in modernity. Within the context of his nightmare, the narrator simultaneously signals his condition as a dehumanized potential force – a nigger – and limitless human potential – boy. Like Auerbach’s *figura*, the narrator’s profounder meaning stands in no contradiction to his

oppressive present. We can also see how Ellison the writer is able to marshal together his modernism and romanticism, Freud and Marx, Twain and Goethe to summon this *figura*, which indicates his limitless potential as an African-American artist. In contradistinction to interwar American modernist writers Ellison marshals the “open-ended possibilities” of literary tradition, form and history to produce the “nigger-boy.” So the open address of his letter, which doubles as an appeal to all, through all time suggests that we must keep this *figura* of the human running. Reading “The Battle Royal as purely social allegory is hard to do when taking Ellison’s story in the context of his protests against modernism. So to answer the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter, the Battle Royal cannot be best understood as merely allegorical or purely within contemporary traditions of realism but as Ellison’s attempt at presenting the human. The “beginnings” Ellison produced for himself in “Twentieth Century Fiction” is echoed in “Battle Royal”, Invisible Man and many of his other writings.

In retrospect, Ellison’s rumination on Hemingway and American literature proves to be a moment of profound transformation for him. It is hard to say that Ellison kills his father in critiquing Hemingway, especially since later on he would wholly embrace him as an “ancestor.” However, his critique of modernism in “Twentieth Century” is part of a larger move away from realism and proletarian naturalism. Coming on the heels of his declaration of a “new American Humanism”, it is apparent that “the Negro” and modernism have a central role in the humanism Ellison desires. After winning the National Book Award Ellison would travel to Austria in 1954 and teach in the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies. Established in 1947 by the Harvard University Council, its mission was to expose Central European students to American culture. At some point, the U.S. Army and the State Department, in its effort to create “ideological

conformity,” took over the seminar and exerted veto power over who could and could not be invited to teach there.

Once he arrived there, Ellison would revisit many of these concerns in a class called "The Role of the Novel in Creating the American Experience." And while there is no doubt Ellison would present the American Negro in all its complexity, one wonders to what end Ellison's ideas were enmeshed in the complex ideological operations of America's Cold War. While published in 1965, one of his most famous essays "Tell It Like It Is, Baby" was conceived out of his experiences in Austria. Just like "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" Ellison returns to the problem of literary humanism, the absence of the "Negro" and its relationship to American literary traditions. It is the humanist concept of "renaissance" that will concern Ellison in Rome, Austria and later in "Tell It Like It Is, Baby." And just like in "Battle Royal" it is both the "nightmare" and a version of his "nigger-boy" that Ellison returns to in order to contemplate the efficacy of America's literary humanism.

Chapter 2: Ellison in Exile: “Tell It Like It Is, Baby” and the Problem of Renaissance

“It is not simply the birth of the nation we now commemorate but its regeneration... We have little hesitation in predicting that the effects of the revolution though which we are now passing upon European politics will be still more marked than the effects of the revolution of 1776,” The Nation (1865).

The use of birth and rebirth as a trope to represent historical change or historical periods is not new. But it is something that has held America in a particularly tight grasp since the late nineteenth century. At the end of Reconstruction in 1877, the fires that forged America’s present sense of modernity burned hottest. The country’s identity as a modern place with modern people is partially bound with the ascendant value of rational, scientific modes of inquiry and industrial capitalism. Alongside this industrial modernity, American scholars and industrialists also bound the country’s identity to newly forged intellectual ties to classical Renaissance antiquity. It is in the late Nineteenth Century historiography of Jacob Burckhardt and his The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (1867) that we first find the identification of the Italian Medieval Period as a “renaissance.” And as Jonathan Arac writes in “F.O. Matthiessen: Authorizing an American Renaissance,” (1985,) Burckhardt’s intellectual influence had an effect on the way Americans undertook classical studies as well as the way Americans saw themselves connected to the ancient past, (Arac 94). The American Academy at Rome, where Ralph Ellison would begin writing “Tell It Like It Is, Baby” in 1955 has a history leading back to American Reconstruction and America’s renaissance sentiment. In 1894, Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., William K. Vanderbilt and Henry Clay Frick, founded the new American School

of Architecture in Rome. Then one year later the American School of Classical Studies in Rome was formed by the Archaeological Institute of America. The American Academy in Rome, officially created a year before the beginning of World War I, is the combination of these two separate institutions. The end of Reconstruction was also the period that many of our modern professional academic institutions are founded. While the American Philological Association, American Social Science Association and American Association for the Advancement of Science were already in existence by the 1880s, by the turn of the century the American Historical Association, the Modern Language Association and many other institutions dedicated to specialized form of Humanist knowledge are established.

Besides these concrete institutions, America has always invoked such “renaissance” sentiments to those writing about it. America was at once John Winthrop’s Puritan “city on the hill” and Hegel’s land of the future. In his 1964 address describing the Great Society, Lyndon Johnson called America a “challenge constantly renewed,” not a “safe harbor.” Even now, America’s post-9/11 sentiment sees its contemporary generation as a rebirth of World War II’s “greatest generation.” This is in much the same way Americans during World War II looked back to its own Civil War past for meaning. If 1776 was America’s revolt against tyranny and Emerson’s time was the birth of America’s “renaissance feeling,” then the Civil War is where this “renaissance” was consecrated and institutionalized. America’s post-Civil War “rebirth” also meant a separation from Europe. The South’s defeat at the end of the Civil War becomes a defeat of all that was associated with European backwardness: aristocracy, feudalism, tyrannical monarchy and human bondage. In the months after Lincoln’s assassination, James Russell Lowell’s “Ode Recited at the Harvard Commemoration” included a line proclaiming that in America “nothing of Europe here, or then, of Europe fronting mornward still/Ere any names of

Serf and Peer” (Lowell 3). Speaking at Harvard, Oliver Wendell Holmes linked Lincoln and Northern victory to the death of European monarchy: “For on the pillar raised by martyr hands/burns the rekindled beacon of the right/sowing its seeds of fire o’er all the lands – thrones look a century older in its light” (Holmes, 8). Not be forgotten are the profound evangelical Christian sentiments contained in the North’s triumph also. Lowell sentiments also called America “the promised land/that flows with freedom’s milk and honey” (Lowell 5). As much as Northern Abolitionism alluded to the discourse of secular and Enlightenment strains of humanism, it was also based on instrumental Puritan and evangelical Christian understandings of America’s mission.

Among “literary” minded Nineteenth Century thinkers, this renaissance sensibility centered on a reoccurring figure. Shakespeare and particularly “Hamlet” became the quintessential figure of American’s youth, innocence and infinite potential. When Ralph Waldo Emerson penned Representative Men (1850) he saw Shakespeare’s Hamlet as a prototype for the Nineteenth Century’s “speculative genius.” Emerson also saw Shakespeare’s mind as the intellectual horizon beyond which we do not see. In fact, Emerson saw Hamlet as too modern for its Seventeenth century audience and only understood with the settling of the United States. After his death, President Abraham Lincoln and by insinuation America became amongst other things, a materialization of Hamlet’s infinite potential. Edwin Lawrence Godkin, The Nation’s first chief editor characterized Louis Napoleon’s reaction to a medal bestowed upon Abraham Lincoln’s widow as an “offering of republicans to a republic” that had a “Hamlet-like miching malecho (of) esoteric as well as exoteric significance,” (Nation 33). Even in America’s first popular cultural form – Blackface Minstrelsy – Shakespeare’s Hamlet was often the vehicle blackface performers used to lampoon American high cultural pretensions and celebrate the

“people’s” new authority and power. Much of this investment in Hamlet owes to the role Shakespeare played as the principal link between the moral traditions of the classics and more modern humanist sensibilities.

In The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture (2000) Franco Moretti sees the multitude of allusions to Hamlet’s dramatic dilemma as representative of the problem of modernity in late eighteenth-century European culture. Moretti attributes Hamlet’s contemplative restlessness to his youth, which explains his conflicted relationship to tradition and duty. While applicable to the United States and its own historic problem of generational continuity to Europe, there is a critical difference between Moretti’s European “Hamlet” and America’s Emersonian one. Moretti’s use of Hamlet stems from a Nietzschean impulse to see tragedy as the place of modern pessimism and doubt. It is at this point that we can find the fork in the road between this European Hamlet and the American one. The tragic Hamlet of modernity’s restlessness, skepticism and change in Europe appears in Emerson’s portrait. But the “Hamlet” of Emerson’s writing is a rather light traveler through history and the experiences. Hamlet the regicide, the expounder of Montaigne and Machiavelli, the incarnation of Terence’s crafty slave does not exist for Emerson. However, for a man who feels that “grief can teach him nothing,” and as Yeats puts it, lacks a “vision of evil,” Emerson did see slavery presenting this grief and evil. Emerson’s version of Hamlet, which begins as a figure lacking a tragic sense of history does become the bearer of history’s burden when he confronts the evils of American chattel slavery. When F.O. Matthiessen published the foundational American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (1941) on the eve of America’s entry into World War II, it was to Hamlet he went to capture the tragic sense of duty he found in America’s own “renaissance” of Western Literary Humanism.

Through Hamlet, the imaginative lens of a nightmare, President Abraham Lincoln's assassination and allusions to Western classicism, Ralph Ellison wrote, "Tell It Like It Is, Baby," for the centennial issue of The Nation in 1965. Many of the contributors to this issue hesitated to approach the question of American progress since the magazine inception at the Civil War's end in 1865. Ralph Ellison's contribution is no exception. Regardless of how they expressed their hesitance, a collective uncertainty over America's direction made sense. America was reeling from two politically motivated assassinations and was once again attempting to travel down the road of political Reconstruction in the South. Both of these events lent to a national mood that was apprehensive at best. Only ten years out of détente with North Korea, the U.S. was accelerating towards another in Southeast Asia, one whose rationale swam hazily beneath a stew of conflicting counter-purposes. Already, the first of many long hot summers troubled Lyndon B. Johnson's promise to fashion America into the Great Society. And the year before, the country watched the gathering forces of neo-conservatism represented by Barry Goldwater. All of this lent urgency to many of the writings. There was no time to sift through the minute, broken fragments hidden within the sands of time to figure out our present social and political problems. However, this is precisely how Ellison decides to solve the complicated riddle of America's present. Whether Ellison, like the mandate stated in The Nation's inaugural issue, saw the possibilities of "regeneration" in American literature is uncertain in his essay. Ellison's pessimism in "Tell It Like It Is, Baby" makes 1965 seem a long way from the ethos of rebirth Americans felt in 1865. The epigraph this chapter begins with clearly conveys this sense of promise. As the editors wrote in 1865, "it is not the birth of the nation we now commemorate but its regeneration."

In this chapter, I will read Ellison's essay "Tell It Like It Is, Baby" as an allegorical staging of America's historical and literary continuity with the "renaissance" past through the figure of Hamlet. As my reading of Ellison's essay will show, placing America in this past proves as tenuous for post-Civil War America as it does of America in 1965. In Ellison's version of Hamlet, Lincoln occupies the role of the King of Denmark and Ellison's dream-self, a "literate-slave" is an orphaned Hamlet. Lincoln and Hamlet represent America's connection to what F.O. Matthiessen conceptualizes as the "rebirth" of democratic sentiment. In "Tell It Like It Is, Baby," Ellison expresses his pessimism about this figure's capability to be reborn. Ellison's pessimism makes "Tell It Like It Is, Baby," a counter narrative to F.O. Matthiessen's version of America's literary continuity with the humanistic past. Matthiessen, like Emerson before him invokes Hamlet as a tragic figure to establish this continuity in American Renaissance. Replacing Hamlet with a "literate slave," the essay reveals Ellison's attempt to infuse the "tortuous ambiguity" of the Civil War into Matthiessen's version of American literary traditions and their historic relationship to Renaissance Humanism. Through archival research in Ralph Ellison's Papers at the Library of Congress, I show that Ellison began writing this counter-narrative in 1954, a year before he began writing the essay at the American Academy in Rome and 10 years before "Tell It Like It Is, Baby" is published. By looking through the syllabi and lecture notes from a course he taught as part of the Salzburg Seminar in America Studies in Austria, we can see the continuity of thought linking Ellison's revision of Matthiessen's "American Renaissance" to the ideas about American literary tradition he takes up in "Tell It Like It Is Baby."

A little over 600 years after Petrarch received his crown of laurels on Easter Sunday and within the very same city which symbolically cradled the renaissance, Ellison began a novel

about assassination and contemplated the contemporary problem of racial segregation. And even the scene Ellison would have been gazing upon in 1955 would have been reminiscent of Petrarch's own. Perched on Janiculum Hill where the American Academy was located, Ellison was immersed in the most complex, intertwining of historical events. Rome, the origin of a past Renaissance and where Petrarch attempted to revive his aging city through summoning ancient republican spirits was the center of the most anti-humanist and death-dealing movements of the Twentieth century, Fascism. Ten years removed from the war, the city, in a scene repeated throughout Eastern and Western Europe was emerging out of ruins, both physical and metaphorical.

Petrarch, who in 1341 stood over ruins of another sort in a cow pasture checkered with the fragments of Rome's republican past, used the words of Virgil, the oratory of Cicero and the stanzas of Ovid to begin his poetic rebirth of Rome. In 1955, much of Rome and Italy's rebirth out of more recent ruins was under the watchful eyes of the Marshall Plan, the CIA and the US State Department. America's presence in Rome created what historian Paul Ginsborg in A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988 called Italy's uneasy mix of "Catholicism, Americanism and anti-communism," (Ginsborg 182). Ellison was at the American Academy on a grant to continue writing a novel that would eventually become Juneteenth. Ellison's fictional interest in a holiday marking the day enslaved blacks in Galveston, Texas were told – albeit two years late – that they were free might seem out of place in Rome. However, at the beginning and end of the Civil War America has similarly given and taken of the pool of "renaissance" ideas and figures in Italy. Giuseppe Garibaldi's Brigades who fought for freedom on the Italian Peninsula also fought at Gettysburg during the American Civil War. Mazzini, rather graciously, wrote of the United States that "Your triumph is our triumph; the

triumph of all, I hope, who are struggling for the advent of a republican era...The abolition of slavery binds you to the onward march of mankind; and the admiration of all Europe calls you to take your rank – leading one- in that onward march”. An emblematic event in Rome encapsulates the complex web woven by these things. Three years after the end of the Risorgimento in 1870, the capstone for the first official Episcopalian Church within the walls of Rome was laid. On a road whose name commemorated the founding of the new nation itself, the pastors of St. Paul’s Church commissioned Edward Burne-Jones, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, to complete a mosaic cycle in the apse. Among the many mosaics in the cycle, the one entitled “The Church on Earth” is the most interesting. In a mixture of styles owing to both pre-Raphaelite and renaissance characteristics, the mosaic is divided into five groups of persons representing the hierarchical classes comprising Christendom. For the lowest register – made up of those Christian soldiers who provide the bulwark of peace and stable government – Burne-Jones utilized the Renaissance tradition and borrowed the visages of contemporaries in order to represent the patron saints/soldiers of Western countries. The saints and soldiers joining one another in the defense of the Christendom on earth were, amongst others Garibaldi, J.P. Morgan, Ulysses S. Grant (then President) and Abraham Lincoln.

Whether Ellison visited St. Paul’s – which was mere blocks from The American Academy in Rome – is unknown. But it would have undoubtedly whetted his interest since it represented what he – like Walter Benjamin – called the spiral of history. J.P. Morgan, chief architect of U.S. government financing during reconstruction, slave owner and philanthropist mingled with Garibaldi, the twice exiled Italian nationalist, who once repulsed a French attack on Janiculum Hill. Grant – the war-time general turned President – joined Lincoln the Great Emancipator. In the mosaic, Protestantism and the free-market, military might, anti-papist

radicalism, slavery and claims of African-American suffrage all conjoin to unite the secular plane with the sacred. This mingling of ideas, the use of renaissance styles of visual representation, and the identification of Christendom with the architects of our modern nation-state reveals the complicated present American slavery created. Generating the centrifugal force to draw these far-flung men together is a dense, yet invisible center not represented in the mosaic. That center, which would be understood as the “Negro problem” in the Twentieth century contained the newly created concerns of U.S. state power, its legitimacy as a democratic global force and what Manzzini above called “the onward march of mankind.”

Since Manzzini’s comments in 1865 there is no question that America had taken the lead as a global power by 1955. However, whether or not this lead had signified the “onward march of mankind” is uncertain. Despite America’s military and political presence at the symbolic place of the West’s first “renaissance” and its participation in a global post-WWII democratic renaissance, Ellison begins “Tell It Like It Is Baby” wondering how far this “onward march” has traveled. As he cites in the preface to that essay, the problem continues to emanate from the very moment Manzzini and others saw ushering in our “republican era,” the Civil War. For Ellison, the end of the war and the failure of Reconstruction were political tragedies whose effects have “foreshadowed the tenor of the ninety years to follow,” (Ellison 30). And as such, puts in doubt the applicability of such linear and anthropomorphic adjectives (“onward march”) to describe the movement of American ideas and history after the Civil War. The most enduring example of this tragedy and how it has affected the direction of history was the persistence of segregation. Segregation represents what Ellison calls the “psychic forces” left over from the nineteenth century that need to be “dispersed or humanized,” (Ellison 30). But he saw these “forces” as a problem the south specifically posed to the Union. The “South,” represented more to Ellison

than a political problem or geographical space. It was also where Ellison attempts to think the enigmatic aspect of what defines America's modern identity after the Civil War.

Ellison's description of the American south as a "force," shows how that region represents such an enigmatic power. The political, material and social inequalities encapsulated in the "south," during the 1960s define for Ellison realms "in so practical and...so far removed an area as that of foreign policy," (Ellison 31). The coincidence between modern racial segregation and America's dubious foreign policy during the 1960s created what Ellison called a "great clashing," which when regarding "Asia and Africa makes for an atmosphere of dream-like irrationality" (31). Collapsing these national and international spaces, the effect of this force presents a fundamental political problem in America's democratic actions at home and abroad. As Ellison notes, his interest in this force and the state of affairs it creates is aesthetic. The movement beginning with slavery's end to African-American freedom cannot be attributed to a progressive re-imagining of the social or political terms of humanism; and perhaps for this reason Ellison describes it as both a "force" and "tenor" in the first couple of pages of his essay. The use of these non-material terms, both of which belong to the realm of physics and music respectively, is as much an attempt to describe how democratic power works domestically (segregation) as a description of how America's democratic power has assumed this "southern" aspect globally. In other words, what about United States "democracy" simultaneously expresses this "southern" force and tenor? Without question there is a historical and political record. As Ellison has often argued, this begins with the Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1877. In exchange for a Republican presidential victory, the Compromise effectively cemented Southern legislative power in US State. Further, it ended Radical Reconstruction, ushered in the segregation of Jim Crow/the Black Codes and combined the terroristic violence of lynching with

predatory economic violence. These acts have created the conscious architecture to the modern problems of “inequality” Ellison identifies in the essay.

The aesthetic question Ellison asks at the beginning of “Tell It Like It Is Baby,” is how one incorporates the “tortuous ambiguity” attributed to the South’s historical legacy into an adequate representation of America (Ellison 31). Ellison saw this poetic conundrum as another “great clashing,” between romantic images of the South. On the one hand the Confederacy saw its fight for “states rights” as the purest expression of American freedom. Yet, its defense of slavery, which rested at the heart of its declaration of rights, was the purest expression of human domination. In an extended passage worth quoting in its entirety, Ellison goes on to describe the effect of this “tortuous ambiguity”:

If we honestly say ‘Southerner,’ then we must, since most Negroes are also Southerners, immediately add white Southerners. If we say ‘white South’ our recognition that the ‘white south’ is far from solid compels us to specify which white South we mean. And so on for the North and for the Negro until even the word ‘democracy’ – the ground-term for our concept of justice, the basis of our scheme of social rationality, the rock upon which our society was built – changes into its opposite, depending upon who is using it, upon his color, racial identity, the section of the country in which he happened to have been born, or where and with whom he happens to be at the moment of utterance. These circumstances have, for me at least, all of the elements of a social nightmare, a state of *civil* war, an impersonal and dreamlike chaos. To what then, and in his own terms, does a Negro writer turn when confronting such chaos – to politics, history, sociology

anthropology, art? War it has been said, is a hellish state; so, too is equivocation, that state in which we live....” (31-2, emphasis Ellison’s).

We could read especially the start of this paragraph as merely Ellison’s oft-expressed anxiety about categorical thought, especially when it comes to determining human identity. His interest in the problem of identity is clearly symptomatic of something deeper and more profound. What is most striking about his description of this “tortuous ambiguity,” is the language of war and particularly “*civil War*” that Ellison uses to describe this “ambiguous” state. This is not the first time Ellison has had recourse to the language of war and civil war in order to articulate his understanding of America’s “state.” In the introduction to a reprint of Stephen Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage titled “Stephen Crane and the Mainstream of Fiction,” (1960) Ellison further explicates this idea of America as constituted by the Civil War and as being a “state” of civil war. He describes it as the “great shaping event” of America’s political and economic life, but he also remarks that unlike the antebellum period when the nation could “pretend to a unity of values,” the post-bellum period for Ellison finds America “consciously divided” (Ellison 119). The character of the United States from the post-bellum period until 1960 leads Ellison to remark that “if war, as Clausewitz insisted, is the continuation of politics by other means,” then American life has been defined by an “abrupt reversal of that formula” so that the Civil War has been continued by “means other than arms” (119). Within such a state, Ellison further remarks, “the line between civil war and civil peace has become so blurred as to require of the sensitive man a questioning attitude toward every aspect of the nation’s self image,” (119). Throughout his description of what this reversal of Clausewitz’s maxim means, Ellison utilizes the language of war to describe the dynamics of American politics after Reconstruction. The South carries on its “aggression” towards the North in the form of “guerrilla politics,” the North “retreats swiftly”

into the “vast expanse of its new industrial development,” (119). Judging from these two essays, from 1955 and 1965 respectively, Ellison’s writings were preoccupied with understanding two fundamental characteristics of modern American life. The first is recognizing the “state” of American political and social life as a reversal of Clausewitz’s formulation so that political life became war by means other than arms. Second, is the *civil* nature of that war, which sees the conflict as composed of politicized combatants whose actions of war seems like acts of peace.

By using the language of war to understand statecraft, Ellison joins a long genealogy of thought concerned with how power and sovereignty manifest themselves in the modern nation state. Recently published works by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben attest to the history and current interest in such questions.²² Both Agamben and Foucault’s assessments are

²² In Foucault’s Society Must Be Defended Lectures at the College de France 1975-76, (2004) the use of “war” as a model to assess the workings of power is his attempt to develop a way to analyze politics in civil society that shies away from non-economic, “repressive” and materialist conceptions of power relations, (Foucault, 13-17.) In all three of these things, Foucault argues, there is a tendency to see power relations mimicking the commodity form, and something to be owned or eliminated. The viability of this model has been eclipsed by the challenge modernity presented to traditional sovereign modes of power. Presenting Hobbes’ figure of the “leviathan” as the ideal model for the modern sovereign state, Foucault wants to move away from Hobbes’ idea that sovereignty and the legalistic claims to “right” contained within it exist in an attempt to end the battle of “every man against every man”, (Foucault, 89-90.) The State’s foundation no longer guarantees the end of hostilities through an exercise of sovereign “reason.” Its foundation is out of the circumstance of and institutions of war so that politics in civil society constitute war’s continuation by other forms of domination and violence. Even more pertinent to what Ellison was thinking during the 1950’s is Foucault’s similar observation that it is the discourse of race and the “race war,” which is key to understanding the modern states formation and its new model of sovereignty based on a war of forces. Race and the bellicose relations between subjects it necessitates most clearly shows the “irrational” tangle of forces that make claims to political power and right on the basis of transcendental juridical right (the discourse of natural rights for example) while simultaneously revealing the emergence of disciplinary forms of bio-power that clash and contend with these claims (Foucault, 81.) In the Nineteenth and Twentieth century “race” is a discourse sanctioned by the state to re-introduces a mythic element into the battle between groups of people. The idea of race is used to overturn natural rights based upon traditional forms of sovereignty. What this racial discourse does however is simultaneously re-inscribes the sovereign states impulse to repress the revolutionary sentiment and protect the purity of both the state and its racial pure make up (Foucault, 82-4.)

Giorgio Agamben’s monograph State of Exception, (2005) also looks toward the modern problem of sovereignty through the figure of war and its institutions. Agamben argues that recent conceptions of state formation, beginning

explicitly philosophical meditations on these concerns. They also bring us to the problem of modern sovereignty from European historical traditions that both illuminate but come short of explaining America's own relationship to them. As in many European assessments of the problem of power in the United States, the missing element is a nuanced confrontation with America's "peculiar institution." Neither Agamben nor Schmitt are the first writers to understand Lincoln's usurpation of sovereign and juridical powers in such a way. A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States, written by the former Vice President of the Confederate States of America, Senator Alexander H. Stephens ponders this very problem at the root of Lincoln's revolutionary act. What is remarkable about Stephen's work is what is most reprehensible about it; its account of the Civil War's illegality as an argument to defend slavery's legitimacy. Not surprisingly, this later point is played down in Stephen's book. Besides the military forces at war, Stephens sees Northern belligerence as the symbolic belligerence of consolidated state power and centralized government to individual states rights. At a very fundamental level Stephens goes back to a problem resting at the founding of the republic, the conflict between strong centralized state powers (Federalists) versus a post-bellum form of anti-Federalism contingent seeking a structure of government amenable to more popular forms of sovereignty. By the time Stephens work rehashes this conflict, the original nature of

with the French Revolution and stretching through the 20th century, have tended to institutionalize the "emergency powers" of rule that are often utilized during moments of war. Two characteristics of Agamben's "state of exception" resemble Ellison's description of the "state" of America from the Gilded Age onward. First is its ambiguity, which Agamben calls a "no-man's-land between public law and political fact and between the juridical order and life..." (Agamben, 1.) Second is the resemblance the "state of exception" has to a legal "civil war, insurrection and resistance", (Agamben, 2.) This later fact is relevant to Agamben's elaboration of the "state of exception's" history in America, whose precedent was established during the Civil War. The "sovereign decision" making President Lincoln assumed in raising an army and suspending Habeas Corpus called into question the proper delegation of powers in Articles One and Two of the Constitution. According to Agamben, this act set a precedent which stretches from Lincoln's essentially dictatorial act at the onset of the Civil War, through Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt to our current presidential administration.

this conflict has changed radically. This change makes the Southern cries of individual “states rights” ironic in fact. The Southern position of secession, which expressed populist sentiments of individual freedom, also expressed the aristocratic and royalist tendencies of Hamilton’s Federalism. In other words, Southern populism hated the very masses that it claimed to speak for.²³ Even more relevant was its foundation upon the most violent form of bio-power, anti-black racism and modern slavery. Stephens like Lincoln was a staunch unionist and in fact argued against Southern succession from the Union but became a secessionist by default when Georgia voted out of the Union in 1861.

Stephen’s ideological and political position exemplifies the origins of that tortuous ambiguity created out of the Civil War Ellison speaks of. His one-dimensional but perfectly legitimate juridical argument for the illegality of Lincoln’s actions to begin the Civil War is also symbolic of the “abrupt reversal” of Clausewitz’s formula in a very literal way. Lastly and perhaps most importantly Stephens, like many Northern and Southern architects of post-Reconstruction America, reveals how the institutionalization of the “civil war”/Civil War over sovereignty and state power was also founded on the management of black populations. The violence and disenfranchisement founded on the category of race becomes the most declarative expression of modern sovereignty. It is also the perilous state upon which America’s glorious democratic era was founded. More profoundly, it suggests that the “Negro,” is the first modern figure of the exception. It is the product of bio-powers’ clash with new forms of sovereign power. Blacks in the post-Civil War era found themselves in what Agamben in the State of Exception called the “no-man’s-land between public law and political fact, and between the

²³ John Calhoun, George Fitzhugh and many other Southern intellectuals looked upon European events in the mid-nineteenth century with more distain than fear. In fact, keeping with the founding dilemma of the constitution’s framers, Senator Calhoun often questioned the idea that liberty and equality were the key foundations to a “sound republic,” calling these ideas the “false conceptions” upon which Europe revolted.

juridical order and life..." (Agamben). Here, the line has been blurred between civil war and civil peace.

Judging from these two essays, from 1955 or so to 1965, Ellison's writings were preoccupied with understanding two fundamental characteristics of modern American life. The first is recognizing the "state" of American political and social life as a reversal of Clausewitz's formulation so that political life became war by means other than arms. Second, is the civil nature of that war, which sees the conflict as composed of politicized combatants whose actions of war seems like acts of peace. As we return to the long passage quoted above and the concern over democracy defining its center we can now understand the full ramification of what Ellison suggests in it. Simply put, Ellison's concern is what does "democracy" look like if it too is a weapon used in America's "unceasing civil war?" How are we to come to an understanding of "the ground-term for our concept of justice, the basis of our scheme of social rationality," if the essential characteristic of democracy, its promise of equality is capable of changing "into its opposite, depending upon who is using it?" Such is the ambiguity that the south, the Civil War's aftermath and America's rush to retreat into the Gilded Age represented to Ellison; it became a place where the everyday exercise of freedom for blacks and white mirrored acts of a war. Because both "Stephen Crane and the Mainstream of American Fiction," and "Tell It like It Is Baby," are neither political treatise nor works that contemplate the epistemological genealogy of such a state of things, there is only the suggestion of what the "opposite" of "democracy" is. For Ellison, segregation's existence hints at what this opposite looks like. As he explicitly writes in both essays, his concern with this state of civil war in America is concern with what resources a fictional writer's have in representing such an ephemeral reality.

To be clear, these are the realms where Ellison's thinking has the potential of taking us, but it is not where he necessarily takes himself. In fact, his approach is emblematic of his apprehension of how these concerns of humanism, racism, democracy and Western history should be approached in the first place. And as we look more closely at Ellison's essay in the next section we will see that he comes to precipice of these insights but hesitates. If we return to where we began this section, we can get a clearer sense of how Ellison articulates this problem through a meditation on the literary traditions that emerge from these contexts. In the beginning of his essay, segregation, the ambiguity of the south and the consequential "state of civil war," it leaves America is most pertinently a problem of fictional representation for Ellison. In the long passage I quoted earlier, Ellison wonders where writers should turn in order to confront the chaos that segregation puts us; is it "to politics, history, sociology anthropology, (or) art?" (Ellison 32). Here we can see that the political aspect of America's torturous ambiguity confound Ellison and his uncertainty extends into how to represent the truth of this ambiguity. For this reason, Ellison's use of the adjectives "force" and "tenor," leads us to belief that positivistic modes of representation are important, but not adequate to this task. Ellison does reference politics, history, sociology and anthropology in his essay, but it is ultimately the last of these, "art" that he turns to in order to frame his representation of this problem. As he makes clear, even art and its subtiles are challenged by America's tortuous ambiguity. Relying on the poetic traditions of the past is not a guarantee either since so many of them do not explain, or free us from this torturous ambiguity but are its poetic agents. This uncertainty about art and its traditions leads me back to Petrarch.

Petrarch's "Oration" was a pivotal moment in the intertwined history of modern sovereignty, race and literary humanism. It is to the Italian Quartocento that the term

“renaissance” is first applied and this same period revives – via Cicero – the words humanist and humanism to describe the project of resurrecting ancient liberal arts learning and rhetoric. The project of renaissance and humanism are symbolically begun with Francesco Petrarch’s coronation as poet laureate amongst the ruins of ancient Rome on Easter Sunday 1341. By reviving, yet democratizing the Latin of Cicero, Virgil and Ovid, Petrarch’s aim was to chart a new rhetorical learning, breaking from scholastic dialectical traditions and the “Arab science” of the Averroes. Petrarch’s “Coronation Oration,” while incessantly referential, uses one figure and one text consistently, Virgil and the Georgics. Virgil’s “sweet longing upwards over the lonely slopes...” becomes a metaphor Petrarch uses to describe the Renaissance poets’ task at arduous study, (Petrarch). Petrarch’s Virgil represents both an homage and figure of transition. In Virgil, Christian and medieval ontology concerning God, knowledge and sovereignty are subtly melded with Petrarch’s new learning based on pagan Roman sources and concepts of poetry. This was Petrarch’s and the Renaissance’s most powerful contribution and critique of the Arab Averroes. Since Ibn Mahommed Ibn Roschd’s commentaries analyzed Neo-Platonism and sought to keep the divide between philosophy and theology separate, the Renaissance’s break with Averroes’ influence during the thirteenth-century was vital to the emergence of Renaissance humanism. Petrarch’s emphasis on Virgil’s “sweet longing” is his way of casting a Christian veneer to the secular project of new humanist learning he wants to rescue in fourteenth century classicism.

As Petrarch’s poetic guide, Virgil also summons a clear allusion to Dante’s use of him in The Divine Comedy. With this, Petrarch’s oration clearly marks the establishment of a new linguistic, literary and poetic tradition that hints at a nascent form of nationalism and yet attempts to establish an unbroken continuity with the Roman republic. And even here Virgil’s use is

relevant since Petrarch's transposes Virgil's "love for his fatherland," to his own longing for an Italian "fatherland," that in the fourteenth century did not exist (Petrarch). Virgil here acts as an expression of the unity between past and present, art and truth, tradition and the new and the sacred and the secular; something that Petrarch felt the new humanist learning could achieve. But even at this very moment when Petrarch seeks to posit new knowledge and documents upon which we erect civilization, like Benjamin says, there is also the dint of barbarism. With Virgil guiding Petrarch's steps, we must ask which Rome Virgil led Petrarch. Is it the republican one or imperial one which clung closely to the republic's shadow? Petrarch's belief that "nothing good ever came out of Arabia" reveals a philosophical and theological conflict (Petrarch 142). And as Thomas Hahn in "The Difference the Middle Ages Makes: Color and Race in the Middle Ages," states in counter distinction to Foucault's reading of the Middle Ages, an already emerging epistemology concerning race was emerging to ensure the West's "pure" antiquity (Hahn 27).

In irony borne out of coincidence, Ellison begins "Tell It Like It Is, Baby" with his own Virgil. This Virgil – a childhood friend from Oklahoma City – is not Ellison's guide, but instead asks Ellison for guidance. As Ellison writes, Virgil's letter "expects insight and eloquence and a certain quality of attention" in locating American reality understood through the prism of race (Ellison). This black Virgil does provide Ellison guidance through the complex spiral of history he is immersed in. The speech in Virgil's letter is not the model for a burgeoning lingua franca of empire, but represents the cast off oratio of the many "exceptions" living in America. Nor is this Virgil a figure meant to mythologize the purity of the historical past as is Petrarch's. Instead Ellison's Virgil, in asking to "tell a man how it is," is asking for an account of the historical present defined by America's "state of civil war." In 1956, the literal battle lines were drawn

between the Supreme Court's decision ruling Alabama's segregation laws unconstitutional and the protest of this decision in the US Congress. In 1965, these same battle lines, already crisscrossing the globe were extended globally into Indochina and domestically into places like Watts. As Ellison's essay demonstrates, the task of representing the "how" part of "how it is," is complex. Is ancient Virgil's "sweet longing," a mode of knowledge that defines the Renaissance aesthetic desire to present a pure continuum of history this "how?" For Ellison there is a problematic continuity between the Civil War and the wars that would punctuate the twentieth-century. All of them invoke this aesthetic of history's rebirth, the same pure continuum suggested in Burne-Jones mix of personages, which, like Petrarch conflates Christian iconography with secular figures to give the sense that America's democratic project coincided with God's special providence. As we will see, Ellison's black Virgil might not lead him to settle on an aesthetic longing for rebirth, but he does lead him to contemplate it. For Petrarch this longing for renaissance looked like Virgil but in modernity, it took the guise of Hamlet for many writers. It is with Hamlet, the titular figure of modern literary humanism that Ellison begins to contemplate the convoluted sense of America's war-like "renaissance" and the exception it has produced.

As careful reader of Ralph Waldo Emerson, F.O. Matthiessen adopts Hamlet as figure to probe the relationship between democracy and "expression."²⁴ Beyond Emerson's mention of Hamlet in Representative Men (1850) a more suggestive invocation of Hamlet – and one apropos

²⁴ Matthiessen admits in the beginning of American Renaissance that it is not wholly accurate to characterize the writings during Emerson's mid-19th century as a literary rebirth. America's renaissance, he states, is achieved by the country "coming to its full maturity and affirming its rightful heritage in the whole expanse of art and culture" (Matthiessen, *iv*.) Out of all the writers composing this "rightful heritage," Shakespeare's works operate as the bridge between the ethical and moral concerns of the classical period and the modern one. Not only was Shakespeare the paradigmatic literary model to imitate for 19th century American authors, but during the 19th century Shakespeare occupied the same position of moral instruction in American humanistic pedagogy that Terence and Plautus held in Fifteenth Sixteenth century British-Anglo humanistic pedagogy.

to his appearance in Matthiessen's American Renaissance – appears in a letter Emerson writes to his brother in 1854 . Emerson confesses to his brother that addressing the “dark question of Slavery” is equivalent to being assigned “Hamlet’s task,” yet being unable to complete it. Curiously, this inadequacy is expressed as a problem of language use. Emerson writes that he knows slave owners will be as un-persuadable as “Sebastopol to a herald’s oration” (Emerson 484-5). Unlike his allusion to Hamlet in Representative Men, Emerson uses him in this letter to establish an interconnection between literature, language, and history. In Representative Men, Hamlet represented the transcendental mind. By contrast, In Emerson’s letter to his brother, “Hamlet” speaks directly to the problem of nineteenth century American slavery. On the surface, these two instances of Hamlet in Emerson’s writing seem very different. The transcendental Hamlet is indicative of what Emerson calls the horizon “beyond which we can not see” and in the letter to his brother Hamlet speaks truth to slavery’s imminent presence, (Emerson 257). Emerson’s “task,” as is Hamlet’s is to set right that which was out of joint with his historical present. America’s peculiar institution for Emerson is the equivalent to the unweeded garden in Hamlet’s Denmark. As the nemesis to America’s symbols of opulence as well as the problems of American inequality found in slavery, “Hamlet’s task” in Emerson’s letter is to “drum well,” or speak (“drum”) eloquently to slavery. It is through such high rhetoric that he can juxtapose slavery’s darkness to poetry’s divine nature. As evidenced in Emerson’s writings, Hamlet is the figure of America’s tragic yet transcendental democratic possibility. Through Hamlet, Emerson expressed his sense that poetic language symbolized a truthful yet divine moral order that could reform America. As Matthiessen and others have shown through retracing Emerson’s conception of language, Emerson saw literary language itself as a material incarnation. Following Coleridge, Swedenborg and Carlyle, Emerson’s Romantic philology saw

the ultimate goal of language to become one with things; symbols corresponded to nature and finally the divine spirit.²⁵ Emerson's theory of language suggests an agonistic relationship between language and the fleeting events of history. In this letter, the transcendental agency Emerson associates with language falters since he feels himself an "unfit agent" to effectively speak to the problem of slavery. So, "Hamlet's task," which is to speak eloquent words to slavery and the products of slave labor becomes an inevitable tragedy.

Emerson's "tragic" Hamlet is not wholly borrowed by Matthiessen. However, judging from where Hamlet appears in American Renaissance, it is clear that Hamlet's tragic relationship to American is retained by Matthiessen. Matthiessen's most sustained engagement with Hamlet is in his discussion of Herman Melville. The connection Matthiessen makes between Melville and Hamlet is connected to his introduction of tragedy and pessimism into the consciousness of mid-Nineteenth century writers. Melville is America's preeminent skeptical artist and Shakespeare is the muse guiding his exploration of tragedy amongst America's flowering democratic possibilities.²⁶ Matthiessen links Melville's experience in Albany where he saw the "contrast between aristocratic pretensions and the actual state of the masses of people..." to his "attention to the essential problems of tragedy" (Matthiessen 376). Galvanizing Melville's

²⁵ This sense of language's use cuts across many of Emerson's works. It is most famously represented in "The Poet," the aforementioned "Shakespeare, or the Poet," "Poetry and Imagination" and many others.

²⁶ Amongst the numerous criticisms of Matthiessen's work on this point, the most forceful one is based on the works he chose as representative of mid-century democratic possibility. Most of these critiques come from Feminist and African-American literary scholars who see Matthiessen's omissions establishing the exclusionary nature of America's literary canon. The two authors brought to the fore in this critique are Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) and Fredrick Douglass' Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, An American Slave, (1845). Douglass' Narrative published in 1845 falls outside of Matthiessen's historical period but Stowe's falls right in the middle, published the year of Melville's Pierre, (1852). Eric Sunquist's To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature, (1993) Toni Morrison's Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, (1992) and Ronald Judy's (Dis)forming the American Canon: African-Arab Slave Narratives and the Vernacular, (1993) are a few works of criticism that note the absence of African-American literature in Matthiessen's "renaissance." Feminist interventions into this debate include, Jane Tompkins's famous Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860, (1985) and Charlene Avallone's, "What American Renaissance? The Gendered Genealogy of a Critical Discourse," (1997).

education in skepticism were his sea travels. These, as Matthiessen explains, expose Melville to the destructive forces of Western colonialism and predatory modes of commercial capitalism, (ibid). All of this rendered Melville into a “Hamlet” whose primary intellectual interest lies in sorting out the difference between “what seems and what is,” (376). In Matthiessen, Melville’s task is to understand the American conflict between the possibilities of democracy and its practice. In many ways this is very different than the “task” Emerson assigned to Hamlet. However, Matthiessen does not completely cleave the ties between Emerson’s optimism and Melville’s criticism of Emerson’s thinking. What Matthiessen suggests is a link between Emerson’s conception of Christ as uniting “suffering and majesty” and Melville the author, who takes on the Hamlet-like task of forging a “conception of democratic tragedy” (Matthiessen 634).

There is a lot at stake in the connection Matthiessen’s makes between Emerson and Melville. Just as important as establishing a literary continuity, Matthiessen implies that there is a moral sensibility intertwined in it. In other words, despite Melville’s own repudiation of Emerson’s optimism, their simultaneous investment in Hamlet –a literary figure whose tragic vision metaphorical reveals “what seems and what is” – connects them. Also, as Jonathan Arac, writes, Matthiessen wants to show that America dons the mantle of a specifically international and Western tradition of aesthetic expression related to democratic thought (Arac 107). By forging a relationship between Hamlet, Emerson and Melville, Matthiessen connects the literary figures of the “renaissance,” to a moral contemplation of democracy and freedom.²⁷ For Matthiessen, the question of freedom is a literary discussion of how poetic acts suggest the

²⁷ There is a consensus amongst many later critics that Matthiessen’s American “renaissance” functions as a complex misrepresentation or oblique allegory of his own aesthetic, political and moral sensibilities. The complex juggling act between his Christian, socialist sensibilities with the conservative nationalist sentiment he was immersed in something I am not sure Ellison was aware of. But as an intellectual with sympathies to the Popular Front, wrote a book on T.S. Eliot and refers to Malraux in the pages of American Renaissance I would not be surprised if Ellison was aware of Matthiessen’s complexities.

revelation of democratic sentiments within the American cultural imagination. What we need to sort out is how Hamlet determines the shape and aspect of such a literary history and the historical consciousness it generates. As many critics of Matthiessen's American Renaissance note, there is an imminent political dimension to Matthiessen crafting his "renaissance" with the authors and in the terms he does. Matthiessen and those of his generation watched as Fascism took hold in Europe. So they sought to create a tradition of American literature to reaffirm our own realized possibilities of democracy as a bulwark against what was occurring in Europe. Donald Pease has outlined in "Moby Dick and the Cold War," that there is an inherently "statist" dimension to this element of Matthiessen's "renaissance" (Pease 118). If this is the case, Hamlet then becomes a more relevant figure to think about the historical relationship literature has to the democratic project in America. The centrality Emerson has to Matthiessen's ideas about American literature should give us pause to the concerns raised by Matthiessen's critics. Does Matthiessen's "renaissance of the renaissance," which draws a direct relationship between America and the long tradition of Western literature, explain the United States' emergence in modernity? Or, does Matthiessen successfully generate a historical understanding of literature that is imminent to the American present and the real problem of freedom within its democratic experiment? If Hamlet has existed in the US literary imagination as a figure expressing the tragic texture of America's democratic project is he adequate to express how this project looks after the Civil War? Is Hamlet the figure capable of illuminating the American conflict between democracy's promise and the presence of oppression and racism?

The consequences of Emerson and Matthiessen's use of Hamlet are raised in Ellison's intellectual work immediately after the publication of Invisible Man (1952). A year before Ellison began writing "Tell It Like It Is Baby" at the American Academy in Rome; he was

invited to teach a series of lectures for the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies in Austria during the summer of 1954.²⁸ The individual seminar topics ranged from courses on American Political Science to “The Sources of American Music in Europe.” If there was a general thematic between all of these seminars, it was their specific treatment of what Avery Craven called in his lecture topic, “The Emergence of Modern America” (Ellison, “Miscellaneous”). Ellison’s particular contribution to the Seminar was two-fold: a series of lectures over six weeks titled “The Role of the Novel in Creating the American Experience,” and a seminar “The Background of American Negro Expression” (“Miscellaneous”). Through the various materials left behind from his time in Austria we can trace his sustained engagement with Matthiessen, Emerson and Hamlet. Particularly noteworthy about Ellison’s reading list is the inclusion of Matthiessen’s American Renaissance. For Ellison, as is clear from the general title of his lecture series, he was interested in the novel’s role in expressing individualism and in “creating the American experience, (“Miscellaneous”). Besides Kenneth Burke’s The Philosophy of Literary Form and Counter Statement, Matthiessen’s book was the only one specifically concerned with American literary criticism on the reading list.

²⁸ The Salzburg Seminar in American Studies did not begin as an official instrument of American Cold War policy. It was established in 1947 by the Harvard University Council and was for a moment independent of U.S. State control. In fact, F.O. Matthiessen (who was teaching at Harvard at the time), as well as Alfred Kazin both taught at the Seminar in its early years. As Reinhold Wagnleitner writes in, Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria After the Second World War (1994) at some point, the U.S. Army and the State Department, in its effort to create “ideological conformity,” exerted veto power over who could and could not be invited to teach at the Seminar (Wagnleitner, 165). Identified as “fellow travelers,” Matthiessen and Kazin were not invited back to the Salzburg Seminar. This makes Ellison’s presence there in 1954 even more intriguing since Ellison himself could be considered a “fellow traveler.” Ellison’s presence at the Seminar, juxtaposed to Matthiessen’s expulsion sheds light on many of his Cold War activities which brought him in close proximity to the CIA funded Congress for Culture Freedom. Thus far, only Lawrence Jackson’s, “Ralph Ellison's Integrationist Politics,” (2003), and James Smethhurst ““Something Warmly, Infuriatingly Feminine’: Gender, Sexuality, and the Work of Ralph Ellison,” (2004), discuss Ellison’s relationship to these institutions.

But what Ellison does with Matthiessen in the lectures is a bit of a mystery. The surviving lecture notes do not clearly suggest how Matthiessen was integrated into Ellison's teaching. From the fragmentary lecture notes left in his archive, a few suggestions can be made to link Ellison's thinking during the Salzburg Seminar to his concern with Hamlet, in "Tell It Like It Is Baby." Ellison's use of Matthiessen is interesting since the reading list is a significant departure from Matthiessen's "renaissance" moment. Throughout his writings, Ellison had an ambiguous relationship to the authors composing Matthiessen's "renaissance." On the one hand, in "The Novel as a Function of American Democracy," (1967) he calls them reminders that we were just "actors in long continued action which started before history and which, through some miracle..., we hoped human society could make a leap forward" (Ellison, 758-9). Ultimately Ellison saw Emerson and the others composing Matthiessen's renaissance as part of an older, "lyrical" sensibility. By the time the Civil War emerges, Ellison felt they could no longer address the catastrophic crisis the Civil War and slavery presented to the United States (Ellison 759). For Ellison, the Civil War and its authors should be the proper benchmark for understanding America's full "maturity," literary or otherwise. Matthiessen did not write much about the War since his study of American literature is confined to a narrow period of time in the decade before the Civil War. And for reasons noted in the body of criticism about Matthiessen, the war did not hold a central place in either Matthiessen's work or much of the literary criticism of the Twenties and Thirties.²⁹ Despite this relatively large gulf concerning historical period as

²⁹ The Civil War's omission from Matthiessen's American Renaissance is remarkably glaring. Matthiessen's omission is often read within the context of the aforementioned "juggling" he did of his political sensibilities. It should be noted that historiography concerning the Civil War and Reconstruction leading up to American Renaissance's publication in 1936 were revisionist in nature. Called the Dunningite School after Columbia University's William Archibald Dunning, many of these works interpreted the failure of Reconstruction as the consequence of bestowing universal suffrage on enslaved African-Americans. This period of historical scholarship spanned the late nineteenth century with the publication of Dunning's own Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction (1898) and Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865-1877 (1907) through the Thirties.

well as their respective canons of authors, Ellison and Matthiessen do share a concern over how European literary traditions are received and applied in America. And in turn, it is American literature and the criticism of it that places America within this “whole expanse in world art and expression,” (Matthiessen iiv).

Besides Melville’s presence, the other authors in Matthiessen’s book do not appear in Ellison’s course. Of Melville’s works it is “Benito Cereno” that appears on his syllabus. Ellison does add two writers excluded from Matthiessen’s “renaissance,” Fredrick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Melville, Stowe and Douglass join Francis Gierson, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington Cable, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Ambrose Bierce to form the representative bedrock of modern America’s literary experience.³⁰ Retaining Melville from Matthiessen’s work is relevant in detecting Ellison’s desire to shift the historical and geographic locus for locating America’s “modern” origins. Within the scattered fragments of lecture notes, Ellison writes: “Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne...all of a period, all New Englanders....John Brown...Problem of Whiteness...White as evil...The problem of Prometheus...where must we stop? The failure of American Democracy...” (Ellison “Miscellaneous”). Clearly, the grouping of authors, period and geography point to Matthiessen. The historical frame around which Ellison puts these authors differs from Matthiessen. In this same group of notes Ellison writes, “The 19th century...slavery becomes a pro...Americans the inheritors of that guilt which springs from [wealth?] Then the violence done the Indians, And now the growth of Negro slavery...”

Although Matthiessen was neither part of this school nor the politics of Dunning, this milieu is worth noting nonetheless.

³⁰ It is clear that Ellison is borrowing his content from the essays that would later make up Edmund Wilson’s Patriotic Gore (1962.) But interestingly enough, Wilson’s work does not appear in Ellison’s syllabus. Ellison most likely acquainted himself with Wilson’s musings on Civil War literature from the chapter drafts of Patriotic Gore that appeared in The New Yorker starting in 1951. When Ellison finally published “Tell It Like It Is Baby” in The Nation, Patriotic Gore had already been in publication for three years. In fact, Edmund Wilson makes an appearance in Ellison’s dream. Whether this was something he included before or after is uncertain. If anything, it adds strength to my argument that Ellison is staging a confrontation with Matthiessen’s antebellum “renaissance.”

(Ellison “Miscellaneous”). It is evident here Ellison sought to complicate the nature of America’s literary inheritance and continuity with history. There were lines of influence Matthiessen attempted to delineate between the classical tradition, Shakespeare and U.S. authors. Understanding the possibilities of democracy in art for Ellison also meant dealing with the presence of democracy’s opposite. In other words, how did chattel slavery and racism determine America’s reception and possibilities of literary expression?

Even if Ellison’s use of Melville signifies an agreement with Matthiessen’s tragic reading of him, Melville is transformed through Ellison’s concern with how race and slavery impact American literary expression. We can see this in Ellison’s reference to John Brown’s presence in American Renaissance. Linking Brown with Melville shows the connection Ellison wanted to draw between the rather narrow, New England aspects of Matthiessen’s book to a larger, geographic assessment of American democratic feeling. Despite being a marginal figure in American Renaissance, Brown embodies the continuum of American democratic eloquence and action for all five authors in Matthiessen’s book. Matthiessen draws attention to Emerson’s acknowledgment that Brown’s tragically short life expressed the sanctity of America’s democratic experiment. But as Ellison notes, Brown and Melville lead us toward the symbolic and moral problem of “whiteness.” Democracy’s failure, “Negro slavery” and the Southern influence on modern American literature signals that Ellison’s interest in whiteness goes beyond the brilliant array of literary and metaphysical references Matthiessen sees in Melville (Matthiessen 290). Brown’s literal and figurative movement from North to South symbolically extends the New England roots of this “democratic possibility” throughout the US and finally into direct and bloody conflict with Southern slave power. Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry showed that in the mid-nineteenth century, the problem of “whiteness” in America was not just

metaphysical but one already made flesh through the institutional and juridical forces of slavery.³¹ It is no coincidence that from Melville and Brown, Ellison would add Stowe and especially Douglass in order to read back into Matthiessen's renaissance the counter narrative of the New England's "democratic possibility." This wider, particularly Southern post-bellum sensibility is detected on Ellison's reading list through the writings of Cable, Bierce and Lincoln. Also, this Southern aspect allows us to focus on the interconnected nature of the "problem of whiteness." As a symbol, it has literary and institutional meaning in mid-nineteenth century America. And clearly this problem still endures into Ellison's present under the banner of segregation as well as narrow conceptions of American literary history. By coupling Moby Dick's section on "The Whiteness of the Whale," and "Benito Cereno," Ellison performs a makeover of Melville. Situating him in this way, he can read into Melville, a more direct genealogical and institutional critique of "whiteness," adding another historical dimension to the stylistic reading of these symbols we see in Matthiessen's work. In other words, through Brown and Melville, Ellison interjects the problem of racism into the heart of Matthiessen's "renaissance" and Emerson's version of tragedy. What Ellison keeps intact from Matthiessen is the Shakespearian dimensions

³¹ As a figure, which breaks through the myopia of Matthiessen's "renaissance" conceptualization, Ellison's use of John Brown echoes W.E.B. Dubois's characterization of Brown in his tragically ignored biography, John Brown (1909). Seen this way, Ellison not only expands the geographic dimensions of Matthiessen's understanding of American literature, he also shifts the international dimensions of it as well. This is how Dubois begins his biography of Brown:

"The mystic spell of Africa is and ever was over all America. It has guided her hardest work, inspired her finest literature, and sung her sweetest songs. Here greatest destiny – unsensed and despised though it be, – is to give back to the first of continents the gifts which Africa of old have to America's fathers' fathers.//Of all inspiration which America owes to Africa, however, the greatest by far is the score of heroic men whom the sorrows of these dark children called the unselfish devotion and heroic self-realization: Benezet, Garrison and Harriet Stowe; Sumner, Douglass and Lincoln – these and others, but above all Brown." (Dubois 1).

By placing the above quote beneath an epigraph from Exodus ("Out of Egypt have I called My son"), Dubois insinuates that Brown joins a multiracial and international grouping of people called out from Egypt to free those who are enslaved. It is perhaps fitting that Dubois titled the first chapter of his book "Africa and America." It is uncertain whether Ellison would have read Dubois's biography, but it is clear that Ellison is using Brown to spatially displace the origins of America's call to democratic possibilities.

out of which he sees Melville's tragic art. Ellison takes Hamlet's task as Melville does, to probe "the very axis of reality." However, by highlighting John Brown's and Melville's presence in American Renaissance, Ellison illuminates the historical and representational problems racism and slavery present to the writing of nineteenth century American literature.

Ellison's activities during the Salzburg Seminar allow us connect his thoughts in Austria to the work he began on "Tell It Like It Is, Baby" in Rome the next year. The tragic, but still nascent democratic possibility Matthiessen expressed in American Renaissance is already being infused with what Ellison would later called the South's "torturous ambiguity" (Ellison. 31). Here we can see that the political aspect of America's "torturous ambiguity" confounded Ellison. In his engagement with Matthiessen's American Renaissance, Ellison recognizes the existence of this "tortuous ambiguity" in fiction and applies it to the Matthiessen's work. This ambiguity for Ellison points – to invoke a dramaturgical term – a fatal flaw in America's "renaissance", especially after the Civil War. From the loose, fragmentary notes that remain from his prepared lectures, we see that Ellison attempted to distill out of Matthiessen's reading of Melville "the problem of whiteness...white as evil," so as to illuminate the foundation of power developing in America during the nineteenth century and extending into Ellison's segregationist present. Ellison's interest in the literary and representational styles of America's "renaissance" authors was to see whether their style spoke adequately to the historical situation they found themselves in. Out of all of them, Melville's novels seemed to point toward an adequate style to represent this state of affairs. It is through Melville that Ellison can link this New England constellation of writers to a larger understanding of American literature. Ellison's course creates an American (in a geographic and stylistic sense) portrait of literary expression where Matthiessen's "democratic possibility" is exposed to writers that complicate this possibility. In doing so I see

Ellison – like Matthiessen and Emerson before him – also engaged in “Hamlet’s task.” Melville does tell the tale of tragedy for Ellison as he does for Matthiessen. However, by remaking Melville and thereby Hamlet, Ellison also allows us to think about Hamlet’s adequacy as such a representative figure.³²

Closely reading Ellison’s essay we find within it many of the concerns from the Salzburg Seminar. Not only do the themes of literary traditions emerge, but also the need to historical and geographically re-imagine what constitutes representative “American” literature. Within the midst of all this Ellison drops a tragic figure in the mold of Hamlet. But as I will show, Ellison’s use of this figure should be read as the ultimate act of re-imagining Matthiessen’s vision of America’s place within the Western democratic possibility. “Tell It Like It Is, Baby” starts in the Twenties with Ellison going to visit his dead father’s body in Oklahoma City as a child. Following an ambiguous, ghostly apparition assumed to be his father, the scene quickly transforms into a “dark colonial alley” outside of Ford’s Theater on the April evening of Lincoln’s assassination in 1865. Ellison describes this scene as “though a book of nineteenth-century photographs had erupted into life” (Ellison 34). Just when this “child” Ellison is within eye-line of this ambiguous figure, the essay shifts into a stream of consciousness where Ellison finds himself back in Oklahoma City looking at his father for the last time before he dies. The dream swiftly shifts from Ellison’s contemplation of his father death in Oklahoma City back to Washington in time for him to witness Lincoln’s assassination and lynching by a wild mob.

³² Melville’s 1852 novel Pierre or the Ambiguities is parody of both Emersonian Transcendentalism as well as Hamlet. Outside of Sacvan Bercovitch’s discussion of Pierre in Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America, (1993) most Pierre criticism does not picked up on Melville’s engagement with the aesthetic relationship between European literature and America’s own sense of mythos. Melville performs a not so subtly engagement with the connection between poetics and race through his characterization of the Glendenning family.

These swift juxtapositions are represented seamlessly enough for the “child” Ellison to momentarily confuse Lincoln with his own dying father (34).

Besides the establishment of filial identification between Ellison’s father and Lincoln there is a geographic palimpsest the essay suggests. The place where Ellison begins to write this essay, Rome is layered on top of the double scenes of action, Oklahoma City (Ellison’s birthplace) and Washington D.C. (where Lincoln is assassinated) in the essay. As the essay moves forward, it is clear that Washington D.C. is the center of action despite this juxtaposition of national (Oklahoma) and international (Italy) spaces. This geographic register also remarks upon two other relevant elements of the essay. First is the staging of the dream at the center of American political power, the nation’s capital. In this essay as well as in Invisible Man, Ellison deploys tropes that create an interconnected sensibility about America. In Invisible Man, the key moment in that description is in Chapter Seven, where Ellison says that “unseen lines” run from his school to Manhattan, or South to North (Ellison 168). Invisible Man created an imaginative space where the figures, institutions and instances of power are configured as a de-centered circuit filled with relays, loops and repetitions.³³ But in the essay we have a different conception. Here, Ellison’s idea of history’s spiral appears to be a more apt metaphor than it

³³ Recent work on Ellison, namely by Herman Beavers’ “Documenting Turbulence: The Dialectics of Chaos in Invisible Man,” (2004) and Yonka Krasteva’s “Chaos and Pattern in Ellison’s Invisible Man,” (1997) attempt to link Ellison to the recent scholarship of late Cold War literature and its figural relationship to “chaos theory.” Two books in the last fifteen years, Gordon Slethaug’s Beautiful Chaos: Chaos Theory and Metachaootics in Recent America Fiction, (2000) and N. Katherine Hayles’, Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science, (1990) have done this work on a larger scale. Throughout Ellison’s works there is a meditation on “chaos” and more specifically, how literature is a form that controls the worlds “chaos.” Perhaps his most eloquent explication of this is in “Society, Morality and the Novel,” (1957). Beavers and Kristeva’s attempts are part of the rehabilitative efforts to make Ellison somehow “post-modern.” Hence, Ellison can be periodized with contemporaries like John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed and others. Not only was Ellison hostile towards the styles these authors represented, but it is a denial of his very modernist roots in Eliot, James, Pound, Faulkner, and others. If there is a scientific figure that Ellison deploys in interesting ways, it is the very modernist figure the radio circuit. His use of this figure in the interview “The Same Pain, That Same Pleasure,” draws allusions to Henry James’ idea of the “circuit of life.”

does in the novel. While time does loop in the novel, Ellison renders in upon a two dimensional plane stretching from South to North and back again.

In the essay however, space and time folds upon each other. Unlike the de-centered geographic element that Ellison portrays in Invisible Man the essay presents Washington D.C. as a geographic center. Ellison's interest in re-conceptualizing the imaginative space of American literary history and displacing Matthiessen's New England context is represented by the imaginative space of Washington D.C. By contentiously using Edmund Wilson's Patriotic Gore against Matthiessen's American Renaissance, during the Salzburg Seminar we saw this re-conceptualization at work. While Washington D.C. is the symbolic and political center of America's democratic sensibility, it is also an in-between space that symbolizes the intertwined nature of American space and power. Historically, while both Delaware and Maryland stayed in the Union they, including Washington D.C., remained slave territories albeit under martial law. This in-between sense is already conveyed in Invisible Man. When rebuking the Vet who "cures" Mr. Norton, Crenshaw tells him that "you ain't going North, not the real north. You going to Washington. It's just another Southern town" (Ellison 154). All of this makes Ellison's appearance in the dream as a "literate slave child" even more relevant since, by the time Lincoln was assassinated slavery had not been abolished in Union territories yet. Therefore, Ellison is both an anachronism in the dream, and yet his own indeterminate status in the dream is reflective of the spatial in-between D.C. represents. For these reasons Washington D.C. is the perfect space to invoke the South's "torturous ambiguity," which was the imaginative element Ellison sought to insert into Matthiessen's "renaissance."

From this rumination we can more properly contextualize the dominant themes of hereditary and filial belonging that saturate the essay. Besides his biological ties to his father, Ellison does not remember enough to detect his father's imprint on his development. Ellison's memories of his father are mingled with the public and political memory of Lincoln's assassination. By confusing his father with Lincoln, Ellison casts his personal sense of familial loss into the political uncertainty left in the wake of Lincoln's death. Ellison wonders aloud: "what quality of love sustains us in our orphan's loneliness; and how much is thus required of fatherly love to give us strength for all our life thereafter? And what statistics, what lines on whose graph can ever convince me that by his death I was fatally flawed and doomed..." (Ellison 35). Whatever his father's flaws, Ellison is uncertain how to quantify or account for them ("what statistics"... "what lines on graph.") Lincoln's death has cast a similar shadow of uncertainty on the twentieth century, a century Lincoln "fathered" according to Ellison. Running parallel to his father's love is another simultaneous act of "fatherly" love, Lincoln's destruction of slavery. Like Ellison's uncertainty concerning his father, there are similar feelings as to whether Lincoln's act was enough to sustain a reborn and now orphaned nation. Just as Ellison collapses his private mourning with the public loss of Lincoln, the same collapse happens with public history and imaginative literature. The twin loss of Ellison's father and Lincoln casts a shadow of undetermined fate upon the dream Ellison; a fate he casts into tragic dimensions of world literature. In the "epilogue" of "Tell It Like It Is, Baby," Ellison suggests this happened when he fell asleep reading the eminent classicist Gilbert Murray's The Classical Tradition of Poetry. Lincoln's martyrdom has generally symbolized our nation's definitive break with Europe and its history. But Ellison also saw it fitting within the poetic traditions of human history.

Murray's chapter on "Hamlet and Orestes" seems the most pertinent to the content of Ellison's dream. In The Classical Tradition of Poetry, Murray compares the son of Agamemnon and Hamlet to point to the:

"process of traditio – that is, of being handed on from generation to generation, constantly modified and expurgated, re-felt and rethought – a subject sometimes shows a curious power of almost eternal durability. It can be vastly altered; it may seem utterly transformed. Yet some inherent quality still remains, and significant details are repeated quite unconsciously by generation after generation of poets" (Murray, 237).

In Murray, Western tradition is sustained through imitation and not invention. Contained in "the children of the poets...artists and the audience" is a figure for the human community sustained by the "tradition" (237). Orestes and Hamlet are literary figures that sustain the unconscious poetic solidarity between Homer, Euripides and Shakespeare's artful reshaping of our ancient memories. Reading Ellison's essay proves that such "solidarity" with the ages is more tenuous for post-bellum America, especially if we are to take his dream as a retelling of Hamlet. In Ellison's version, Lincoln occupies the role of the King of Denmark and Ellison's dream-self, an orphaned Hamlet. If Lincoln and Hamlet are supposed to represent the continuity of a literary humanism and its democratic possibilities Ellison expresses his pessimism about this in the essay. One way Ellison's pessimism is expressed in "Tell It Like It Is Baby," is through metaphorical allusions to the failure of writing in the essay. After Lincoln's assassination in the dream, his body, barely clinging to life is not accompanied by the ordered "lines" of dignitaries, military men, gentlewomen and freed slaves found in "history book descriptions of the event"

(Ellison 34). Instead, nothing “goes as it was written.” The ordered “lines” become a “mob” which quickly metamorphosis into a “carnival...with the corpse become the butt of obscene jokes.” Ellison’s play on the tropes of writing (“lines,” and “book descriptions”) that descend into chaos becomes a moment where Ellison illuminates the problem of recalling written records: historical, literary or otherwise, (Ellison 36). The “history book” in this case and the ordered “lines” of the sentence are inadequate to convey the complex events the dream is attempting to link. Even Ellison’s description of Oklahoma City before it becomes the street of Washington D.C. bears this out. Characterized as the spacious and empty “well-trimmed walks that led to handsome walks...,” Oklahoma City becomes the cacophonous “arcade,” of Washington D.C. that teems with “relentless crowds” (Ellison 33). Not only is this another example of orders descent into disorder but it also simultaneously shifts the tropes of a pastoral space (Ellison’s childhood home) to that of the chaotic and modern present (Washington D.C).

This shift can be read as a displacement of the pastoral imaginary enveloping America’s “renaissance authors” with a sensibility capturing our modern American “tortuous ambiguity.” The foundational books in American literary study seize upon this pastoral sensibility as well as understand American literature as an extension of what Murray called “traditio.” Besides Matthiessen’s American Renaissance, Lewis Mumford’s The Golden Day: A Study in American Experience and Culture (1926) and Van Wyck Brooks’ The Flowering of New England (1936) both summon allusions to America’s relationship to and rebirth of Western literary traditions. These three books are central in establishing the transatlantic and trans-historical dimensions of the American literary canon. They also come out of an ethos beginning at the Civil War’s end that included figure like Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, who would later be associated with the New Humanism. While all of these thinkers differed in their critical, aesthetic and political

proclivities, they saw and idealized the classical tradition as a pattern for imitation. With his mention of Gilbert Murray, Ellison inserts himself within this same lineage.

We can register Ellison's filiative uncertainty about this lineage through his use of racial and other biological descriptions. The precarious nature of order and lineage found in the essay's beginning scenes extends to Lincoln's physical description throughout the nightmare. Like the aforementioned tropes of writing, these shifting descriptions also reveal a certain anxiety concerning Lincoln's relationship to the nation he is a relative of and father to. After the assassination, Ellison's "dream self" asks what everyone is laughing at; the answer, "at our American cousin, fool," is a play on both the production Lincoln was watching when shot and Lincoln himself who is simultaneously demarked as "our American cousin" (Ellison 36). The status of "cousin" given to Lincoln denies him a patrilineal relationship to the United States and its founding fathers, whose work he is supposed be carrying out. Lincoln is not quite estranged, but instead of the Civil War strengthening his familial ties, it ostracizes him. Not only does the act of Emancipation render Lincoln into a cousin, but his cousinhood simultaneously plays into an ambiguity concerning his racial identity during the dream. Returning to the initial scene where Ellison spots Lincoln, the description shifts from someone who is "familiar" to that of a "stranger" whose race is uncertain (Ellison 32-3). After his assassination Lincoln's racial status takes another significant shift. At first Ellison writes that Lincoln's complexion was "darker than I'd even imagined," and later one man in the mob bearing his body through the streets of Washington calls out "We've caught the old coon at last! Haven't we now" (Ellison 37). By identifying Lincoln as a "coon," Ellison invokes a moment of catachresis. Unlike the filial and human connection to the nation "cousin" invokes, the word "coon," marks him as inhuman, a denial of humanity legitimating Lincoln's lynching at the foot of the Washington Monument.

When Ellison recognizes Lincoln as a “coon,” it also marks the moment that tears “at the foundation of that which I had thought was reality...” (Ellison 37). Slowly, Ellison realizes that his own status in the dream and in the world is precarious since, how he could be himself, “a slave or even human” if Lincoln himself is not (37). This goes to explain the dynamic changes Lincoln goes through in the dream. The lynching violence visited upon his body eventually changes him from an ambiguous silhouette to a “coon” that is eventually castrated and dies yet another death.

Lincoln’s ambiguous status during the essay is seen from perspective of what Ellison describes as a “literate slave child.” Despite the chaos around him, Ellison uses this figure to give “ordered significance” to the chaotic mixture of present and past, human and inhuman (Ellison 46). This “literate slave child” is only given the role of witness to the horrific events without the capability of acting to stop it. He tells us that thrust at the front of the mob; he was not allowed to enjoy the “forced detachment...anonymity...freedom to *not* participate” (Ellison 42-3). Even after he witnesses Lincoln’s violent death by assassin and mob, this dream-self states that out of a sense of “familial completeness,” harking back to memories of his own father that he “had not felt the President was actually dead. He isn’t dead: I wouldn’t have it so” (Ellison 42). As we can see, Ellison’s most concerted intervention into Hamlet is the displacement of Hamlet, with this “literate slave child.” Hamlet calls himself a “rouge and peasant slave,” and in Hamlet’s predecessor, Orestes there appears the stock slave character who avoids death at the hands of Orestes and his sister. By creating a “literate slave” that could “tell it like it is,” Ellison introduces innovation into the “traditio” of Emerson, Murray and Matthiessen. This figure reveals a countervailing poetics of race and slavery into American democratic expression. Unlike Emerson and Matthiessen’s Hamlet, this figure brings us closer

to the problems of anti-black racism and slavery, not further away. Essentially, racism and slavery have disrupted the filiative and literary tropes of continuity established by this “renaissance” sensibility. Despite his desire of familial completeness, the literate slave reveals how Matthiessen’s “democratic feeling” as been torn asunder. It is in this register that we can re-read the figures of writing that fail in the essay. The “tragedy” both Emerson and Matthiessen suggest reveals a metaphysical crisis over the problem of freedom. Ellison’s literate slave – by attempting to bring ordered significance into these disparate traditions – suggests that both politics and the products of literary criticism are in crisis. Not only does Ellison show that the slave complicates American “democratic expression” but that any attempt at finding such expression must account for anti-black racism and slavery.

Ellison’s use but simultaneous displacement of Hamlet’s tragedy is significantly different from most modern criticism on the play. Modern critics like Harold Bloom, Catherine Beasley, Thomas Grady, and Terry Eagleton have understood Hamlet as indicating the line between medieval and modern subjectivity.³⁴ But they all use their observations to critique bourgeois subjectivity: meaning subjectivity understood as sovereign, empowered and autonomous from worldly ideologies (Grady 252).³⁵ If Ellison’s slave bears any relationship to Hamlet, it is

³⁴ Here I am specifically referring to Harold Bloom’s *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, (Riverhead Books, 2003) Catherine Beasley’s, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama*, (Taylor & Francis Books Ltd, 1985,) Terry Eagleton’s *William Shakespeare* (Blackwell Publishers, 1987) and Thomas Grady’s *Shakespeare, Machiavelli and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet*. (Oxford University Press, 2002).

³⁵ Implicated in these readings of Hamlet is the way he navigates the political and moral obligations in this tragedy. This, of course, is through Hamlet’s acts of poesis. Shakespeare constructs a figure that: feigns madness, refers to the Attic traditions of tragedy as well as the New Comedic traditions of Terrence, and stages a production of Euripides’ *Hecuba*. In other words, “Hamlet’s task,” which is to find the truth behind his Uncle’s involvement with his Father’s death, is done through a self-conscious deployment of poetic registers and rhetoric. It is poetic languages ability to create what Sidney called “another nature,” that clears the fog of uncertainty and reveals the truth surrounding the play’s central tragedy. Just as important as poetry’s function is the fact that it is a poetics that operates outside of the law in the same way that Hamlet’s uncle ascends to the throne by these same means. This fact, as well as the bloody violence in the play is attributed to its Greek and Spanish dramaturgical roots. Plot wise, the “morality” of *Hamlet* (a dominant characteristic of Greek and Spanish Revenge Tragedy) is rather uncertain.

Hamlet's curse of inaction. But there is a subtle difference between their respective failures to act. Hamlet could literally act as an author within the play. The most alluring element of "Hamlet" is his self-consciously deliberate acts of poesis (producing Mousetrap, faking his madness, etc...) Ellison's use of Hamlet positions his essay closer to the discussion of tragedy between Walter Benjamin's and Carl Schmitt's reading of Hamlet. Between Benjamin and Schmitt we can see the relationship between modernity, poetics, and power suggested in Hamlet. Carl Schmitt's book Hamlet or Hecuba: The Eruption of Time in the Play is a response to Benjamin's The Origins of German Tragic Drama (1928).³⁶ Schmitt's motive for straying into the realm of aesthetics was to correct Benjamin's reading of the play. Benjamin relied on Schmitt's definition of the sovereign in order to draw a distinction between classical tragic forms (found in Aristotelian and Attic traditions) and the baroque "mourning play's" origins. The subtle, but powerful differentiation between Benjamin and Schmitt has to do with how each author understands sovereign power changing between the German Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in England. At its core, this differentiation is about the exercise of the law and what does and does not fall within the purview of the law. For Schmitt, the great crisis and revolutions precipitating the modern state's emergence revealed a new tool for the exercise of

The end of Shakespeare's play – which suggests that Hamlet's death is to be used to generate political consensus – does not give us a clear moral sense suggested by tragedy's roots. What is clear from the modern reception of Hamlet is a positive valence given to his flexible range of poetic registers. It is language that allows him to work outside the law in order to reveal the "truth" as well as exact revenge. These two things: a moral sensibility to language's use and that sensibility's connection to a tragic concept of freedom exist as we have seen in Emerson and Matthiessen's use of Hamlet.

³⁶ There is a pretty substantial difference between the original German title and the English translation. In German the word "einbruch" has multiple meanings that more or less translates into some sense of "zeit" "breaking through" Shakespeare's play. Schmitt's point in using "einbruch" is to critique the German Romantic cultural tradition. By having historical time "break-through" Shakespeare's play, he shatters the idea of art's autonomy from ideas and political history. This is not to say that Schmitt is not concerned with literature or aesthetics at all. In fact many of his key intellectual terms borrow from the realm of aesthetics like "representation," "myth," and "iconography" amongst many others.

sovereign power...the “state of exception,” (Schmitt). Across many of Schmitt’s writings he explicitly argues that this legal suspension of the law should and can be integrated into the workings of state power in order to situate the state as the final arbiter of power. For Schmitt, the power of the sovereign rests in its decisions over matters of life and death as well as when the law can be suspended (Schmitt 138).

Benjamin, on the other hand sees this extra-legal, “state of exception” as something outside of the sovereign’s ability to declare. The key to Benjamin’s formulation is retaining the potential for the exercise of power and violence out of the reach of state law (Benjamin 283). Benjamin’s discussion of the “state of exception” in his published works is part of a long standing argument with Schmitt’s conception of the sovereign. In The Origins of German Tragic Drama we can see a continuation of this argument and how it influenced the evolution of tragedy. Benjamin’s emphasizes Hamlet’s acts of creation because he is concerned with the place of mourning in tragedy. When Hamlet acts out his “mourning,” this is where Benjamin finds the separation of his sovereign power and his ability to wield it (Benjamin 137). This is why Benjamin reads Hamlet as the paradigmatic *trauerspiel* and consigns the sovereign figure of the baroque tradition into the secular realm of historical consciousness. Hamlet is a play about the loss of sovereign power’s mythical right and the transfer of power to the secular realm. This new, secular nature of power for Benjamin holds the potential for something revolutionary to occur. What it allows for is the willful capriciousness of human agency to act against sovereignty’s power (Benjamin 66-7). Carl Schmitt on the other hand does not see such a cleaving. History’s “irruption” into the play for Schmitt demonstrates the opposite tendency. Through reading the “irruption” of the 16th century into Hamlet, he sought to destroy the roots of overt aesthetic conservatism defining 200 years of German aesthetic criticism. Instead of seeing

criticism sheltering art from the capriciousness and violence of time, Schmitt wanted to think about how ideas and politics far-flung of aesthetics are vital sources to aesthetic creation. As David Pan saw, Schmitt's recognition that the saturation of "politics" in art is advantageous to the State's domination of civil society. (Pan, 154-5) Schmitt effectively recognized that art's autonomy could work both ways. It could either shore up the control by becoming a field of action for the State or its autonomy could be a cauldron of thinking antithetical to the States designs. In Schmitt's view, everything was political and designations between friend and enemies were a constituent part of civil society, even its art. The fatal element of tragedy in Schmitt's work works to summon the sovereign to act. Sovereign action is what restores order and contains the capriciousness of human agency (Schmitt 140).

Ellison's "literary slave child" shifts the concerns in modernity from the bourgeois and "free" representation of Hamlet to the American conundrum over racism and its relationship to democracy and power. The "mourning" that Benjamin sees in Hamlet has its analogue in the powerlessness that characterizes Ellison's "literate slave". Ellison describes himself as "held and forced to the front of the crowds" in the dream and unconsciously swept up in its movements and actions (Ellison 36). His words, which we are reading on the page, are never heard above the roar of the crowds nor can this slave go against their tidal movements. All of this poses a crucial question. Can Ellison's slave "mourn" in Benjamin's sense of lamenting to loss of previously held power? What Ellison shows us is a figure of representation born within a purely secular and historical realm. The language and writing that Ellison's "literate-slave" deploys is not transcendent but one that expresses the indelible marks of racism and its historical legacy on the modern subject. If Ellison's "literate slave" suggests a poetic language that is not transcendent, what sort of poetics does Ellison's essay suggest we use to express our common fate? By

making Lincoln, the father of our twentieth century a “coon” Ellison weaves the problem of racism into the very fabric of America’s ideas of humanity and literature.

When Ellison began writing “Tell It Like It Is, Baby” in 1955, America was still embroiled in a civil war. Southern Congressmen manned the ramparts when the Supreme Court ruled that Alabama’s segregation laws were unconstitutional in 1955. Ellison’s essay demonstrates that the task of representing “how it is,” is complex. It also shows that there is a problematic continuity between the Civil War and the wars – both global and domestic – that would punctuate the twentieth century. With the assassinations of Malcolm X, John Kennedy as well as his own novelistic venture into political assassination, it makes sense that Lincoln would be Ellison’s subject. The trope of familial bonds that appear in his essay suggests that Ellison was also uncertain about what sort of “father” Lincoln was for our twentieth century. Perhaps Ellison thought the contemporary crisis gripping America s desperately needed Lincoln’s leadership? Of all the elements of tragedy both missing and present in Ellison’s dream, the one that disturbs him most is the absence of Lincoln’s successor. Ellison wonders aloud why there was no one “to play Anthony to Lincoln’s Caesar?” (Ellison 45). To stave off the wonton chaos and powerful violence in the dream, Ellison summons’s Lincoln’s “eloquent words” contained in the Gettysburg Address (Ellison 44). He struggles to recall them and finally, perhaps ironically recalls them through Charles Laughton’s recitation of it in the film Ruggles of the Red Gap. The scene Ellison recalls has Laughton’s character (a British butler) using the address to rebuke the Gilded Age materialism of his American employers. As was Laughton’s rebuke so is Ellison’s. The Gilded Age following Reconstruction and the Civil War repudiated the potential America had in its grasp to truly transform the terms upon which civil society and humanism was understood. With Ellison as was with many other intellectuals of the post-Civil War era, Lincoln

symbolizes that paradigmatic expression of America's new found humanism after destroying slavery.

During his time in Austria we know that Ellison, read the entirety of Lincoln's corpus of writings (Ellison "Miscellaneous"). As Richard Hofstadter writes in American Political Traditions and the Men Who Made It (1948) the political environment of the nineteenth century was not antagonistic but complicit to the fundamental working arrangements of state power (Hofstadter vi). This arrangement existed because the "rise and spread of modern industrial capital" was commingled with the defense of the American constitution (vi). Lincoln does not, in Hofstadter's account, deviate from this American ethos. Lincoln's decision is not based solely on a moral repulsion to slavery but is also strategically in step with the political ethos of the United States. Hofstadter's account of Lincoln rationale for emancipating enslaved Blacks and pressuring the Union demythologizes this impenetrable morality. Reading many of Lincoln's address on slavery, Lincoln appears to be a parochial – if strategic – mind bound to the political realities of anti-black racism that under-girded the Free Soil Movement of the 1850s. Hofstadter writes that applying the moniker "revolutionary," to the Civil War is dubious at best since in the long view of American history it aimed to "preserve a long established order," not necessarily to overthrow it (Hofstadter, 126). If Ellison did read all of Lincoln's works then he could not deny Lincoln's ambiguous duplicity. Perhaps it is for this reason Ellison describes Lincoln as a combination of "wisdom and guile," "enigma and lucidity" (Ellison 46). Maybe Ellison saw Lincoln simply as politician swaying with the perilous, divided nature of his times?

Telling it "like it is," the historic task assigned to Hamlet proves "too complex" for Ellison in the end, (Ellison 46). Using Murray's The Classical Tradition in Poetry was an

attempt to speculate about the classical renaissance tradition's ability to speak to what he calls "those centers of stress within" American life (48). But Ellison admits defeat, since this tradition is unable to reconcile the state of chaos that has defined American life since the end of the Civil War. Through this tradition, Ellison attempts to bring an "ordered significance" to America's particular humanistic quandary; but ultimately it falls apart. "Tell It Like It Is, Baby" gives us glimpses of why the patterns of classical tragedy offers insight but does not necessary solve the riddle. At "Hamlet's task," Ellison – like Emerson and Matthiessen before him – sought to understand America's role in the vast expanse of Western ideas of humanism, freedom and democracy. His engagement with Matthiessen's literary "renaissance" reveals Ellison's sense that our founding American writers failed to properly represent the historical relationship between anti-black racism, regimes of power and ideas of freedom in America. Realizing that America's aesthetic "renaissance" cannot in fact "tell it like it is," Ellison performed a revision of Matthiessen by writing the American South's "torturous ambiguity" into it.

Chapter 3: Arendt and Ellison Speak for the Negro

In 1958, the editors of Commentary deemed Hannah Arendt's essay "Reflections on Little Rock" so controversial they passed on its publication. This happened despite the fact that someone on their editorial staff asked Arendt to write the essay. "Reflections" controversial content was not lost on Irving Howe and the editors of the Socialist quarterly Dissent. Arendt's acquiescence to publish in Irving Howe's journal seems rather strange. Howe's quarterly was a revitalization of what he saw as the decay of democratic socialism American thought (Howe iv). Dissent's creation in 1954 provided a counterweight to the centrist-liberal politics Partisan Review was associated with. Even though Arendt herself was a critic of such liberalism (yet a very frequent writer for Partisan Review), she was a much stronger opponent of Howe's brand of socialism. "Reflections" appears in the belly of the very beast she was seeking to spear with her intellectual lance. From Arendt's position, Dissent and its editors were provocateurs of the very "liberal cliché" she sought to address with her essay, (Arendt 44).

Agreeing to publish it a year later, Howe and Dissent took precautions to distance themselves from the potential fallout. Hence, when "Reflections" appeared, it was with two disclaimers and two rebuttals to its content.³⁷ Such strong rhetorical buffers made sense given Arendt's comments and the historical context they appeared in. Published in Dissent's winter issue, "Reflections" suggested that enforcing desegregation in public education was in Arendt's words, "an impatient and ill-advised measure," (Arendt 48). For Cold War Liberals, such comments, let alone from one of their own could not have had worse timing. The legal grounds for "separate but equal" public facilities had been struck down only five years earlier. Brown vs.

³⁷ The very next issue of Dissent was concerned with the problem of education in America. Almost predictably, the essays take aim at both Arendt's "Reflection on Little Rock," "Crisis in Education" and Partisan Review.

Board of Education's success was seen as an extension of liberalism's social and political coalition building begun with the Popular Front in the late 1930s. In the five years between Brown and Arendt's "Reflections" violent physical and legislative battles were fought in an attempt to subvert the Supreme Court's legal decision. In retrospect, 1959 was also the threshold where integrationist and coalition building politics of the 30s began to change. Local, state and federal violence against black political action in the US was quickly causing a reevaluation in the Civil Right Movement's strategies. Slowly, the sun began to set on the integrationist ethos of coalition and cooperation. Dawning in its place would be the defensive and more radical nationalism of SNCC and the Black Panthers. Despite her clear agreement with legal desegregation, Arendt's comments were the equivalent of sweaty, intellectual dynamite in this volatile historical milieu. For many, "Reflections" displayed intellectual activity in its most aloof, anti-social posture. Arendt's ideas appeared morally reprehensible and worst seemed to reside in the clouds like Socrates in Aristophanes' play of that same name.

Arendt's essay "Reflections on Little Rock" has raised the ire of past and present readers for the author's insensitivity to America's long-standing problem with racism. Instead of instilling Arendt with a feeling of courage and admiration, the image of black children facing white mobs in Little Rock, Arkansas filled her with horror. Such acts of protest represented a breakdown of what Arendt – following Kant – called "common sense." Despite the success of Federal attempts to desegregate southern elementary schools, Arendt saw desegregation as a lost cause. Writing to her critics in the very next issue Dissent, Arendt felt that school desegregation impressed her with a "sense of futility and needless embitterment," since "all parties concerned knew very well that nothing was being achieved under the pretext that something was being done" (Arendt 181). Arendt's rationale for criticizing Federal enforcement of desegregation was

complex. She gives three interrelated reasons for her stance. Public school desegregation: subverted “authority” by asking children to do the political work of adults; misguidedly sought to enforce social instead of legal integration and finally raises the specter of “tyranny”, which occurs when “legislature follows social prejudices,” (Arendt 53). “Reflections” and the controversy surrounding it often fails to make its way into contemporary assessments of Arendt’s writings. When it is mentioned it appears in two iconic ways. More forgiving readers see “Reflections” as emblematic of what Arendt scholar Margaret Canovan calls her “contradictions” in thought.³⁸ Less forgiving readings of “Reflections” charge Arendt with racism. Not only is this later charge dubious but usually comes when Arendt’s comments in “Reflections” are divorced from the context of her other works.³⁹ Despite the dubiousness of these charges “race” does pose a problem in Arendt’s thinking. The problem is neither “racism” as such nor Arendt’s avoidance of “racism” as the central political problem in Modernity.

³⁸ I refer to the more recent books on Arendt’s political thought including Kristeva’s book Hannah Arendt, Lisa Jane Disch Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy, Maurizio Passerin D’Entreves’ The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt, Margaret Canovan’s Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought and “The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt’s Political Thought.”

³⁹ Here I refer to the works of Anne Norton in “Heart of Darkness: Africa and Blacks in the Writing of Hannah Arendt, Linda M.G. Zerilli’s “The Arendtian Body,” Meili Steele in “Arendt versus Ellison on Little Rock: The Role of Language in Political Judgment,” and Kenneth Warren, “Ralph Ellison and the Problem of Cultural Authority.” Her one defender is Seyla Benhabib in her The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt. More importantly, “Reflections on Little Rock” is most obviously a companion piece to her “Crisis in Education,” written the same year as “Reflections.” What is interpreted as “racism” in “Reflections” comes from her complicated political and philosophical position on public education in “Crisis in Education.” In “Education,” she argues that the American educational system demonstrates problems that reflect general problems in modern American society. The absence of political authority, a dismissive attitude towards “tradition” and the “past”, and an insidious “Pragmatism” indicate the instrumentalization of knowledge. Influenced by a Rousseauian ethos, American education is politicized to the extent that it demonstrates the egalitarian nature of American politics. Instead of making “aristocratic” distinctions as European educational systems do, American education blurs the distinctions that establish authority. Arendt demonstrates the effect of this in various ways in “Crisis.” All of this leads to Arendt’s conclusion that we must “decisively divorce the realm of education from the others...most of all from the realm of public, political life, in order to derive from it alone a concept of authority and an attitude towards the past which are appropriate to it but have no general validity and must not claim a general validity in the world of grownups,” (Arendt 512). School desegregation, which she decries in “Crisis”, is rearticulated in “Reflections.” In both, she expresses this above idea that school should not be the arena for “political” action.

While she admits that “the color question was created by the one great crime – racial slavery – in America’s history,” she also writes that “the country’s attitude to its Negro population is rooted in American tradition and nothing else” (Arendt 46). Arendt’s assessment of American political traditions separates the “crime” of slavery’s institutions from American “tradition”. This is a separation she repeats in both On Revolution and On Violence, two of her later works focusing on America and its political traditions. Not only is a thoughtful consideration of racism and slavery missing in On Revolution but in both “Reflections” and On Violence she links the attempts by blacks at political recognition (desegregation) to the breakdown of what she calls “common sense.” As Meili Steele remarks, in “Reflections” Arendt assumes the existence of a “common world that is in good enough shape to draw together” the speech and actions of both blacks and whites in America, (Steele 187). It is for this reason that Arendt cannot understand black political acts since they defy this assumed “common world.” If “black” acts of political recognition violate “common sense” then it is clear that Arendt gives little value to the force of racism within American “tradition.” Judging by Arendt’s use of this word in “Reflections,” tradition is different than common sense. If they were synonymous, Arendt would not so dismissive of this “attitude” about race. Just as importantly, by framing slavery as a “crime” Arendt casts slavery as a moral problem instead of a philosophical conundrum at the heart of America’s democratic experiment.

In Arendt’s writings on America, the problem is not racism nor is it symptomatic of her “contradictions” in thought. Like many European intellectuals, Arendt misunderstands the relationship between anti-black racism and America’s intellectual and political traditions. Her analysis of political action by African-Americans reveals this. The relationship she draws between black protest in “Reflections” and On Violence is similar to the rise of mob rule and

violence she discusses in The Origins of Totalitarianism (1950) and The Human Condition (1957) respectively. In all of these works, Arendt centralizes speech as a vital activity that communicates “common sense”, initiates civic recognition and wards off the potential descent into mob rule. When speech and its ability to create and communicate judgment fails, common sense disappears, the political sphere is compromised and the precipitous descent into totalitarian power begins. On principle, Ralph Ellison would agree with the importance Arendt gives to speech. But speech is often times rational and not “poetic” for Arendt. This difference between Arendt’s and Ellison’s thought is crucial. Ellison sees literature and poesis exhibiting the very properties of common sense and recognition Arendt denies them.

While Ellison makes elliptical references to Arendt in his debate with Irving Howe in the New Leader, his most extended published response to Arendt’s “Reflections on Little Rock” appears in Robert Penn Warren’s Who Speaks for the Negro? Ralph Ellison’s rebuttal to “Reflections” remark on Arendt’s misunderstanding of America’s race problem. Meili Steele suggests that there is more to Ellison’s response than just a clash of political sensibilities. As Steele remarks, Ellison’s engagement with Arendt reveal the limits of Arendt’s Kantian concept of language and speech, (Steele, 144). I would like to use “Reflections on Little Rock” as an occasion to discuss Hannah Arendt’s conceptualization of American political traditions. Arendt’s “Reflections” began her three year study of American political culture that culminated in On Revolution in 1961. Her suggestion that desegregation is a deviation from America’s own political “common sense” at the beginning of “Reflections on Little Rock” reveals her nascent interpretations of America’s foundational political ideas. As I will show, Arendt’s interpretation of American “common sense” is linked to her misreading of Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia. This misreading began in The Origins of Totalitarianism and extends through

“Reflections on Little Rock” and On Revolution. By mistaking anti-black racism as a social problem – rather than a political one – Arendt cannot properly interpret the “common sense” of America’s political traditions.

In the second part of this chapter I draw attention to Ellison’s description of the events at Little Rock, and its connection to Arendt’s misunderstanding of American “common sense”. I read Ellison’s response as a critique of Arendt’s reliance upon Kant’s *sensus communis* to conceptualize political speech. Instead of the rational “common sense” speech of Kant, Ellison suggests a speech deriving from a “common sense” of literary and vernacular origins. Ellison gives an example of this literary common sense in two ways. First through his sublime description of the black children at Little Rock and secondly through a similar reading of Martin Luther King’s “humility”. Instead of a clash with “common sense”, Ellison’s literary reading of Little Rock and King takes this notion to task.

Arendt begins “Reflections on Little Rock” asking how a nation founded on “common sense” could allow the occurrence of federally mandated desegregation. Her allusion is of course to Thomas Paine’s famous 1776 tract Common Sense. Paine, like most of the other American eighteenth century authors she cites in her work are champions of the distinct separation of governmental power and civil society. These are the very issues Arendt suggests are at stake in the debate over school desegregation. Although Arendt does not take this into account, these early American political thinkers also descend from the tradition of Locke and Hobbes, which secularizes political power, yet uses Christian moral idealism to legitimate it. Significant elements of Paine’s argument in Common Sense are arguments against the divine right of Kings along national and racial lines -- as Sections II and III of Common Sense bear out. Arendt herself admits that the foundations of arguments like Paine’s are Christian and not secular

in origin. By the end of the eighteenth-century, this Christian and racial thought eventually calcify into the ideology of American racism. But this is not where Arendt begins her investigation of “common sense”. Arendt first asks what the nature of “sovereign power” was in America political traditions.⁴⁰ She writes in On Revolution that the British Civil Wars of the seventeenth-century and their culmination in the Glorious Revolution, created the conditions of limited sovereignty within the British Isles. This in turn set the template for America’s political milieu. The next step the Founding Fathers took in developing their ideas of revolution was with an eye towards ending Britain’s limited but still sovereign exercise of power. When it was time to break from England and create an American republic the debate was not “where do we put sovereignty” but as Arendt writes “where do we rest authority.” The difference between these two conceptualizations of power is crucial to Arendt’s narrative of American Revolution. Sovereignty represents the consolidation of political decision making in one institution – namely the King. “Authority,” on the other hand is derived from the colonists’ experience at autonomous self-governance within local institutions of power. “Authority” represents an alternative formation of power based on the shared and collective experience of political subjects. Arendt links the shared and collective nature of authority to the effect Christian theological concepts had on American colonists. Puritan stress on Hebrew ideas of covenant as well as their belief in the Church’s origins in “consent” appear as important precursors to the American Revolution. The constitution of each original American colony into commonwealths with “freely chosen”

⁴⁰ However limited and problematic Arendt’s observations are in On Revolution, this particular observation exhibits one of the book’s strengths. Recent criticism, particularly Giorgio Agamben’s The State of Exception attempts to read the problem of the “King’s” political sovereignty into American political institutions. What does not appear in On Revolution but makes an appearance in The Origins of Totalitarianism is the relationship between modern theories of political sovereignty and private, economic interest. It is surprising that Arendt’s discussion of the American Revolution does not include a discussion of Hobbes. Property and its ties to the American conception of political happiness have its roots in Hobbes even if the Republican element of the American democratic experiment was not part of his “leviathan.” Why Arendt leaves Hobbes out of her assessment of the United States is rather curious, especially since her concerns of about American mass society is so pronounced. As with many of Arendt’s observations about American political and intellectual traditions, she leaves much to be desired.

representatives leads Arendt to believe that this spirit of “covenant” building was in the air, (Arendt 173).

In Arendt’s account, these aforementioned facts created the conditions of a “specifically American experience” which: “taught the men of the Revolution that action, though it may be started in isolation and decided by single individuals for very different motives, can be accomplished only by some joint effort” (Arendt 171). The action of “covenant making” led to the formation of political institutions (and the penning of America’s Constitution which expressed this form of power) based on the literal power of constitution, promise and covenant amongst citizens. Juxtaposed to French revolutionaries, whom Arendt reviles in On Revolution, she describes the Founding Fathers as interested in creating revolution in terms of “speech” and action, not violence. Her omission of war and violence from the American Revolution is purposeful. As she repeats throughout On Revolution, the American Revolution is singular in the West precisely because its foundations are in the power of covenant making, an act necessitating the preservation and transmission of rational speech. Violence and the instrumental element of speech accompanying it are on the other hand “antipolitical.” Neither relies on covenants between human beings but reverse this action. As Arendt writes in On Violence, violence, in its more extreme expressions is “One against All,” (Arendt 42). In other words it is the purposeful breakdown of political power gained in concerted deliberation, action and judgment. The “instruments” (from weapons to rhetorical speech) of violence are a substitute for the living, breathing presence and consent of the many (42).

The multifarious institutions of racial slavery are the clearest, most indelible blight upon the green pastures of America’s political common sense. Not only does American chattel slavery represent the enduring presence of the “sovereign” within American legal traditions but it

also operated by exercising the greatest tool of violence -- the destruction of speech and common sense. Slavery's presence in America is not lost on Arendt in On Revolution. As she writes, the fact that the American Revolutionaries were not motivated by "compassion" towards slaves is striking. She finds their silence to the "abject and degrading misery...in the form of slavery and Negro labor," surprising since it was such an eighteenth century commonplace, especially after the Naturalist philosophy of Rousseau, (Arendt 65). Arendt explains this apparent contradiction as a historically specific one. Juxtaposed to Rousseau, eighteenth century American thinkers saw slavery as a "social question" and therefore outside the concern of political institutions. Rousseau saw compassion as the, "most natural reaction to the suffering of others, and therefore the very foundation of all authentic 'natural' human intercourse," (Arendt 74-5). French Revolutionary thought supplanted concepts of freedom based on political deliberation, consensus and participation with the alleviation of material suffering – which for Arendt was strictly a "social" concern. It was for this reason that Arendt saw the political life imagined by the French Revolution parting ways with common sense and "reason." Instead Robespierre, inspired by Rousseau, saw virtue in the sacrifice of one's own will. A general sense of suffering – based on the agon between an individual's selfishness and the selflessness found within the will of the people – should guide political action and institutions. Human (as well as assumedly civic) intercourse is based on assuming that such an *a priori* suffering exists for all. Rousseau's ideas push "thinking," whose governing metaphor for Arendt is the "dialogue" outside the realm of politics. More perniciously for Arendt, Rousseau's "general will" reintroduces the concept of the sovereign into political thought again. But these were not the concerns of America's fledgling political thinkers. Arendt speculates that motivating Thomas Jefferson and others was the "incompatibility of the institution of slavery with the foundation of freedom," not "pity or by

a feeling of solidarity with their fellow man,” (Arendt 66). She blames this lack of pity on the dark obscurity of slavery itself, which made humans into objects thereby causing politicians to overlook the “abject and degrading misery” of its victims.

Arendt recognizes that the Founding Fathers knew that slavery could not philosophically coexist with the political institutions they wanted to set up. However it is also clear that Arendt cannot understand how slavery – an experience she readily associates with tyranny – did not allow these same Founding Fathers to be moved by “pity...with their fellow man.” This misunderstanding can be traced back to her discussion of racism in The Origins of Totalitarianism. Racism in Arendt’s account becomes an instrument of late nineteenth-century imperialism. She ties it to two late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth - century impulses within Europe’s bourgeoisie. “Race consciousness” is first an attempt to either affirm or challenge political and property rights. Arendt sees both aristocrats and members of the bourgeoisie used race thinking in such ways during the eighteenth century. Second, race consciousness is tied to the emergence of the European nation-state. France, Germany and England at some point use race in order to organize concepts of nationalism based on organic and “tribal origins, (Arendt 170). Intertwined with the biologics contained in such common origins (concepts of “innate personality” and “natural nobility,”) race consciousness also acquired a messianic hue. In part, this messianic component creates the conceptual legal and social ground work for Western European imperialism.

Race and racism carried a new sort of law that accompanied European nations into their colonial exploits. While extending the nation-state, it also established the inherent and eventually lawful superiority of colonizers over the colonized. These new laws also require new modes of organization in order to fully expedite the domination of peoples and resources. At the

center of these laws is an abandonment of the idea of humanity (Arendt 157). As Arendt writes, by excluding the principle of humanity from international law, politics – which is based upon covenant – is abandoned for a Hobbesian “perpetual war of all against all” (157). Under the conditions of an accumulating society, there is “no other unifying bond available between individuals who in the very process of power accumulation and expansion are losing all natural connections with their fellow-men,” (157). Racism and the true practice of politics for Arendt are at odds.

Because of its relationship to imperialism, Arendt identifies “race-consciousness” as a strictly nineteenth-century phenomenon in both Europe and America. Despite its racial and colonial aspect, Arendt took eighteenth-century desires to abolish or retain slavery as evidence of an absence of race consciousness. Even if her comments are confined to the European continent, this could not be further from the truth. Not only do her observations ignore the ideas of Immanuel Kant but also the works of David Hume, John Locke and many other seventeenth and eighteenth-century political philosophers. Both Benjamin Franklin’s Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind and Benjamin Rush’s Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America upon Slave-Keeping are pre-Revolutionary American works weaving the principles of race-consciousness into the speculations of America’s political future. Rush and Franklin’s discussions of race define what Ronald Takaki calls the “nationalistic fervor” defining America’s pre and post Revolutionary period (Takaki). Overlooked by Arendt’s as well our twentieth-century reception of America’s “Revolutionary” generation this same race consciousness is most prominent in the most iconic of America’s revolutionary thinkers, Thomas Jefferson. Quoting Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia in The Origins of Totalitarianism and in On Revolution, Arendt understood Jefferson’s “trembling” at God’s justice as the

indication of this absence of race consciousness. Indeed, Jefferson and the American Founding Fathers were worried about slavery's incompatibility with eighteenth-century American political institutions but they were not – according to Arendt – enforcing a regime of control and exploitation based on race. Read in the context of his Notes on the State of Virginia Jefferson's "trembling" is based on more than a possible retribution for slavery's injustice against humanity. Jefferson trembles because he fears eventual black insurrection in the United States. It is this fear that leads Jefferson to suggest the gradual abolishment of slavery, the education of manumitted slaves and their eventual deportation to a "distant area under the protection of this country" (Jefferson 201). Undoubtedly, events in Haiti and Toussaint's own eventual act of revolution weighed heavily upon Jefferson's mind. But more than this fear was another clearly expressed reason for Jefferson's trembling. As he writes, it is the "real distinctions...nature has made," that translate into "political" as well as "physical and moral" objections to the coexistence of Blacks and whites in the United States (201).⁴¹

Jefferson assigns "natural" distinction to the realm of "political" objection and hence Notes on the State of Virginia demonstrates the taint of "race-consciousness" that had already permeated the eighteenth-century political discourse about slavery. One would have to look no

⁴¹ Jefferson's fear of American slave insurrection and its roots in the Haitian Revolution do not make it into Arendt's assessment of Jefferson's thoughts on slavery. Neither does the Haitian Revolution make it into her account of the French Revolution either. Arendt's comments about blacks in Africa contained in The Origins of Totalitarianism hinge on the fact that they "had not created a human world, a human reality, and that therefore nature had remained, in all its majesty, the only overwhelming reality," (Arendt 192). Most explicitly, this absent "human world," for Arendt means the establishment of a "political body," (Arendt 193). The Haitian Revolution clearly fitting into Arendt's own paradigm of "revolution" in On Revolution as well as being a counterweight to her discussions of race in The Origins of Totalitarianism is a silent event in her assessment of modernity, race and the Totalitarianisms relationship to modern slavery. As with her misreading of Jefferson and 18th Century America slavery, an account of Haiti and France's dominion over it would have illuminated the 18th Century relationship between "Race and Bureaucracy." relationship found within slavery's institutions. A recent work attending to this oversight is Sibylle Fisher's Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution (2004). Also noteworthy is C.L.R. James' The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L' Overture and the San Domingo Revolution. Tim Mathewson's "Jefferson and the Nonrecognition of Haiti", David Byron Davis' Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, John C Miller's Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery, David Geggus', "The Haitian Revolution," amongst innumerable works talk about the domestic effects the Haitian Revolution had on Jefferson and the United States domestic politics in general.

further than the presence of Constitutional laws limiting suffrage along racial lines as well as the assignment of congressional legislative power to see that natural distinction was given “political” expression. Arendt’s blindness to such political realities – ironically grounded in the very secularism she seeks to express – limits her ability to fully understand America’s common sense. Jefferson and the Founding Fathers’ lack of pity, their fear and trembling before the hand of Providence were not based on the political thought of deliberation, covenant and speech. The wheel of fortune Jefferson saw turning on its diabolical yet natural axis had on its end what Melville would later have Delano utter in terror – “the Negro.” The Founding Father’s politics of deliberation were also the strategic politics of distinguishing friend from foe. Blacks posed a political threat to the burgeoning Republic; a threat that Jefferson and many others sought to eliminate or contain.

As we can see, Arendt extends her misapprehension of America’s “color question” from Origins of Totalitarianism into “Reflections on Little Rock.” “Reflections” contains the ideas that would later develop into her political portrait of the Founding Fathers in On Revolution. In both “Reflections” and On Revolution, Arendt’s assumes a rational political common sense guiding America’s political institutions. Such assumptions directed her mind away from the political form violence took in American slavery. Jefferson’s assessment that race was primarily a political problem stands in stark contrast to Arendt’s reading of America’s eighteenth-century political common sense. With this admission, the principle of humanity was already dispelled from America’s political imagination. Blacks, as Jefferson writes in his Notes, represented potential combatants he wished to check by casting them outside any human covenant with white Americans. If, as Arendt claims, America’s revolutionary common sense was made “by the combined power of the many” and the “interconnected principle of mutual promise and common

deliberation” its authority was based on a racial version of Hobbes’ perpetual war of all against all (Arendt 215).

This conflicted aspect of American political common sense – lost on Arendt – is not lost on Ralph Ellison. Like Arendt, Ellison recognizes the hope found in the pluralistic principles resting at the center of America’s democratic experiment. Yet, as I outlined in Chapter Two, he also recognized the countervailing force of violence and domination contained in this same experiment. It should be of no surprise then that Ralph Ellison’s most direct response to “Reflections” expresses the coeval relationship of hope and violence. Nor should it surprise us that Ellison’s response does not discuss the relationship between racism and America’s “common sense” through political science, sociology or philosophy. What is crucial to Ellison’s response is its profoundly aesthetic sensibility. As he tells Warren, Arendt:

has absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of Negro parents when they send their kids through those lines of hostile people. Yet they are aware of the overtones of a rite of initiation which such events actually constitute for the child, *a confrontation of the terrors of social life with all the mysteries stripped away*. And in the outlook of many of these parents (who wish that the problem did not exist), the child is expected to face the terror and contain his fear and anger *precisely* because he is a Negro American. Thus he’s required to *master the inner tensions created by his racial situation*, and if he gets hurt – then his is one more sacrifice. It’s a harsh requirement, but if he fails this basic test, his will be even harsher. (Ellison, 344 italics mine).

Ellison appears to describe this “rite of initiation” in terms of the sublime. In the writings of Burke, Addison and Shaftsbury through to the German Idealism of Kant and the later Romantics this “confrontation” with “terror,” defined the sublime experience. Yet, this same terror also spawned the experiences of pleasure, harmony and Kant’s most important contribution, reason in the perceiving subject. However unlike the Anglo, German Idealist or Romantic ideas of the sublime, Ellison does not necessarily place this terror in nature nor does it inspire reason in the Kantian sense. Terror is not natural (or supernatural) but “social” and its chaos is not harmonized with its perceiving subjects (“parents” and “children”) but purposefully revealed and necessarily confronted (“rite of initiation”). Here – at the place where terror is confronted and “contained” – is where the sublime overlaps with the stronger impulse found in Ellison’s writing: the tragic.⁴²

This tragic confrontation and recognition of social “terror” brings us to the most important concept bearing on Ellison’s response to Arendt: the theme of containment.⁴³ As Ellison tells Warren, Negro American’s are required to “master the inner tensions created by his racial situation.” Ellison mentions the necessity of containing and mastering these tensions later

⁴² I have discussed Ellison’s use of the tragic extensively in my second chapter. Also, it is here – with the gesture the sublime makes towards the tragic – that the criticism of Max Dessoir is important to note. His *Asthetik und allgemeine Kunstrissenschaft* sees the sublime in a contiguous relationship with the “tragic consciousness.” Where Ellison’s writings differ from Dessoir’s is how he treats the place of “fate” within the tragic. There is also a body of critical literature linking the “American” with the “sublime” that is worth mentioning. Beginning with Walt Whitman as well as Wallace Steven’s 1935 poem “American Sublime” a range of American intellectuals take up this concept in their work. In the last 40 years the most notable authors are Perry Miller, Leo Marx, Rob Wilson and Donald Pease.

⁴³ I will say that Ellison’s use of the word “containment” is peculiar in its frequency throughout this interview. Alan Nadel’s Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism and the Atomic Age is one of the most important books to deal directly with this trope of containment. Ellison’s work has had a central place in Nadel’s literary and cultural criticism and in Containment Culture Nadel places him within the “narrative of black American culture during the Cold War” that “contrast the narrative of containment,” (Nadel 226). Ellison’s precise place within such a narrative is dubious at best. He does not belong with the other authors Nadel mentions, namely John A. Williams, Alice Walker and Eldridge Cleaver. Where they clearly demarked themselves as anti-establishment and part of the nationalist elements of the Civil Rights struggle, Ellison sought distance from these very things. To a large extent he played a very important if – to use a favorite Ellison phrase – ambiguous role in the very “containment culture” Nadel sees Ellison outside of.

on in the interview when – speaking about Martin Luther King’s followers – he says King, “knows that these people have been conditioned to *contain* not only the physical pressures involved in their struggle but...*mastering* the psychological pressures,” (Warren 341, emphasis mine). The play between mastery and containment repeated through this interview should be familiar. In one form or another they all appear throughout Ellison’s writings. The most iconic example happens in the famous Battle Royal chapter of Invisible Man. When caught between the currency covered electrified rug and the Battle Royal’s white Southern spectators Ellison’s narrator talks of being able to “contain the electricity – a contradiction but it works,” (Ellison 27). In Ellison’s non-fiction writings, this trope of mastery and containment is related to discussions of artistic form. Such sentiments range from his writings on music where he says that proper jazz “reduced the chaos of living to form,” to the art of the novel, which Ellison sees as “a ship in which man conquers life’s crushing formlessness,” (Ellison 133, 229). With Warren however, Ellison takes the thematic discussion of literary form and language and applies them to describe the politics of segregation. The terms change from an aesthetic one (“form”) to describing the political ramifications of a psychological act (“containment”). Yet there is clearly continuity between Ellison’s description of art’s formal function and the act of confronting and containing the “terrors of social life.”

Where Arendt retells the story of America’s political beginnings as a rational tale of “common sense,” Ellison cannot do so. For Ellison, the repercussions of desegregation do not indicate the loss of what Arendt sees as America’s common sense but the endurance of its terribly convoluted logic. Arendt’s response to the events in Little Rock, Arkansas expresses the limits of her secular political humanism. Despite their beginnings in speech and covenant making, by the eighteenth century, political thinkers in American had already mingled the logic

of racism with the radical nature of political life they envisioned. Instead of being opposed to the legal and philosophical grounds of American freedom, Jefferson's Notes show that the racist logic of slavery was part of this same movement towards freedom. This simultaneous movement between political freedom and its destruction is what Ellison implies by the "terrors of social life." Blindness to this countervailing, destructive force limits Arendt's ability to properly understand the operation of political power or the function of racism in contemporary American segregation. While many have pointed out this blindness, Ellison included, his comments on "Reflections" also suggest a broader critique of her secular humanism. Hinted at in the above response to "Reflections," Ellison's critique has to do with where Arendt places common sense. Arendt rests this sense in public and political life while for Ellison politics is not the adequate realm for finding this sense. This sentiment is not directly expressed in his reference to Arendt and "Reflections" but as I will show it is suggested in the context she appears in.

Who Speaks for the Negro? is not the first time Ellison makes reference to Arendt and "Reflections." His initial reference appears in an elliptical and rather witty allusion to "Reflections" four years after the essay's publication. Amidst his debate with Irving Howe on the pages of the New Leader Ellison satirically refers to Howe as just as much an "Olympian authority" on Negro matters as Arendt in "Reflections on Little Rock" (Ellison). Outside of its humor and irony, associating Arendt and Howe implicates Arendt in Ellison's broader attack on the ontological privilege social scientific and philosophical modes of inquiry are given over literature. Their profound methodological differences aside, Howe and Arendt are guilty of the same thing for Ellison. Ellison begins "The World and the Jug" with a question directed towards Howe but just as easily applied to Arendt: "Why is it that sociology-orientated critics seem to rate literature so far below politics and ideology that they would rather kill a novel than modify

their presuppositions concerning a given reality which it seeks in its own terms to project?,” (Ellison 155-6). For Ellison, this tendency is shown in the over-determined connection between Naturalism and Black authors Irving Howe made in much of his literary criticism. In Arendt, this tendency is much more complicated and has to do with the kind of relationships literature has to philosophical “truth”.

Arendt’s works use a range of literary figures from Virgil and Herman Melville to William Faulkner in order to illustrate philosophical points. Yet “literature” holds a dubious and at times sinister place in her writing. In On Revolution, she faults the French “men of letters” for basing their experience of revolution on “language and literature rather than experience and concrete observation,” (Arendt 116). Her most explicit and biting reference to literature comes in this same work. Unlike her immediate intellectual contemporaries Arendt took a rather pessimistic stance on the nineteenth century European novel. The works of Balzac and his nineteenth century progeny (Flaubert, Zola, etc...) are indicative of the novel’s passivity to the emergence of bourgeois social Darwinism.⁴⁴ They are, in her words, indicative of the “elevation of chance to the position of final arbiter over the whole of life,” (Arendt 141). Novels can only be written in a “world without action” and the destinies of human subjects are determined either by “necessity” or the favoritism of luck. As Arendt goes on to explain in The Origins as well as in The Human Condition “chance” and necessity dominate in a world where the economic forces of capital have eviscerated the possibilities of traditional political action.

In these same works, Arendt centralizes “speech” as a vital activity that communicates “common sense” and initiates human “recognition”. But speech is not “poetic” for Arendt.

⁴⁴ In talking about Balzac, she is talking about the roots of Naturalism. This is curious since the literary figures she uses in her works are not these writers. Across her works if she is not referring back to either Greek or Roman literary sources she often references modernist writers like William Faulkner, Brecht and Thomas Mann.

Instead “speech” belongs to another realm of language use. In fleshing out the division between “Work” and “Action,” Arendt makes this distinction between poetic language and “speech” clear. All art functions as both “remembrance and recollection” for Arendt but poetry in particular exhibits its durability through “condensation, so that it is as though language spoken in utmost density and concentration were poetic in itself,” (Arendt 169). Even though this quality makes poetry durable and worldly, this condensation also renders it “dead”. Poetry cannot acquire or store up knowledge, nor can it reason or deduce. Neither does it have the characteristics of the highest activity – thinking itself – which Arendt describes as the relentless and repetitive process of life itself. It is speech that has these characteristics. Accompanied by action, speech for Arendt serves the function Aristotle designates for it in his Politics which is to communicate and form “a common perception” of what is “advantageous and what is the reverse...to declare what is just and unjust,” (Aristotle 6). Speech also plays a part in revealing human distinctiveness amongst other human beings. Poetry, which only deals with reified “objects”, cannot do this. Describing the relationship between “speech” and “life” Arendt writes, “with word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance” (176).

The distinction Arendt draws between speech and poetic language can be read back into The Origins of Totalitarianism. Arendt characterizes the ideal subjects of totalitarian rule as those unable to distinguish “the reality of experience” (fact and fiction) or “the standards of thought,” (truth or falsehood) (321). The erasure of these distinctions signifies the destruction of speech and hence the capacity of judgment for Arendt. Poetic language, while the space of remembrances, is essentially “thoughtless.” While it might be meaningful, poetic language is

not capable of disclosing either experience or the “standards of thought” as speech does. The political realm – which is defined by people acting, speaking and deliberating in concert – is also the space where judgment based on common sense is created and communicated through speech. The author figure that produces “poetic language” represents the opposite of speech and action in concert. Arendt notes this and purposefully drives a wedge between the two since the analog to such an author figure in the political realm raises the specter of tyranny.

As many critics have noted, this is where Arendt’s use and revision of Kant’s idea of common sense emerges. Arendt’s idea of speech presupposes two things. As Jurgen Habermas notes Arendt’s notion of speech presupposes a non-coercive “common course of action” for its listeners and speakers (Habermas 257). Secondly, as Andrew Norris notes it also assumes that all phenomena are primarily “that which appears to others,” (Norris 170). It is from this capricious, yet communal appearance that we achieve human distinctiveness and unified belonging. By borrowing Kant’s idea of aesthetic judgment, Arendt abandons his notion of impartial political judgment. Common sense becomes a public, non-objective and non-coercive means of recognition. Arendt was aware that Kant’s political writings, which rest political judgment with a disinterested sovereign ruler, could not constitute a properly free political realm. Also, Arendt had to have recognized that for Kant, common sense did not hold a place for the kind of secular moral judgment she sought to elaborate in the political realm. In fact, the Critique of Judgment, Kant excludes common sense from his concept of moral philosophy.

Arendt’s common sense has its roots in the Greeks. Specifically, it calls to mind Aristotle’s split with Plato over the idea of the good and the relevance of practical knowledge. However, in both The Human Condition and On Revolution, she reveals that the weight of her understanding owes more to the practical attitude of Roman interpretations of common sense.

This decisive split in the Romans had to do with their rejection of the “theoretical speculations” of Greek philosophers as Hans-Georg Gadamer writes in Truth and Method, (Gadamer). In On Revolution, Arendt’s interest in creating a parallel between the derivation of Roman law from the concept of *lex*, (or “intimate connection”) and America’s own “covenant making” marks her reliance on the secular immanence of common sense. Establishing such a parallel writes the American Revolution within a humanist tradition stemming from Aristotle to the Roman Republic and then lost until fleetingly appearing the eighteenth century. The Human Condition is where Arendt, in a more modern attitude, uses the concept of common sense as a critique of modern scientific reasoning based in the categorical thought of eighteenth-century rationalism. Ironically, Arendt joins a genealogy of humanist thinkers – beginning with Giambattista Vico – for whom common sense was intimately tied to hermeneutical forays into philology and rhetoric. Arendt, as a student of Martin Heidegger, clearly shares their philological and rhetorical interest in the power of words and speech. Further, like Vico, Arendt sees common sense as a vehicle of criticism and way of forming truth, (Gadamer). Owing to her Aristotelian and Kantian predilections however, she shies away from the line from Vico to Bergson that embraces the poetics of speech and human action within this sense. While speech is the “living sense” that can create such common sense, literature on the other hand is dead thought. The weight of literature’s dead language can give us a memory of what was. But within the political realm only living speech creates knowledge and forms a community capable of making judgment. Speech and its potential to convey common sense is as close to “reason” that humanity can get, and here is where Arendt’s Kantian sensibilities are the most obvious. Nonetheless, it is through speech that Arendt feels “things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their

identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity.” It is only here that “worldly reality truly and reliably appear,” to us (Arendt 57).

Despite the many ways their interests intersect, Arendt’s dismissal of literature clearly puts her at odds with Ellison. Beyond her general skepticism of rhetorical and literary language, Arendt’s attack on the novel furthers this split. As a genre of “chance” and “fate,” Arendt suggests that – at least in the hand of the Naturalists – the novel can only “present” the passionate response of humans to an inhuman fate. The novel only pantomimes the agency that the human will would have in actual worldly affairs. For Arendt even this act of mimicry remarks on the novel’s abject status. All the novel did was project a world where “artists” and “intellectuals” were protected from the cruel world of chance that visited “philistines,” (Arendt 141). If taken as a critique of Naturalism (beginning with Balzac) then Ellison would undoubtedly share Arendt’s sentiments. Combined with Arendt’s more systemic comments on literature, her understanding of the novel only intensify her general dismissal of literature as an inquiry into truth or model for the possibility of speech.

This battle over how we define our inquiries into the truth frame Arendt’s second and most iconic appearance in Who Speaks for the Negro. Warren does not prompt Ellison to discuss “Reflections.” Instead, Ellison invokes “Reflections” in the midst of a response about Kenneth Clark, the social psychologist made famous in the Brown vs. Board of Education case. Clark, whose Dark Ghetto and other writings dismiss Martin Luther King’s tactics of non-violence, is cast in a similar light as Irving Howe in “The World and the Jug.” As Ellison tells Warren, the only way Clark and others will become interested in the “plight” of Southern Negroes is through “a description, replete with graphs, statistics and footnotes, of Negro life as so depraved, hopeless and semi-human that the best service that money could perform would be

to stuff the mouths of the describers so that the details of the horror could stop” (Warren 340-1).⁴⁵ As with Howe in “The World and the Jug”, Ellison’s critique of Clark is bound up with an attack on deductive and sociological modes of inquiry. “Graphs, statistics and footnotes,” are only capable of describing the “depraved, hopeless and semi-human” aspects of Negro life. Clark’s valuation of Southern (and Northern) Blacks eliminates what Ellison calls the “necessary psychological complexity” needed to understand and respond to American racism. Instead, Ellison says Clark imposes a “psychological norm,” upon Negro life that inadequately interprets the way blacks *might* understand their American experience. As with Howe’s “Realism,” Clark’s psychological portrait of black life renders it as purely sensuous and not willful, reactionary and not thoughtful.

For Ellison, there is will and thinking contained in Martin Luther King’s non-violence. King’s “humility,” is not the irrational, pathological response to Southern racist violence Clark would make it out to be.⁴⁶ In counter-distinction to the historical baggage and hopeless

⁴⁵ Ellison’s critique of Clark here reminiscent of his criticism of Gunnar Myrdal’s An American Dilemma, which was written almost 20 years before. Clark was a student of Myrdal’s at Columbia and Ellison’s comments in Who Speaks for the Negro echo his earlier criticisms of Myrdal method of studying Black life. Part of this description entails a not very casual link between the empirical powers of social science and the institutions of capital, bureaucracy and finance. Ellison makes similar connections in his unpublished review of An American Dilemma in 1944. The problem of race and its relationship to this same triumvirate can be found in many of his essay and interviews like “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,” “Some Questions and Some Answers,” and other places. Ellison’s insights into the exploitative dimensions of advanced capitalism are hard to pin down. It is clear that he understands its exploitative effects though the aftermath of racial slavery and Gilded Age industrial capitalism. There is no explicit systematic position Ellison expresses on the relationships between labor, capital, science and industry. Where Ellison discusses language and literary form is where this becomes complicated. He has no problem combining technological and organic metaphors in his description of literary practices. When it comes to criticizing the social sciences, Ellison does not shy away from making the connection between science, capitalism and the effective exploitation of labor. In fact, in his review of Myrdal he writes that An American Dilemma creates a “more effective blueprint for the exploitation of the South’s natural, industrial and human resources,” (Ellison, 337.) It seems that Ellison accuses Kenneth Clark’s project, the Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited of the same thing.

⁴⁶ In “A Strategy for Change,” the penultimate chapter of The Dark Ghetto, Clark argues that the integrationist, non-violent political strategy of Martin Luther King suffers from an unrealistic, if not pathological basis. He writes that the “natural” reactions to injustice, oppression and humiliation are “bitterness and resentment,” (Clark 218). What Clark reserves the bulk of his criticism for is the “philosophical and strategic” significance of King’s philosophy. These are things that Clark says, “could only appeal to the educated or to White liberals,” (218). It is in the

pessimism Clark saw in King's strategies, Ellison thought there was a "great power in humility," (Ellison, 341). He continues:

Getting back to King and Clark, I think this – and it might sound mystical, but I don't think so because it is being acted out every day: there is a great power in humility. Dostoevski has made us aware – in fact, Jesus Christ has made us aware. *It can be terribly ambiguous and it can contain many, many contradictory forces, and most of all, it can be a form of courage.* Martin Luther King isn't working out of yesterday or the day before yesterday. He is working out of a long history of Negro tradition and wisdom, and he certainly knows more about the psychology of his fellows than Dr. Clark. He knows that these people have been *conditioned to contain* not only the physical pressures involved in their struggle, but that they are capable, through this same tradition, of mastering the psychological pressures of which Clark speaks (Ellison 341, italics mine).

As was the case with Howe, Ellison's critique of Clark judges his deductive modes of inquiry as inherently "negative." Neither Clark nor Howe seeks active thinking – what Ellison refers to as "mastery" in this passage – but quantifiable reaction and pathology. These are the values easily documented through "graphs, statistic and footnotes." Ellison starts out describing humility as "mystical" but then quickly corrects this by situating humility's "every day" acts into a trans-historical legacy of literary and historical figures. Ellison begins with Dostoyevsky, whose pivotal presence in his response suggests two intertwined narratives. In Demons, The Idiot and Notes From Underground, Dostoyevsky literary works were in part skeptical polemics against

"natural" reaction towards injustice that Clark places authenticity but it is precisely the "unrealistic" character of King's response that Ellison's wants to place both truth and value.

the positivist rational ideas of progress infiltrating Russian politics and culture. Literature and the willful potential it embodied were presented in Dostoyevsky's works as a response to the many guises of this positivism. Dostoyevsky's American appeal was in part based on this element of his thinking and like Irving Howe – Ellison embraced Dostoyevsky precisely because his works represented an opposition to the dogma associated with proletarian realist fiction during the Thirties. For Ellison especially, this dogma was heavier when it came to the representation of Blacks in literature.

The humanistic and redemptive example of literature also blends with Dostoyevsky's known Christian sensibilities. Salvation's potential in works like The Idiot and The Brothers Karamazov are only achieved by tragic sacrifice. It is no coincidence then that Ellison goes from Dostoyevsky to Christ in the above passage. Despite Ellison's movement back through time as well as from the secular to the sacred, he is always still centered upon the *word*. Christ is as much a literary figure as he is both a spiritual and historical personage. Outside of Dostoyevsky's own invocation, Christ's tragic sacrifice resonates within American literary and political traditions. There is on one side the line coming out of Emersonian Transcendentalism and reaching its apogee in the liberal democratic politics of the Cold War. The tragic figure of Christ resonates in writers like Emerson, Melville, Kenneth Burke, Faulkner, Schlesinger, Niebuhr and Ellison himself. In all, Christ is representative of the universal and also America's historical struggle for freedom. This Judeo-Christian trajectory suggests that a free willed choice resides in sacrifice.

Ellison's placement of Martin Luther King's "humility" and the "long history of Negro tradition and wisdom" within such a constellation are telling. It represents a fusion of the more secular modernist version of American humanist inquiry and the politics of Black vernacular

conceptualizations of Christ. The complex role Christ and Christianity play within Black social and political discourses of freedom are testified to by the works of E. Franklin Frazier, C. Eric Lincoln, Albert Raboteau and James Cone. In The Black Church Since Frazier (1974) Lincoln places King's blend of social activism and Christian sensibility within the permeable boundaries between the Black Church and the public sphere Frazier documented in The Negro Church in America (1963). Frazier ends The Negro Church in America stating that the Black church's centrality to black social formation is unequivocally pertinent to the secular comportment of Black participation in American political and intellectual life. Cone's version of this same dynamic does not end in such an integrationist tone. Stretching from David Walker to Malcolm X, Cone links the historically political nature of Black Christianity to the anti-colonial discourses of Liberation Theology during the Cold War. In A Black Theology of Liberation (1970) Cone fits King's Christian sensibilities within this ethos. Ellison's version of King clearly fits within the secular, Cold War integrationist and American modernist ethos of Ellison's thought and writing. Ellison's version of King, while suggesting the complexities of Civil Rights politics during the Cold War is clearly an example of this American secular invocation.

Beginning this constellation with Dostoyevsky demonstrates where Ellison's sensibilities rest. The very things Dostoyevsky meant for Ellison's generation of writers he finds embodied in King and the "Negro wisdom" he brings to American social life. In the same way Dostoyevsky's works engaged Russia's positivist political discourses of the late nineteenth century – discourses often hinged around the ideologies of racism and nationalism – King's "humility" engages a similar American phenomena. "Humility" then actively functions as a skeptical and secular engagement with the presence of racism in America. As Ellison writes, through "humility" the irreconcilable clash between the "implicit heroism of people who must

live within a society without recognition, real status,” but who are also ironically “involved in the ideals of that society,” is revealed (Ellison 342). Yielded from this clash are truth and the capabilities of judgment, since “such people learn more about the real nature of that society....They might not be able to spell it out philosophically but they *act* it out. And...against the white man’s indictments of this conduct, [it produces] folkways and values which express their sense of social reality...” (Ellison 343, emphasis Ellison’s). Simultaneously, “humility” also creates the possibility of transcendence, a concept sitting on the other side of Dostoyevsky’s concern with humanity and clearly part of King’s political strategy against segregation. When we encounter Ellison’s description of this transcendence it appears to clash with his own secular sensibilities. At times he speaks a metaphysical and romantic language of “universality” and recognizing the shared “core” within our shared human experience. This metaphysical characteristic reaches its apogee near the end of Ellison’s interview with Warren. Here, Ellison associates the transcendent, “human side” of interracial communication (won through the political effects of humility) in the American South outside of “political and social and ideological” reality (Warren 344). He describes this reality as a “particularly negative art form” draining the “energy of the imagination,” and “breaking up” the human ideal (Warren 344).

As David Harvey writes in The Condition of Postmodernity, the rebirth of an international and universal political ethics was simultaneously expressed in Modernist aesthetic expansions and experimentations with time and space in art (Harvey 273). In bringing together Dostoyevsky, Christ and Martin Luther King Ellison juxtaposes this triumvirate of heroic, trans-historical figures against the “negative art form” of parochial American Southern reality. The new version of humanistic continuity Ellison establishes here also demonstrates a complex version of historical time symptomatic of what Harvey calls the “privileging of conceptual space

over the linearity of homogeneous time (Harvey 273). For Ellison, what unites Dostoyevsky, Christ and King are their shared conceptual notions of humanistic freedom; one that is unbounded by geographic or racial belonging. Also, in a very familiar rhetorical move, Ellison figuratively associates the American “South” with the same sociological and rationalist methods of inquiry hampering the achievement of “human communication...and social intercourse,” (Warren, 344). In an echo of Ellison’s debate with Howe in the New Leader, he links Kenneth Clark’s sociological thought with the roots of southern segregationist thought. Both are examples of race-based intellectual parochialism, which limits the potentiality for a transcendent concept of humanist understanding. And while Ellison’s critique of positivist science and contentious embrace of American “vernacular” forms brings to mind Leo Marx’s pastoral modernism his intentions cannot be completely read in the “Great Divide” narrative of Modernism (Huyssen 15).

These “negative art forms” are not only juxtaposed with art writ large, but with the complex Modernist lineage of the novel Ellison often returns to in his works. As I have suggested above, Dostoyevsky’s presence represents the invocation of this tradition and its links to post-Civil War American literature and Cold War intellectual humanism. Creating continuity between the literary works of Dostoyevsky and the actions of Martin Luther King, Ellison demonstrates how these American phenomena is part of a poetic humanist continuum. In the United States this continuum challenges the imaginative and intellectual parochialism driving the violence of segregation, the inquiries of sociology and Naturalism’s style. This dangerously unimaginative, anti-humanist parochialism defined part of American “common sense” for Ellison. From Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia to Kenneth Clark’s and Arendt’s misreading of race; Ellison saw the “negative art” of America’s “common sense” sealing the fate

of human possibility. Dostoyevsky's figurative appearance in this interview is used to suggest a genealogy suggesting another version of American "common sense."

Illuminating the link from King to Dostoyevsky moves us closer towards understanding Ellison's place within the poetic traditions of inquiry and critique begun in Vico's The New Science. As was Vico's intention so was Ellison's. In differing contexts both sought a method of studying human action that left behind the legacy of Positivism and mechanistic philosophies that read a priori presuppositions into the study of human life. Vico's "new science" was to use the resources of philology to recovery a sense of human beginnings out of human vernacular language use. He argued that the development of humanity should not be studied through a concept of "natural law" but by the dynamic relationship between words, and human custom, human speech and the institutions developed from them. As Vico wrote in The New Science, the "sequence of human institutions sets the pattern for the histories of words" and these words are "carried over from bodies and from the properties of bodies to signify the institutions of the mind and spirit," (Vico 78). Placing the "institutions of mind and spirit" within the realm of deed and speech, Vico's axioms on etymology open up the radical possibility that our principles of humanity must be understood by studying the generative potentiality of words and actions themselves.

In "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," Ellison wrote that "perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word...for if the word has the potency to revive and make us free, it has also the power to blind imprison and destroy," (Ellison 81). Ellison's response to Arendt's "Reflections" in Who Speaks for the Negro demonstrates that in both the eighteenth and twentieth-century, American words and deed are literally a paradox to the rationality of our political institutions and their ability to capture a

“common sense.” Despite Arendt’s attempt to articulate an inclusive, non-legislative political space, black political action and American anti-black racism creates a conundrum to the humanism she sees in American political traditions. The philosophical and imaginative limitations Arendt puts on human action and speech are revealed in her inability to comprehend Black political acts. Arendt does not understand that American “common sense” – communicated by speech and action – casts blacks outside of its realm understanding. This, as I have argued, has as much to do with Arendt’s narrow interpretation of American political theory as with her narrow conceptualization of language. In her rejection of the “word’s” poetic potential she also limits her ability to understand “speech” as a true space for civic recognition. Juxtaposed to this is Ellison’s broader understanding of human activity. The potential for humanity Ellison sees in literary language and speech corrects the failures of America’s “common sense,” which does not properly fit blacks within its idea of the human. Ellison centralizes a more dynamic sense of belonging through an appeal to literature which allows him to unite words of Dostoyevsky to the deeds of Martin Luther King. By creating this integrative space of “speech,” Ellison continued to read into American literary traditions an imaginative alternative to America’s legacy of segregation by word and deed.

Despite their difference, the Cold War drew Ralph Ellison and Hannah Arendt together. Their initial works Invisible Man and The Origins of Totalitarianism were responses to World War II and the significant changes that war wrought upon the twentieth century. Working in different genres and traditions, Arendt and Ellison’s works were part of America’s intellectual front line heading into the Cold War. There they were joined by Lionel Trilling’s The Liberal Imagination published in 1950 and Arthur Schlesinger’s Jr.’s The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom published in 1949. Ellison’s response, a work of fiction and Arendt’s, a work of

political philosophy, are united still in their mutual forging and use in the arena of Cold War American anti-communism. Even before the onset of the Cold War both Ellison and Arendt separately critiqued the intellectual roots from which Communism emerged: ideological thought. It is ideology, as Arendt often says, that reveals Modernity's newest and most indelible stamp upon political thought. At the end of Origins, Arendt defines ideology as "the logic of an idea" as it is applied to the events of history. Ideology's power comes from the instrumental force of its own logic, which can predict the inherent movement of events. For the "ideas" rooted within any given ideology, there is no need for an "outside factor" to set an event in motion. Hence, she distinguishes this modern application of an idea's "logic" from the eternal *eidos* of Plato and Kant's concept of "regulative principle of reason" (Arendt 469). Ellison's understands the effect of ideological thought in similar ways. In letters to Richard Wright as early as 1937, written before his split with the CPA, Ellison expresses a concern about ideological constraints Marxist thought put on poetic and literary expression (Fabre). Ellison's concern with Marxist ideology's effect on literary expression also extended to his concern over its effect within literary criticism. His public responses to Irving Howe's "Black Boys and Native Sons" on the pages of The New Leader in 1963-4 are perhaps the most iconic and famous expressions of this concern. It was not Marxist ideology alone Ellison bristled under. In a 1964 review of Amiri Baraka's Blues People for the New York Review of Books Ellison shows why he was not the most popular writer with the Black Arts movement. The problem with Baraka's analysis of the blues music was the rigid correlation Baraka created between "color, education, income and the Negro's preference in music" (Ellison 282).

For Ellison as with Arendt, it is with the "word" where the potential for democratic plurality and the problem of ideology is the most destructive. However it was Arendt's

misunderstanding of the “word” and its American context that brought Ellison’s critique. One important question is how far does Ellison’s critique of Arendt’s politics go? In On Violence, Arendt puts Frantz Fanon and the Black Power movement at the center of her polemic. She is unapologetic about her fear and unflinching with her warnings about their liberation politics. Both Fanon and the Black Power Movement were indicative of a larger and more disturbing trend in modern Western politics: the destruction of proper political power and their institutions. In their stead, all that was left are the implements of force. Arendt never seemed to understand that this very force, founded before Modernity’s birth has always been used against Blacks in America as well as Black Algerians by the French. Instead, she mistakenly saw this force only arising at the end of the nineteenth-century and welded by the children of Rousseau’s natural rights philosophy.

Ellison, who was aware of this aboriginal contradiction in “common sense,” was also unapologetic about The Black Power Movement and its aesthetic arm – the Black Arts Movement. Much of his writing and interviews during the 1960s reveals this. His above review of Baraka’s Blues People, an address given to the Free Library in 1967, a tribute to Duke Ellington written in 1968, and perhaps most tellingly, his testimony in front the United States Senate in 1967 betray Ellison’s political predilections. Like Arendt, Ellison sees Black Power as a symptom of the dissolution of political power and the decadence chaos of modern times. Instead of “aspiring to project a vision of the complexity and diversity of the total experience,” Ellison says, writers lose faith and “falls back on something which is called black comedy – which is neither black nor comic, but a cry for despair,” (Ellison 764). Ellison was beginning to draw a distinction during the 1960s. Those black children fighting segregation in the 1950s and early 60s were seen as part of his own “literary” common sense. He believed this so much that

he enveloped them within the descriptive aesthetics of the novel during his interview in Who Speaks For the Negro. It makes sense that Ellison could draw such an intimate relationship between the potential of literature and the attempts of these Blacks to “truly and readily appear” in the desegregating south. As Ellison writes, being a Negro “imposes the uneasy burden and occasional joy of a complex double vision, a fluid, ambivalent response to men and events, which represents, at its finest a profoundly civilized adjustment to the cost of being human in this modern world,” (Ellison 178). While they were still kept from that “common world” Arendt assumed existed in America Ellison saw Blacks expressing its common sense nonetheless. The same burden of humanity Ellison sees expressed by the actions of Blacks he also sees in the American novel. But Ellison saw the art and artists affiliated with the Black Arts movement as a repudiation of all these things. Instead of a complex Duboisian “double vision” or a fluid “response to men and events,” Ellison saw these Black Artists as moving swiftly away from accepting this burden. The young black artists he shared the late 1960s with were part of the “cacophony of styles” endemic of mass culture. As writers they were more interested in being “sociologists” than projecting a comparative vision of Negro American experience out of the “broad knowledge of how people of other cultures live” (Ellison 747).

Concerning Black Power, a topic Ellison is silent on in his published writing, his indirect dismissal of its sociology and ideology are similar to Arendt’s own rejection of the unfortunate political power these positivist scientific pursuits wield. When Ellison’s more direct concern with politics does appear it is attached – just as Arendt in On Revolution – to the founding documents of the American Republic. As he writes in “Society Morality and the Novel,” these documents “form the ground of assumptions upon which our social values rest; they inform our language and our conduct with public meaning, and they provide the broadest frame for our most private

dramas, (Ellison 702). Ellison even repeats Arendt's claim when he writes that there is a "superstitious overvaluation of Europe" and not enough attention to the "explicitness of the omnipresent American ideal," (702). Whether it is because of the acute political failures of America to live up to this heritage in the 30s and then in 60s it is not towards politics that Ellison suggests we turn to understand these social values, language or conduct. Instead these principles are best expressed in the "consciousness of those writers who created what we consider our classic novels," (702). Predictably, he goes on to list Hawthorne, Melville, James and Twain as examples of this proper novelistic practice. Nor is it to politics that Ellison suggests we turn to achieve the sort of "common sense" Arendt sees as achieved in political deliberation. Again, it is the novel which can "communicate with us...by appealing to that which we know, though actual experience or through (other) literature, to be the way things occur" (Ellison 697). Between the novelist and the reader there must exist "a body of shared assumptions concerning reality and necessity, possibility and freedom, personality and value, along with a body of feelings, both rational and irrational, which arise from the particular circumstances of their mutual society," (697).

The large "body of shared assumptions" Arendt saw within the politics of deliberation Ellison saw in a mixed tradition of post-bellum American fiction and European Modernism. It was only when the designs of politics entered American literary criticism and the practice of art these "shared assumptions" are lost. In his interview with Warren, Ellison saw all African-Americans "caught up" in the egalitarian ideals of American life but simultaneously caught up in their continued contradiction, whether that is the de facto or de jure practices of racism. Ellison places the blame for this with a reality defined by political, social and ideological concepts. Perhaps it is for this reason he gives Warren such a literary way to explain Martin Luther King

and Negro protest in Who Speaks for the Negro. It reveals Ellison's own understanding that "common sense" – at least the sort described by Arendt in "Reflections" and elsewhere – has yet to be achieved in politics. For Ellison, it is to be found in the words "spoken" within the novel – albeit a very specific version of the novel. With this, Ellison, unlike Arendt, veers closer to Vico and the embrace of rhetorical and literary languages' potential for conveying such sense. When crafted properly Ellison believed that literature was the "positive" art form capable of capturing our humanity. In the novel, our eventful past and lost human conditions are made to endure through the shaping of our speech and the language used to create it.

Throughout the 60s, Ellison – as well as his Cold War contemporaries from the Forties – would continually fall back on this "broad knowledge," best expressed (for them at least) in late nineteenth and early twentieth century American and European novel. But we must wonder whether Ellison and contemporaries like Arendt were just as guilty of blending politics and aesthetics. And if so how were they doing this? When the Congress for Cultural Freedom – a high profile international consortium of artists and intellectuals created in 1947 – was exposed as a Central Intelligence Agency front in 1967 it was revealed that its tendrils stretched into the very intellectual and cultural life of this country. Ellison himself was a member of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom. During the 50s and 60s many of Ellison's essays were published in journals under the editorial steward of intellectuals associated with the Congress for Cultural Freedom or indirectly funded (and in some instances directly funded) by the Central Intelligence Agency (Saunders 101, 162, 179). From Partisan Review to Prevue, the same Modernist American and European artistic traditions championed and utilized by writers like Ellison were also used to wage an intellectual battle with the Soviet Union. The same "black comics" Ellison derides in later writings – comics he pointed towards the modernism of

Faulkner, James and Dostoyevsky – were also designated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s COINTELPRO program as terrorist “enemies of the state” in 1968, (Churchill). All of this should give us pause since it brings up the pernicious exercises of force by the US State during the Cold War.

By the 70s, when Ellison turned his mind towards finding America’s “common sense,” he sought it out in the traditional disciplines of sociology, philology history and literary criticism. More importantly, he looked for it in the broad knowledge offered in nineteenth and early twentieth-century American novelistic fiction. Was Ellison’s burgeoning interest in American language an occasion to transcend this pernicious reasoning and use of force by the US State? As Walter Benjamin asks in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” was Ellison turning these politics into art or was he politicizing art against it? It is to this next phase of Ellison search for the “common sense” of American literary language that we should turn next.

Chapter 4: An Integrative Vernacular

Out of all the significant events occurring in the United States one particular set of changes has had and continues to have a profound effect on American life. With the destruction of Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement had achieved its most important task. It had vanquished the central juridical quagmire of American political and social life. As history has borne out though, the solution to this problem has only exposed the deeper architectonic structure of racism and the shifting grounds of humanism in America. The solution, known as “integration,” was based on the legal and moral principles founded in the Brown vs. Board of Education decision in 1954. As these safeguards against Jim Crow’s reappearance were implemented, they released unpredictable social and political forces into the dynamo of American life.

Integration describes a whole host of technological, economic and social changes in the United States and globally. It was used as a slogan for federally mandated racial reconciliation that has cemented the concept in the minds of Americans. Abolishing the legal grounds for “separate but equal” institutions led to what Orlando Patterson in The Ordeal of Integration: Progress and Resentment in America’s “Racial” Crisis calls the “paradoxes of integration” (Patterson 15). While the federal government continued to pass legislation dismantling the legal legacy of Jim Crow, Patterson discovers that the same post-Brown vs. Board decades saw an increase in racial chauvinism (Patterson 65). Literally and intellectually, the field of literary criticism was not immune to this “integrationist” impulse or its paradoxical consequences. The influence of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism in literary criticism had a profound effect on how African-American literary works were read by African-American scholars. During this time Ralph Ellison published “The Little Man in Chehaw Station: The American Artist and His

Audience” in The American Scholar (1977). Ellison’s essay does not bear the overt marks of these interpretive sea changes. However, the essay undoubtedly taps into the social and political vectors of integration simultaneous with these academic events.

For the proponents of theory’s embrace, Ellison’s “Little Man” essay seemed to fit perfectly. So much so that Ellison’s essay would become a crucial touchstone for Post-Structuralist and Cultural Studies readings of African-American literature. Early critics such as Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Houston Baker read into Ellison’s description of the artistic process as both “coopera [tion] and resist [ance]...” echoes of Derrida. Ellison’s essay was just another example of the applicability of post-Structuralist semiotic approach to language to African-American literature.

Looking back on this period, an obvious change does come over Ellison’s writing during the 1970s. It makes sense that his work would be used to engender post-Structuralist, vernacular readings of African-American literature. The fact is “vernacular culture” does begin to occupy a more explicit role in Ellison’s reflection on and understanding of American identity. As a poignant sign of times, so does the word integration. Whenever this later term appears in his writings, as it does in essays like “Going to the Territory,” (1979) “Perspective of Literature” (1976), the aforementioned “Little Man” (1977) and his 1981 “Introduction” to Invisible Man others, it is more often than not linked to the “dynamic process” of vernacular creation (608). Central to Ellison’s adoption of integration and the vernacular is his use of the term “antagonistic cooperation.”

In “Ellison’s Racial Variations on American Themes”, Kun Jong Lee sees antagonistic cooperation as an anticipation of black Post-Structuralist interpretations of literature (Lee 433-4).

However, when we trace the roots of this term and Ellison's particular use of it in "Little Man", it does not readily yield the proto post-modern or racialist readings projected onto his essay. Ellison's use of "antagonistic cooperation", a term he borrows from the late nineteenth century sociologist William Graham Sumner, is linked to his continued search for a proper American "common sense." "Little Man" is years removed from his debates with Hannah Arendt over desegregation and Little Rock. Nonetheless, I believe that in "Little Man" Ellison elaborates an alternative to the racialized metaphysics found in Arendt's version of American "common sense." Instead of tracing the origins of black aesthetic practices or simply reiterating the "melting pot" thesis, I argue Ellison's essay and its focus on "antagonistic cooperation" is the end product of a project to re-conceptualize the dominant metaphor of American social cohesion. This project culminated during the country's transition from the Civil Rights Era. And by the 1970s, I see Ellison invoking "integration" to express these thoughts.

Ellison's aesthetic interpretation of antagonistic cooperation in "Little Man" and its connection to integration is no coincidence. Reading the essays Ellison published during the 1960s and combing through his archived papers at the Library of Congress shows that he had been thinking along these lines for at least a decade before "The Little Man" essay. His tenure as the Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at New York University during the 1970s also had an overwhelming influence on these ideas and in particular "The Little Man" essay.

As I will show in a reading of Ellison's essay "The Myth of the Flawed Southerner" (1965), "On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz" (1962) and handwritten notes from his time at NYU, we see nascent versions of both "antagonistic cooperation" and integration in his thinking. All of this culminates in the "Little Man" essay and what he called his poetic understanding of the "integrative, vernacular note" of American experience (Ellison "Miscellaneous", 507). Ellison's

notes from the 1970s also reveal this aesthetic interest in antagonistic cooperation and “integration” is directly linked to Ellison’s anxiety over what he calls the “ideology of blackness”, a term he uses to identify the Black Arts and Black Power Movements. Ellison’s elaboration of a poetic yet antagonistic vision of “integration” offers us a way to think about America’s transitional post-Civil Rights moment. Like his peers, Ellison’s pessimism is connected to the new challenges life in the post-Civil Rights era presented to Americans and African-Americans alike. Many African-American intellectuals in particular began to express a great deal of pessimism beginning in the 1970s and into 1980s. Much of it was tied to the perception that once culturally cohesive African-American communities were fracturing in the face of urbanization and a globalizing, post-industrial market economy. Preoccupying Ellison’s thoughts in particular was the threat Black Nationalism and essentialist ideology posed to American social cohesion. In this vein, I see Ellison’s use of Sumner and his appropriation of integration as a counter to the social chaos he detected in these movements. In spite of what some call Ellison’s “withdrawal” from active participation in African-American intellectual life during the 1960s and 70s, he echoes the same culturally based pessimism.⁴⁷ In “Little Man” and other contemporaneous writings, Ellison articulates a hopeful but in the end rather pessimistic assessment of African-American (as well as American) life.

To close this chapter I will read his melancholic optimism about the present into the Dantesque coal-heavers vignette that ends the essay. Instead of being the moment of transcendence found in Canto XXXIV, I will read it through Canto X of the Inferno. Drawing

⁴⁷ When it comes to race matters, Ellison’s mandarin intellectual tendencies have been much debated. Despite evidence that casts Ellison’s intellectual activities in a broader, more complicated Cold War context, recent studies by Jerry Gafio Watts and Arnold Rampersad have not tied Ellison views on race to the machinations of American state power in the cultural realm. In fact, both authors use Ellison’s biography almost as a cautionary tale about the failure of African-American leadership. Watts suggests that Ellison should have read his Gramsci and Rampersad sees Ellison as an embodiment of Bledsoe, the power-obsessed Dean in Ellison’s novel Invisible Man. The irony of this last suggestion is interesting and shall be taken up in the conclusion of my dissertation.

parallels to Gramsci's reading of Canto X in "Canto X of Dante's Inferno", I argue that Ellison is making a similar non-metaphysical, material claim to language and expression through the "little man" and coal heavers. For Ellison, the question is not about the problem of "leadership" as Paul Bove reads into Gramsci's interpretation (Bove 214). Instead it is an attempt to displace the epistemological assumptions behind the question Farinata asks Dante and Virgil: "What is your name and race?" Ellison's "heretical" portrayal of the little man and coal heaver's challenges the dogmatic political meanings these questions had during the time Ellison wrote his essay. By casting this "little man" amidst the chaos of the 1970s, Ellison reveals the forces threatening the literary and historical significance of his little man. Just as the Gilded Age roots of Ellison's little man suggest a profoundly radical version of the human, at the same time, Ellison's "little man" reminds us of his own complex political stance. Ellison's feelings about Black Nationalism are tinged with remnant, Cold War, anti-communist sentiments. At the same time Ellison's "little man" rescues a crucial element of America's humanist past and suggests its necessity for the future, I read him as showing the author's own exile and inability to properly see his present.

The same year Robert Penn Warren's interviewed Ralph Ellison in Who Speaks for the Negro? Ellison attended the National Festival for the Arts held at the White House. With Lyndon B. Johnson's commitment of more troops to Vietnam and the conspiratorial cloud enveloping Malcolm X's recent assassination, the Festival became a charged political event. Ellison's decision to attend drew criticism by those on the Left as well as fellow African-American artists and intellectuals. Outside of individual speaking engagements, it was not until he contributed to To Heal and to Build (1968), a compendium of essay on Johnson's legacy that Ellison addressed his reasons for attending. Ellison's contribution, "The Myth of the Flawed

Southerner” also presents what I see as a turning point in his thinking. Read in retrospect, it foreshadows the way Ellison would grapple with the concept of integration in the 1970s. In “Myth”, Ellison’s comments about Johnson’s legislative achievements are scant. Instead, the essay chides both the new and old Left for boycotting the National Festival for the Arts. Invoking his own “personal and group history” – a history he sees himself sharing with Johnson – Ellison suggest that his Southern identity and blackness compelled him to attend. Both speak to “meanings that went deeper than the issue of the government’s role in the arts or the issue of Vietnam...” (555).⁴⁸

These meanings of course are the vexed history of anti-black racism and the continual attempts to reconcile America’s present with this troubled past. His meeting with Johnson sparks Ellison to ruminate on Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. He also ponders other post-Civil War interactions between African-Americans and past presidents. Johnson’s attempts to redress this past from the executive branch have in Ellison’s mind “changed the iconography of federal power” (Ellison 562). Like Lincoln before him, Johnson has done what all great Presidents do in times of national turmoil, take “the essential conflicts of democracy – the struggle between past and present, class and class, race and race, region and region,” and bring them “into the most intense and creative focus” (Ellison 559).

⁴⁸ Robert Lowell’s open letter to the New York Times was the most public and forceful rebuff of the Festival. As Robert Tomes suggests in Apocalypse Then: American Intellectuals and the Vietnam War (1998), the boycott, along with the publication of Lowell’s “Waking Early Sunday Morning” in the New York Review of Books crystallized the growing dissatisfaction many artists and intellectuals had with the Johnson Administration’s policy in Vietnam. The boycott also exposed the growing tension within the left, which as they pertained to the Vietnam War, came to a head with the events of 1968. Ellison’s comments in the midst of this are interesting. Like Saul Bellow, John Hershey and others Ellison decided to attend despite his wish that the Vietnam War “be brought to a swift conclusion” (Ellison 554). But unlike Bellow and Hershey clear disagreements with Johnson’s policy, Ellison was notorious for his equivocating stance on the war; a stance captured by the one direct statement he makes about it in this essay. It was this issue that also distanced Ellison even further from African-Americans during this period.

Lincoln's appearance and his comparison to Johnson in "Myth" should not be surprising. The centennial anniversary of the Civil War was celebrated just three years prior to the publication of Ellison's essay. Ellison, amongst many other intellectuals of the time, alludes to the resemblance between the 1960s and the 1860s. In "Myth" Ellison makes this point explicitly. Besides the historical allegory invoked by Lincoln's appearance there is an aesthetic one as well. Ellison's reference to Lincoln, the invocation of the South and the White House scene he paints in "Myth" suggests the same catachresis between race and American power he portrayed in "Tell It Like It Is, Baby" (1965). And like that essay, Ellison draws upon a mixed tradition of American literary history to understand it. The myth Ellison refers to in his title is an old "slave borne myth" about a southerner who – regardless of his feelings towards blacks – can "move with tragic vulnerability towards the broader ideals of American democracy" (Ellison 561). Similar to his comments about Lincoln in "Tell It Like It Is, Baby" and also Martin Luther King Jr., in Who Speaks for the Negro, Ellison sees Johnson containing and ultimately mastering these conflicts. Unlike King and Lincoln however, Johnson's southern whiteness creates even more conflict with these goals. Ellison's representation of Lincoln focused on that president's indeterminate racial status. But in "Myth" Johnson's whiteness is unambiguous. Reminiscent of his lectures in Austria on Herman Melville and John Brown, this lack of ambiguity foregrounds the epistemological and symbolic problem "whiteness" poses to the achievement to the "broader ideals of American democracy."

Once again, race and region generate the torturous ambiguity at the heart of American democracy. This myth, like his tragic portrayal of Lincoln does not dispel this ambiguity. And neither the southerner, nor the nation, necessarily transcends it. As Ellison writes, this southerner is "flawed" (Ellison 561). But in counter-distinction to the tragic dramaturgical

allusion, this flaw is not fatal. Ironically, not only is this flaw the source of Ellison's identification with Johnson but without it, the myth itself could not exist. But what sort of nascent metaphor for "integration" does this myth and Ellison's essay present? How does the "flawed Southerner" and Ellison, the representatives of seemingly insoluble principles of race and region, past and present, compare to other visions of social cohesion? Is it similar to the "melting pot," Schlesinger's Cold War "vital center," Arendt's belief in "common sense", Trilling's "liberal imagination" or even Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society?"

Instead of parsing the statistical or legislative concepts under-girding Johnson's integrationist policies, Ellison remakes him into a late nineteenth century literary figure. In the work of post-Reconstruction American writers like Charles Chesnutt, Mark Twain, Albion Tourgee and George Washington Cable, the "flawed southerner" is a figure encapsulating the forlorn hope of American progress during the Gilded Age. Like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn in Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn or Sheriff Campbell in Chesnutt's "The Sheriff's Children", Ellison's mythological white southerner does not completely abandon the symbolic and ideological power whiteness has given him. Nor does an enlightened understanding of race lead them to recognize their shared humanity with blacks. Like Twain's and Chesnutt's characters, Ellison's flawed southerner recognizes that anti-black racism's power is both instrumental and situational.

For example, Jim's "freedom" in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is just as easily made into a joke since Tom admits that he was going to pay Jim if they succeeded in releasing him (Twain 368). And despite Sheriff Campbell's decision to protect his mulatto son in "The Sheriff's Children", he fully recognizes that when it comes to race, equality in the face of the law is not guaranteed. As he tells a mob of whites waiting to lynch his son, "I'm a white man

outside, but in this jail I'm sheriff" (Chesnutt 140). If it is out of this literary and historical context Ellison's "flawed southerner" emerges, then clearly he does not represent the assimilative utopia of the melting pot. Nor does this figure suggest the presence of reason, something the lies behind both Schlesinger and Arendt's concepts of American social and political cohesion. The roots of Ellison's myth indicate a combative relationship between race, civil society and literary presentation in America. Neither a juridical (in the case of the Sheriff) nor moral (with Tom and Huck) appeal to humanity fully comprehends it. More importantly, this myth and literary works do not embody a vision of social progress.

Such pessimism – especially about the possibility of racial reconciliation – was constitutive of the times Twain and Chesnutt wrote in. Ironically then their presentation of blacks in fiction simultaneously embraces Gilded Age optimism yet exposes its progress as a disastrous version of Anglo-American exceptionalism. The reintroduction of "the Negro" (as well as ethnic minorities) within the aesthetic realm has to be thought of in relationship to a triumvirate of forces: The plantation tale, minstrel entertainment and pseudoscientific thought about race and human progress. And in one way or another each of these authors were influenced by these forces. They are examples of the "scoffers" Henry May discusses in The End of American Innocence (May 201). Yet even skeptical writers like Twain, Chesnutt, Cable and Tourgee, could not resist the aesthetic and intellectual whirlpool of forces perpetuating anti-black racism.

Ellison's metaphor of "civil war" very much fits the skeptical tenor of this period. And the myth at the core of his essay – a mixture of black vernacular folk tale and late nineteenth century literary type – does not suggest a cessation to these hostilities. The "flawed southerner" is Ellison's hope that raciology does not completely arrest the democratic potentiality that racial

chauvinism extinguishes. Perhaps to Ellison, the “iconographic” changes Johnson makes are literal. Instead of policy, Johnson has sent into circulation an old, yet necessary symbol of late nineteenth century mythology. It is the composition of this myth (the contiguous blend of black folk tale and post-reconstruction literary trope) that “The Flawed Southerner” gives us a glimpse of the direction Ellison would take his understanding of integration in the 1970s. After Ellison’s attendance at the festival, his interview with Robert Penn Warren and his eventual position as the Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at New York University in 1970, American political life strove to but did not appear to arrive at any form of common sense or integration. The diverse spectrum of political voices speaking during this time reached their nadir. Three years after the festival Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy would also be assassinated. Lyndon B. Johnson, the very man Ellison celebrated in “Myth” chose not to run for reelection.

Ellison’s remarks about Martin Luther King in Who Speaks for the Negro literarily represented the civil rights leader as a black and American approximation to “common sense”. But by the end of the Sixties even King’s transcendent potential became a threat to not an enrichment of America’s democratic foundations. King’s murder was one of many incendiary events leading to America’s violent and tumultuous “Summer of 68”. And it was during this long, hot summer that America’s concept of the “melting pot” and twentieth century promises of desegregation seemed to wash away in a tide of bloodshed. If Martin Luther King symbolized the need to forge a true commonality within America’s civil and political “sense,” Presidential hopeful Richard Nixon’s Southern Strategy symbolized the countervailing force at its core. King’s death and Nixon’s ascent marked the end of the Civil Rights Era – a swath of American history beginning with Reconstruction and ending with Lyndon B. Johnson’s “Great Society”

legislations. It also encapsulated the intertwined and conflicted relationship between Civil Rights Era politics and America's international Cold War priorities.⁴⁹

For many Americans voting in the 1968 Presidential Election, this violence became the civil rights era's symbolic capstone. Nixon and most of the GOP exploited this violence and ran on a platform emphasizing a return to "law and order". This not so subtle euphemism cast the agitation for civil and political rights as law breaking activities in need of punishment; not activities that sought political redress. Just as importantly, the visage Nixon and Republican strategists gave this agitation was familiar. It was what Thomas Jefferson saw waiting on the other end of Fortune's wheel; the familiar mare disturbing America's innocent slumber and republican dreams. For once again, African-Americans had cast a long shadow upon America's national politics. Nixon's Southern Strategy and its emphasis on "law and order" was a clear exploitation of America's historic fear of black political insurrection.⁵⁰ In the wake of King's assassination as well as the end of Johnson's presidency both of these political agendas were substantially transformed. In Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy, Mary Dudziak writes that by the end of the Sixties "just as Vietnam had eclipsed

⁴⁹ Casting Martin Luther King as a threat was in part the job of COINTELPRO. In the years after King's assassination it was revealed that the United States Government had been spying on its own citizens since 1956. Given the title COINTELPRO, the United States used the Federal Bureau of Investigation to gather intelligence on specifically targeted domestic political groups. Created to counter and destabilize the effectiveness of the CPUSA in the Fifties, by the late Sixties this organization was used by the FBI to track a host of domestic political groups. Categorized under "Black-Nationalist Hate Groups," were groups ranging from The Black Panther Party to SNCC to Martin Luther King's SCLC. By the late Sixties King's alignment with the anti-Vietnam War and organized labor movements made him look like the very "black messiah" the FBI feared would emerge.⁴⁹

⁵⁰ The GOP's veiled allusion to the civil rights movement and black protest in its "law and order" mantra spurred the next permutation of American conservatism into Neo-Conservatism. Historians, economists, political scientists and other scholars have shown that the modern roots of Neo-Conservatism are found in the reaction stance the GOP took towards the Civil Rights movement. The majority of this scholarly work has centered on the reactionary stance taken against Affirmative Action. However, the revelation of domestic spying programs throughout the Cold War, the "terrorist" designation given to Black Liberation Movements and finally the relationship between tax reform and wealth redistribution in the wake of American urban riots show that anti-black racism in particular marshaled political forces that eventually evolved far beyond their roots in this racism.

civil rights as a defining issue affecting U.S. prestige abroad, law and order had eclipsed social justice as a politically popular response to racial conflict” (Dudziak 248).

The end of the Civil Rights era also marked the end of desegregation. That term, which defined a legal goal and shaped political strategies, was replaced by a more nebulous and controversial idea: integration. If desegregation was the battle to gain and enforce legal rights, integration’s goal – while clear – was much more complicated. Two legislative actions by Lyndon B. Johnson buttressed America’s turn towards integration. First was his Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the other was Presidential Executive Order 11246 in 1965. Both called for “affirmative action” by federal contractors to insure that employment practices do not discriminate against minority candidates. It is not until the early Seventies, when George Schultz revised Johnson’s mandate, which the political impact of integration trickled down into American social institutions. This revision called for “proportional representation” in employment, elementary school and college admission decisions. Despite the clear legacy of racial discrimination many saw integration as a threat to the perceived egalitarian meritocracy defining American social life. These fears centered on the legal and statistical nature of this mandate since “proportional representation” invariably meant reverse discrimination to the critics of this practice. Integration was understood as the answer to America’s legacy of segregation and inequity. Yet by the 1970s, policy makers and pundits began to attack the legal and philosophical rationale undergirding integration. That rationale was the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision.

As Richard H. King writes in “Race, Equality and ‘Hearts and Minds’” the attacks on *Brown vs. Board of Education* center on a fundamental conflict at the foundations of the decision. Besides its origins in the Fourteenth Amendment, *Brown* emerges out of a specific

post-World War II intellectual context where a “universalist paradigm of thinking about race had emerged among intellectuals” (King 5). From the UNESCO statement on racial equality in 1950 to the publication of works like Theodore Adorno’s The Authoritarian Personality, King argues that the aftermath of World War II witnessed a vigorous dismantling of biological theories of racism (ibid). Thought of in this context, Brown vs. Board was the product of an intellectual and social movement occurring on many fronts. However, as Mary Dudziak suggests it was also another weapon in America’s Cold War battle with Soviet Russia. School segregation, as all legal and vigilante forms of racial violence, was a public relations crisis for the American State (Dudziak).

Alongside this juridical and international context was a countervailing discourse about race rooted in American social-scientific and psychological inquiry. A key component to the Brown decision was the use of social psychology to legitimate the court’s decision. Footnote 11 contained arguments by Kenneth Clark and Gunnar Myrdal showing that segregation had an adverse affect on the psychological development of African-American youth. This moral-clinical discourse about the struggles facing African-American children (and culture) was indicative of the sociology of race practiced during the Cold War. Despite the differences in their intention, Clark and Myrdal’s work about African-Americans existed on a continuum with other works during the Cold War like Stanley Elkins’ Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (1959) and later Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (1965). All suggest that at the root of African-American cultural life there is, as King writes, a root pathology that has made African-American culture “inadequate to the tasks of modernity” (King 6). The intellectual currency of this argument was powerful enough that it found its way into the Supreme Court’s ruling. This despite the fact that

as an argument, Clark and Myrdal's moral-clinical discourse undermined Brown's strength as an interpretation of the constitution. So instead of making the constitution "color-blind" as it were or focusing on the institutional roots of American racism, Brown, King writes, shifted attention to the "psychology/culture of the victims of discrimination and racism" (6).

As the 1950s gave way to the more confrontational racial politics of the 60s and 70s, this moral-clinical discourse modulated as well. Black Nationalism challenged the victimage arguments of the 50s but did not completely dispel them (King 7). And if anything, the confrontational politics of the Black Power movement reinforced the sense that African-Americans were not up to the tasks of modernity. I doubt that Nixon's use of the phrase "law and order" was a direct allusion to Enlightenment philosophy. However, this phrase invokes a Hobbesian concept of civilization. Nixon's phrase suggests that the paradigmatic achievement of the nation-state is the imposition of "law and order." To read African-American political protest as opposed to this suggests an inherent tension between the achievement of African-American political rights and the process of modernity itself. So in many ways, "law and order" implies a "pathological" reading of African-American culture as an unruly element in the operations of American modernity. Keeping the above account in mind, it would make sense that the actual implementation of integration was complex. As Michael Dawson writes in Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies, the benefits of dismantling Jim Crow were obvious for the majority of Americans. However, broad changes in America's political economy challenged the philosophical and legal underpinnings of Brown vs. Board. Tied to the fracturing of traditional Civil Rights groups is the shift from Fordist economic arrangements to those of "flexible accumulation" (Dawson 37). The two are commensurate since as Dawson suggests, the Fordist regime "integrated the racial and economic

orders” (37). Beyond the effect these economic changes had on American political economy, the State had also waged a devastating campaign against dissonant groups in the America. And the anarchic forces that emerged while the Civil Rights movement waned were destroyed both internally and externally. Even if African-American political protest was part of a long tradition of American political unrest, those traditions were being disciplined at the end of the Cold War.

While African-American culture became a celebrated and contested object of critical analysis, it also became the scapegoat for African American ills. The –“pathological” school of cultural analysis was taken up by later African-American intellectuals. From William Julius Wilson and Orlando Patterson to Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates Jr., all saw contemporary black life going through a crisis whose roots were “cultural”. Much of this sentiment is captured in West’s term “black nihilism”. As Madhu Dubey suggests in Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism (2003) it is no coincidence that the romantic excavation of an African-American Modernist past was the focus of so many African-American intellectuals during this period. This romanticism was evident in African-American social scientists who argued that the benefits of Jim Crow were the creation of culturally cohesive black communities (Dubey 14). It is hard not to think these critics have become black versions of Matthew Arnold. African-American thinkers in this period of transition faced a complex landscape. They saw these changes yet all of them chose not to think with them. Like his contemporaries, Ralph Ellison was quite vocal in labeling contemporary black culture anarchic compared to America’s cultured “Negro” past. But as his writings of the period reveal, the past he sought to excavate was neither completely reactionary nor romantic. Ellison’s “Flawed Southern”, which was a figural integration of racism and democratic sentiment, slave tale and American literary conventions, foreshadows the lines of thought from the past Ellison would pick up in the 1970s.

As Jim Crow unraveled into the prime knot of integration, Ellison became the Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at New York University in 1970. Swimming with some of the reactionary academic tide of his time, Ellison refused to teach courses in African-American Literature (Rampersad 435). While programs like Yale, University of Pittsburgh, and San Francisco State University were integrating this emerging discipline into their curriculum, Ellison wanted no part. It is not as if he was not concerned with race (something we will see his courses bear out). But it did seem as if he saw these courses as a negative byproduct of the Black Power and the Black Arts Movements. This attitude becomes evident from lecture notes, syllabi and other materials from the period Ellison was at NYU. More importantly, it appears that this attitude has direct bearing on Ellison's initial thoughts for his "Little Man" essay. The tumultuous changes of the 1970s preoccupied his private and public thoughts. Despite his well known criticism of the Black Power Movement, in handwritten notes written in the early 1970s, he characterizes its force in neutral but anarchic terms. The original thought for the "Little Man" essay comes in the midst of Ellison's contemplation of the "chaos released when angry blacks began pressuring the principle of race linguistically..." (Ellison "Miscellaneous"). Out of this chaos emerges what he calls "the ideology of blackness", which appears to be Ellison's umbrella term for the various Black Nationalist groups that emerge in the 1960s (Ellison "Miscellaneous").

When Ellison wrote these notes, Malcolm had already left the Nation, gone through his conversion to Sunni Islam and was subsequently murdered. The Panthers would have begun their disintegration and split into ideological factions. Cleaver, along with Stokely Carmichael, had already moved towards a more fervent Black Nationalist rhetoric while Newton and Bobby Seale would embrace Leninist Marxism and later Communalism. More importantly, by the

1970s, the Black Power movement was involved with Third Worldism as well as other identitarian political movements within and outside of the United States. Constructing monolithic representations of this “ideology” was and still is a commonplace as James Smethhurst writes in The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s (Smethhurst 17). Black Nationalist politics was just not the same by the 70s. It had taken on multiculturalist and internationalist aspects in the face of post-colonial struggles across the globe (Smethhurst 317-8). This is important to note since these changes are not registered in Ellison’s notes. In fact, Ellison gives a one dimensional representation of Black Power (referring to “Malcolm Little and Eldridge Cleaver” as representatives of this ideology).

His fiction appears to be useful however. It is this broad, somewhat dated version of Black Nationalism that he characterizes as the “inadequate” response to the political and social chaos of the 60s. The problem, Ellison writes, is this ideology places “little stress...upon the need [of African Americans] to deal with the complexity of their own background, society or the world at large.” Instead, Ellison writes that it “reduce [es]” their ability to understand these very things (“Miscellaneous”).⁵¹ The deeper we go into these notes, the more Ellison elaborates the problematic stakes of this “ideology of blackness”. And the most powerful insight he makes comes out of an error. Ellison writes that the supposed “connection” these separatists have to their “black brothers” is based on a “condescension...displayed by young black separatist students when referring to the uneducated people who live in black slums.” These uneducated people play the “noble savages” to what he calls the separatists “own type of Rousseauism”

⁵¹ As I noted at the end of Chapter 3, the politics of Black Nationalism went through significant changes during the 1960s into the 70s. The local political concerns it addressed began to give way to a Pan-Africanist and Third World Internationalist sentiment by the late 1960s. The specific aesthetic and cultural concerns in Ellison’s notes makes it difficult to discern his knowledge of Black Nationalism’s internationalist dimensions. Also, I am curious to know whether Ellison’s rejection of it is also tied to the anti-Communism still part of America’s political fabric at the time.

(“Miscellaneous”).⁵² Against this supposed savagery, he describes these young separatists projecting themselves as “heroes” in a dialectical struggle against “uncle Tom[’s], capitalism, whiskey...and Louis Armstrong” (“Miscellaneous”).

Ellison makes a common mistake when he attributes John Dryden’s literary figure of the “noble savage” to Rousseau’s thoughts in the Discourse on Inequality. As I discussed in Chapter One, Ellison’s understanding of the eighteenth century reveals a Demanian like blindness that plays out to be an insight. The Christian nature of Dryden’s sentimental romanticism is the source of most Anglo-American literary representations of “noble savages”, not Rousseau’s man in the state of nature. In Discourse on Inequality, Rousseau saw civil society as a corrupting force not the civilizing one as it is portrayed in many works of the eighteenth century. Because of this it is at first difficult to decipher what Ellison means by this reference, since it suggests that black nationalists saw themselves on a civilizing mission.

At the same time, in Discourse on Inequality Rousseau’s one elliptical reference to “Negroes” expresses a commonplace eighteenth century idea; that “Negroes” existed in a perpetual state of nature. According to Rousseau, the uniformity found between all living things in a state of nature explains “why Negroes and savages are so little afraid of the wild beasts they

⁵² The entirety of Ellison’s note reads like this:

It is amusing, the [uncurious?] condescension displayed by young black separatist students when referring to the uneducated people who live in black slums. It makes me suspicious that the younger blacks see such people as noble savages in keeping with their own type of Rousseauism. It’s all so [unintelligible...], by making an easy identification with the submerged condition of his “black brothers” he doesn’t have to pay his respects to any difficulty or discipline, either of conduct or manners; he finds justification for his rank social-[unintelligible] criminal impulses, rationalizes laziness, academic shoddiness, bad manners and projects himself as hero, accusers of whitey, uncle Tom, capitalism, whisky (in favor of heroine and pot) and Louis Armstrong. In other words, he adopts the lifestyle of a hustler and pimp with the blessings of a [unintelligible]-made ideology (Ellison “Miscellaneous”).

may meet in the woods” (Rousseau 88). Not surprisingly, Rousseau treats Negroes and savages as separate yet contiguous categories. Singling out the Negro as exhibiting “savage” tendencies yet constituting a separate, categorical class suggests the epistemological and “ideological” force anti-black racism represented in eighteenth century thought. As Ronald Judy suggests in “Kant and the Negro” (1991), expelling the “Negro” is not simply an “error” of eighteenth century humanist inquiry but shows the Negro as a “force to be resisted ideologically” (Judy 70).

In Discourse on Inequality, it is uncertain whether Rousseau’s “Negro” is prelapsarian – as is his man in the state of nature – or modern but simply outside the chain of being. This uncertainty is crucial because Rousseau’s thoughts on the Negro have implications for his understanding of slavery in The Social Contract, Or Principles of Political Right. Like Kant’s own comments on the Negro in Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful and Sublime, Rousseau’s comment suggests that the Negro is irreducibly and essentially irrational. The Negro is *of nature* but not in the same way his man in “a state of nature” is. Man can understand nature as an object of contemplation as well as become a social being. The Negro however cannot. Its relationship to nature is contiguous and purely experiential. Clearly, Ellison’s comment is *not* produced out of a deep reading of Rousseau. Nonetheless, it does provide a damning indictment of Black Nationalism. Ellison suggests that these “separatists” traffic in the same essentialisms that they are attempting to overturn. Privileging the “uneducated” might give the sense that Ellison is involved in his own romantic version of “Rousseauism.” But this is far from the case. In fact, this misreading becomes an occasion for Ellison to present a counter narrative to this supposed “savagery”. It is not romanticized simplicity but complexity that Ellison sees in these “uneducated” folk. Instead of a pre-modern “state of nature” Ellison sees them as a contemporaneous expression of modernity. Within the context of Ellison’s notes, this complex

modernity and its historical singularity explains the aesthetic concerns found in Ellison's initial articulation of the "Little Man":

Essay: What is signified by discovery that voices arguing about the qualities of Metropolitan Opera sopranos belonged to coal heavers. Hazel's advice, always play your best because in this country there's always the little man behind the stove who knows what's cooking. The unstructured class defying availability of knowledge, techniques and tradition.

Mrs. Breaux, Ma Rainey, King Oliver. The role places of vernacular entertainment in the mixture of styles and traditions ("Miscellaneous").⁵³

In the above note, Ellison is not attempting to paint a pre-modern scene of the vernacular. His invocation of Armstrong, the "coal heaver" aesthetes, and his own time at Tuskegee suggests a parallel moment of "chaos" to the one he is in the midst of in the 1970s. Morris Dickstein argues in "Ralph Ellison, Race and American Culture" that Ellison's "spiral of history" conjoins Garveyite Nationalism and Popular Front radicalism to similar ideological challenges emerging in the 1950 and 60s (Dickstein 21). In these notes Ellison extends this same palimpsest into his thoughts about the 1970s. Beyond the comparison between the chaos of the 1970s and the 1930s, at the root of this fragment are historical and aesthetic allusions to post-Reconstruction America. Adam Gussow points out in "Fingering the Jagged Grain: Ellison's Wright and the Southern Blues Violences" that much of the work done on Ellison has not provided an adequate theory based on the "particulars of both post-Reconstruction history and an emergent culture of

⁵³ This fragment and these notes were clearly written in the 1970s and were found in BOX 102, labeled "Miscellaneous notes, 1943, 1953-1991, nd" in Ralph Ellison's archives at the Library of Congress. Whether or not this fragment was written before or immediately after Ralph Ellison gave a speech at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music on May 10th, 1975 entitled "The Little Man Behind the Stove" is unknown. Nonetheless, his thoughts are clearly a precursor to "The Little Man" essay published in 1977.

blues performance” (Gussow 138). Louis Armstrong’s presence in these notes is a key link to this post-Reconstruction moment. His presence reveals how this past shapes Ellison’s essay fragment. Also, by invoking Armstrong, Ellison makes a clear statement about the relationship race has to American vernacular forms of expression.

In “Checking Our Balances: Ellison on Armstrong’s Humor” (1999), Robert O’ Meally writes that by the 1940s, many thought Louis Armstrong’s jazz performances and career choices crossed the line into “Uncle Tomism” and blatant minstrelsy (O’ Meally 119). This critique of Armstrong only intensified in the 1960s and 70s. During this period, the musical dichotomy between Swing (typified by Armstrong and Duke Ellington) and Bebop (John Coltrane and Miles Davis) changed into an ideological one about racial politics. Ellison’s defense of Armstrong in the 1960s, particularly in Shadow and Act (1964) only intensified this dichotomy. Ellison’s notes further support the political concerns some African-American critics had with Armstrong and early jazz music. Coincidentally, these accusations against Armstrong curiously mirrored the growing chorus against Ellison at the height of the Civil Rights movement (119).⁵⁴ Along with giving insight into Ellison’s musical tastes, Armstrong crystallized an aesthetic and philosophical perspective on life for Ellison. With this in mind, it is no coincidence Armstrong’s version of “So Black and Blue” opens Invisible Man.

Andy Razaf’s original version of “So Black and Blue” was a satirical turn on vaudevillian, blackface performances. Instead of condescendingly staging the pathos of African-

⁵⁴ Just as Ellison became a lightning rod figure of the Civil Rights era for his perceived quietism and “uncle Tom” behavior so did Armstrong. These criticisms of Armstrong and Ellison naturally reached a crescendo as Black Nationalist became the dominant voices of the late Civil Rights era. But even in recent works assessing the legacy of Ellison these sorts of claims are suggested. Arnold Rampersad’s new biography Ralph Ellison: A Biography paints a picture of the author suggesting that his pursuit of fame trumped his literary pursuits as well as a firmer commitment to the Civil Rights struggle. Jerry Gafio Watts’ Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics and Afro-American Intellectual Life (1994) goes even further suggesting that Ellison’s commitment to writing disabled his political sentiments.

American life, as it was originally commissioned to do, Razaf made the song a ribald lover's compliant. Written to be sung by a woman, the song told of the inability of dark-skinned African-American women to find the love of men who wanted lighter-skinned ones. But Armstrong took the ribald, sexual content out and let in the tragicomic images of African-American life ("even a mouse/ran from my house"). Ellison both expands upon and distills the thematic elements of Armstrong's rendition in the preface of Invisible Man and makes it, as O'Meally remarks, a representative "site of contestation over the meaning of black expression and history" (O'Meally 130). A similar and more revealing example of this contestation is seen in Ellison's reference to Armstrong in the essay "On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz" (1965).

Here, Ellison speculates on the historical reasons why Armstrong is rejected by a new generation of jazz aficionados. His comments reflect the ideological fault lines that tinged most discussions of art in the 60s and 70s. Ellison writes that this rejection is rooted in what he calls bebop's "understandable rejection of the traditional entertainer's role – a heritage from the minstrel tradition" (Ellison 259). Ellison's problem with this is the leap made when the trumpeter's "personal conduct" (his aforementioned "Uncle Tomism") are assumed to somehow reflective of his "artistic qualities" (259).

What emerges out of the dialectic between art and conduct is the assumption that race (in this case "blackness") holds a "purity of status" that – depending on what aesthetic an artist utilizes – can be sullied or preserved. But Ellison's claim is that Armstrong, like all performers and artists, exemplifies that by definition such purity of status "is impossible" (259). When Ellison contextualizes Armstrong's performance within the traditions of minstrelsy and "Uncle Tom" [Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel was a mainstay of minstrel performances in the 1850s] he reminds us that slavery forms the backdrop upon which the drama of modern art played out in

America. In the case of minstrelsy, it crystallizes the relationship capital and mass culture has had to concepts of racial authenticity in American expressive culture. In Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (1993) Eric Lott reads minstrelsy as a reflection of white desires in the Jacksonian Age and beyond. More importantly, Lott reads minstrelsy as the aesthetic doppelganger of slavery that stalled “the development of Negro public arts and generated an enduring narrative of racist ideology – a historical process by which an entire people has been made the bearer of another people’s ‘folk’ culture” (Lott 145). Henry Louis Gates Jr. in “The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black” (1988) suggests a similar moral and political narrative. Unlike Lott, Gates’ interest is in the aesthetic response of African-Americans. And rather ironically, Gates suggests that it is music and not literature that made the most substantial break with iconographic legacy of minstrelsy (Gates 148).

While the moral and political implications of minstrelsy are clear, it is the aesthetic relationship between minstrelsy, vaudeville and later black expression that is more problematic. From the perspective of musicology, the relationship early jazz has to minstrel and vaudeville musical expression – is an unbroken one (Schuller and Emerson.) Ellison’s account, which ruminates on the transition between minstrel performativity and early jazz, focuses on a politically problematic but nonetheless worthwhile line of thought found as early as W.E.B. Dubois’s essay “The Negro in Literature and Art” (1913). In Ellison minstrelsy is conceptualized as a contiguous form of expression within African-American culture. Enough so that in “On Bird,” Ellison can assert that Armstrong’s aesthetic forbearers (“the entertainer”) are from the minstrel stage. While it is not certain that Ellison read Dubois’s essay it is obvious he

was a reader of Constance Rourke and Henry Toll.⁵⁵ His connection to these two writers explains why Ellison is not so dismissive of minstrelsy. Despite its grotesquely racist and highly commodified packaging of African-American expressive culture, minstrelsy's connection to African-American artistic forms is vital.

It is within this framework that we must understand Ellison's use of Armstrong in "On Bird" and more importantly, in Ellison's notes on the complexity of African-American experience. The contestation over meaning in black expression and history O'Meally refers to is inevitably connected to the question of racial authenticity. In other words, is it possible to locate [through various modes of aesthetic, philosophical or social scientific inquiry] habitual thought or abiding characteristics that constitute the African-American community and the way it experiences life? Then, as it still is now, this question was synonymous with finding black modes of expression outside of Anglo-American or Western European cultural influences. Besides questioning the possibility of racial or biological purity, Ellison's invocation of minstrelsy and Armstrong raises this very question. Minstrelsy was America's first mass produced and globally circulated form of popular art. Beyond its usage of white and black bodies to "carnivalize race," minstrelsy transmuted African-American expression into a multiplicity of objects and modes. Sheet music, a crucial element in the domestic and international dissemination of minstrelsy, literary dialect humor and later sound recordings are just some of the objects tied to minstrel show aesthetics. Along with absorbing non-contiguous folk and dialect forms, minstrelsy's long history ["Backside Albany" (1815), an adaptation of a seventeenth century Irish ballad is thought of as the first blackface dialect performance] as a

⁵⁵ More on this at the end of this chapter.

mass cultural form suggests the intimate relationship reification has had with black expression (Mahar).

Racial authenticity then has as much to do with the degree representations are circulated as it does with the moral and political considerations of that representation. Lott's suggestion that minstrelsy stalled "black public arts" suggests – with a significant dose of naiveté – that non-commercial black musical expression would have escaped the forces of commodification. Houston Baker's and Robert Stepto's solution to this state of affairs suggests the same thing.⁵⁶ Both see the "private", non-circulating moments of black expressive practice as instances where the private self can be differentiated from inauthentic or coercive modes of expression (Stepto; Baker). Making minstrelsy contiguous with Armstrong's jazz performance necessitates a confrontation with a crucial presupposition at the root of African-American expressive culture and the discussions of it. That presupposition, as Ronald Judy writes in his essay "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity" assumes that a kind of moral policing ensured the aesthetic and political purity of African-American communities, particularly in the post-bellum period. Not only are the moral grounds of black humanity produced out of this policing, but it is also assumed that such morality and proper moral acts are communicated through black aesthetic forms (Judy 227).

Connecting the affective practices of blackface minstrelsy with Armstrong and early jazz requires a different attitude towards the African-American past. It requires the abandonment of crucial presuppositions made about the aesthetic practices born in this period and their relationship to the question of black humanity. Ellison's use of Armstrong to "contest" the

⁵⁶ Here I am referring to Baker's thoughts in Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory and Robert Stepto's From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative.

meaning of black history and expression suggests that our knowledge of the human – black or not – does not rest with questions of authenticity but the deeper epistemological questions about this very knowledge. Instead of apprehending black humanity as fungible with certain governable moral and political modes of representation, Ellison uses Armstrong to move towards another question, which is: what the human is amongst things (Judy). Rejecting Louis Armstrong means rejecting a crucial way of understanding the affective relationship between race, expression and identity. For Ellison, this rejection subsequently means limiting how Black Nationalists think about black humanity. I believe this question trickles down to Ellison’s rumination on “the role of place” and the “mixture of styles and traditions” he alludes to at the bottom of his essay fragment. Minstrelsy is not explicitly referred to in these notes. But Armstrong’s presence crystallizes an aesthetic genealogy (King Oliver, Ma Rainey and Zelia N. Breaux) that exemplifies the contested history he is produced out of.⁵⁷

Much of what Ellison writes about in his notes and “On Bird” is connected to jazz music’s intimate relationship with commercial capitalism and the technologies of mass production. As James Hardin writes in “Adorno, Ellison and the Critique of Jazz” (1995), these twin facts have hindered critical thinking about it. The measure of its artistic merits has often been read in an inverse relationship with its commercial viability and the technologies of mass production. Especially in regards to jazz (or the blues for that matter) designating certain forms

⁵⁷ All three are foundational in the early development of jazz and blues in America. Ma Rainey’s place in this trinity is crucial. Born in the deep-south, she – like many early American blues musicians – developed her talents on the vaudeville and minstrel performance stage. King Oliver – Armstrong’s mentor – on the other hand represents the Creole influence on American Jazz. Just as important is Zelia N. Breaux. Breaux was musical director at Douglass High School where, Ellison, jazz vocalist Jimmy Rushing and guitarist Charlie Christian attended. Ellison’s reference to “place” could allude to his high school but most likely refers to the Aldridge Theater, a popular musical venue owned by Breaux in the predominantly black but ethnically diverse “Deep Deuce” section of Oklahoma City. Not only did Armstrong perform at the Aldridge but so did Rainey, King Oliver and host of other early jazz and blues greats before him.

as contiguous (or not) with these modes of production often determines the degree to which it signifies racial filiations. For someone like Adorno who saw jazz's relationship to minstrelsy as a damning one, jazz would remain an art form produced out the hegemony of the culture industry. Adorno's attitude is not far off from the Black Nationalist's [albeit not having to do with the question of black identity] Ellison writes about in his notes. Jazz, as Harding suggests, complicates such facile understandings of art. It calls into question whether "the encroachment of technology and the culture industry" can be read as "the kiss of death to all cultural expression," (Harding 153-4).

These very elements lead us out of the unproductive binary made when questions of authenticity are thought strictly in terms of the degree of commodification in the market. In "The Subject of Sonic Afro-modernity" Weheliye suggests that the "audiovisual disjuncture" created by nineteenth century recording technologies have opened up a space for thinkers to think questions of black subjectivity outside the teleological end point that visual and linguistic concerns often led. Weheliye does not suggest that we privilege the aural, or oral vernacular in any reductive or essentialist enterprise. Instead, he writes that the intersection between subjectivity, sound and technological reproduction "calls attention to [the] texture and confluence of [modes of communication] rather than striving for intelligibility, networking it squarely within the charged currents of opacity," (104).⁵⁸

This confluence is what Armstrong symbolizes for Ellison. Armstrong, like Ma Rainey and King Oliver before him holds in tension the multiple aesthetic traditions that have created American art. Moral and ideological considerations aside, this tension reveals that romantic

⁵⁸ Weheliye relies on Eduardo Glissant's concept of "opacity", which is found in Glissant's book Poetics of Relation (1990).

ideas of black identity have to confront the affective elements of all black expression. When Ellison writes that confusing Armstrong's art with his personal conduct "reduces...music to the mere matter of race," he is referring to the problematic categories of intelligibility used to understand artistic expression. Minstrelsy of course is a complex and problematic example of this intelligibility. Lott and others are right when they read minstrelsy as a product of America's struggle with its own political and social identity during the antebellum period. It shows the significant role raciology and anti-black racism played in shaping how American intellectual traditions understood these struggles. Minstrelsy is indeed an example of the way American state power symbolically expresses itself in the realm of culture. Its affective presentation of race is an early example of the way the market as well as the state can arrest the possibility of the human. At the same time however, it was an anarchic expression of this humanity for African-Americans.

Ellison's writings suggest its anarchic potentiality by foregrounding the thoroughly symbolic and affective presentation of race in artistic expression (Judy). Even before the phonograph, minstrelsy expressed the "audiovisual" disjunction that technology later exploited in order to circulate music. Precisely because race is reduced to a thing, it reminds us that the same constructive affect is mobilized to think the human. Looked at from this perspective, music – like much artistic expression – resists the moral and ideological intelligibility race provides us to apprehend it (Weheliye 104). Nothing demonstrates this anarchy more than minstrelsy's myriad usages or more importantly, the appropriation of its musical conventions in early jazz artists.

This last point brings us full circle to Ellison's notes. As I suggest above, Ellison's invocation of Louis Armstrong forces us to rethink the way we understand race and the human in

modernity. Against the “Rousseauism” of black nationalists, Ellison creates a counter narrative to their romantic conceptions. By making minstrelsy contiguous with formative modes of black expression, Ellison highlights the highly affective way race was presented in aesthetic forms in the nineteenth century. Just as importantly, his notes remind us that this affect is the product of a particular epistemological context which deserves our scrutiny. Artists like Armstrong in other words come from a genealogy of black artists that are constituted by – but more importantly – who actively manipulated these aesthetic conventions. Their stylistic manipulation of convention reveals their humanity. Reducing music to the mere fact of race – as these “nationalists” did with jazz music – reintroduces intelligibility about the human that Ellison sees Armstrong’s art defying. And by consequence, art becomes fungible with the kinds of ideological, moral and political modes of representation that limit the possibility of thinking the human in modernity.

With all of this said, it is equally clear that Ellison’s “little man” is a figure born out of his own Cold War tinged political attitude towards black nationalism. While attempting to think around these forms of intelligibility, Ellison is equally – if not willfully – blind to the very important transformations to the “ideology of blackness” he writes about in his notes. What makes these notes so compelling are the intellectual and political consequences they lead to. It is clear in 1965 that Ellison’s support of Lyndon B. Johnson was based on Johnson’s record on racial issues and Vietnam did not complicate this. By the time Ellison wrote these notes, the remedy Johnson and later Nixon would devise to mend America’s racial problems– integration and affirmative action – unfolded under the very race-based intelligibility he is calling into question. Beyond these notes lies one of his most famous essays “The Little Man at Chehaw Station”. Seeing the context out of which this “little man” emerges, the question is: how should

we understand him? Whatever his little man was, it was clearly an attempt to recall a particular genealogy of thinking about American unity and humanity. But in what ways does Ellison's own politicized, reactionary attitude about his times effect the maturation of these insights? Is the "little man" a figure generated out of shrewd and subtle political thinking on Ellison's part? Is it a bulwark against the emergent multicultural and internationalist aspect of Black Nationalism in the 1970s (Smethhurst); a political and aesthetic bloc that challenged the Cold War cultural liberalism [which trafficked in its own metaphors of unity] Ellison ascribed to? Or is he representative of Ellison's blindness to the Schmittian political nature of his times?

And if the "little man" is a figure of unity and social cohesion what sort is it? Integration had transformed into a process dependent on the very categorical intelligence about the human Ellison sought to evade. Do these notes anticipate his continued support of it in the 1970s? Perhaps Ellison was treading the thinnest of lines between these many things. Maybe his "little man" was directed towards some other threat that Black Nationalism *and* the logic of Federal integration represented.

"The Little Man at Chehaw Station" is a parable. Ellison begins it in Tuskegee when he was a young, fledgling musician attempting to master the trumpet. After a poor performance at his monthly music recital, he goes to seek consolation and advice from Hazel Harrison – a famous concert pianist and one of Ellison's music teachers. Rather than sympathy, she gives the young Ellison quixotic advice. "Always play his best even in Mississippi's Chehaw Station", she tells him. Ellison describes this station as "a lonely whistle-stop where swift north or southbound trains paused with haughty impatience," (Ellison 490). Lurking in Chehaw's "claustrophobic little waiting room," she tells him of a "little man whom you don't expect," one who will know the very music, traditions and standards of Ellison's performance, (490). Far

from an ideal venue to play, let alone be ambushed by a connoisseur of classical music, Ellison writes of his confused but eventual acceptance of Miss Harrison's advice.

From this anecdotal preamble, Ellison writes of his bafflement over the "little man" as a way to discuss the enigma of what he calls "aesthetic communication" in America. The "little man" becomes a figure through which Ellison thinks the mercurial and boundless aesthetic knowledge contained within America audiences. The mystery to Ellison is how such a "little man" is created. For all intents and purposes this man's race, class and education should disqualify him from possessing such aesthetic acumen. The fact of his existence speaks to the potential virtues Ellison sees in American society. That American art can communicate an experience outside the narrow phenomenology of race and socioeconomics says something about the unseen, dynamic forces behind American culture. Since Ellison saw American culture as a reflection of the country's social possibilities, the "little man" exhibits the potentially integrative and democratic nature of American social relations. Each artist should strive to appeal to this "little man" on the basis of "what [artist] assumes to be truth," (Ellison 492).

America's "artistic truth" according to Ellison is the pre-existing – if unrecognized – fact of American cultural integration. Bringing audience and artist alike to recognize this truth is made analogous to rhetorical forms of exhortation, persuasion and "wooing," (Ellison 492). Even though it might be a "truth" that the audience acquiesces or ultimately rejects, Ellison sees the persuasive nature of this integration as defining our social and artistic fabric. Failing to convey this truth in American art is tantamount to failing to conveying "American experience", (ibid). The truth of our integration is revealed in the activity of "antagonistic cooperation", a term he uses to describe the aesthetic relationship between the audience (represented by the figure of the "little man") and artist. "While the audience is eager to be transported, astounded,

thrilled, it counters the artist's manipulation of forms with an attitude of antagonistic cooperation, acting, for better or worse, as both collaborator and judge" (Ellison 492). It is through this simultaneous cooperation and resistance that "new dimensions of artistic truth" are attained (Ellison *ibid*).

"Antagonistic cooperation" bears great similarity – at least conceptually – to Arendt's use of "common sense". Both recall the "deliberative" secular sensibilities Ellison and Arendt see as crucial to American culture and politics. Taking a closer look at this term, antagonistic cooperation returns us to the political and rhetorical differences between Ellison's aesthetic sensibilities and Arendt's Kantianism. The truth formed out of "antagonistic cooperation" and Arendt's term "common sense" is similar to what Kant calls "taste" in the Critique of Judgment. For Kant, the critique of and debate over artistic "taste" proceeds from "quarreling" and not from "definite concepts as determining grounds," (Kant 135). Taste, as Kant says, is a kind of *sensus communis*. But the phenomenological senses used to form aesthetic judgments do not have the "capacity for expressing universal rules" (135). Satisfying these rules can only come from reason based on the laws of logic. What is quarreled over in debates concerning taste is "feeling" not the *a priori* concepts of truth determined by the laws of logic. This last part of Kant's thought is crucial, since his observations about taste are the foundation upon which his critique of aesthetic judgment is based. Like all products of the imagination, taste and aesthetic judgment might goad us towards demonstrative concepts of the truth but can never lead towards cognition or moral ideas, (Kant 202).

Relying on the non-conceptual, aesthetic nature of Kant's *sensus communis*, Arendt saw speech as the product of purely rational language – thereby demoting the poetic and affective

faculty of the imagination. As I demonstrated in my last chapter, Ellison's response to Arendt revealed his understanding that in order to be truly inclusive, "common sense" must aspire to the very imaginative and poetic sensibilities Arendt dismisses. Reason in other words is not enough. Ellison's use of "antagonistic cooperation" simultaneously captures the political sensibility of Arendt's "common sense" and the necessary poetic overtones Ellison sees as crucial to any version of American social integration. His "little man" is both a product of "antagonistic cooperation" and simultaneously a willful agent in its creation. Ellison never footnotes the term "antagonistic cooperation" and because of this, most critics credit him with coining it. Most likely he borrowed it from nineteenth century sociologist William Graham Sumner, who is credited with coining it in his most famous work Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores and Morals (1901). Sumner defines antagonistic cooperation as "the combination of two persons or groups to satisfy a great common interest while minor antagonisms of interest which exist between them are suppressed" (Sumner 18). As Sumner writes, this kind of cooperation is "the most productive form of combination in high civilization. It is a high action of the reason to overlook lesser antagonisms in order to work together for greater interest" (Sumner *ibid*).

Sumner's Folkways is never mentioned in Ellison's published works or unpublished notes. And Ellison's one explicit mention of him is an unfavorable. It comes in a review of Gunnar Myrdal's An American Dilemma written in 1944. Quoting from Sumner's essay "The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over" (1894), Ellison labels Sumner, who famously quipped "the greatest folly of which man can be capable is to sit down with a slate and pencil and plan out new social world," an anti-democrat (Ellison 332). Indeed, Sumner's early essays including "The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over" and the more famous "The Forgotten Man" (1883)

show Sumner a vocal supporter of *laissez faire* capitalism during the worst economic and political crises in the Gilded Age. Sumner's support of the economic and social status quo comes from what Bruce Curtis in "William Graham Sumner and the Problem of Progress" sees as his inherent belief that free-enterprise capitalism was the engine fueling progressive society (Curtis 357). Social engineering, the welfare state and attempts to regulate enterprise all fueled a type of egalitarianism Sumner saw hindering progress (357). As demonstrated in breadth of essays found in The Forgotten Man and Other Essays (1919), Sumner's feelings were also based out of America's general antagonism against Socialism and labor unions in the late nineteenth century.

The Ellison of 1944 would have undoubtedly been a sensitive and dogged critic of Sumner's support of bourgeois, status quo politics (Smethhurst; Foley). He also picked up on the racist dimensions of Sumner's thought concerning progress in civilization. Sumner's lectures on "Science of Society" (1902-3), reflect late-nineteenth century pseudo-scientific thought linking race to degrees of development. And in Folkways Sumner seems to reiterate the argument that "Negroes" could ape "civilization" only after contact with Europeans (Sumner 265). There is a connection between Sumner, the Post-Reconstruction *laissez faire* defender of the status quo and Sumner, the progenitor of racist sociology. This deadly combination, as Kenneth Warren writes, was widespread during the late nineteenth century. In the end it effectively "consolidated the white supremacist order" by intellectually legitimating America's abandonment of Reconstruction (Warren 11). Sumner's work on mores and folk culture was foundational to the later work of Dr. Robert E. Park, whose early research on race relations proved crucial to Myrdal himself (Ellison 331).

Beginning with this book review, through Invisible Man and even in the late 1960s, Myrdal and the sociological school he represents has been an object of Ellison's critique. Also, evident through these connections is a long – if not always evident – relationship with the thought of Sumner. Ellison's attitude towards Myrdal does not change much in this time. The same cannot be said about his attitude towards Sumner. The term “antagonistic cooperation” appears as early as 1964 (Ellison 188). In the hand written notes from his time at NYU, the term appears again (Ellison “Miscellaneous”). Looking back to his representation of Lyndon B. Johnson as a “Flawed Southern” and his thoughts about Armstrong, it seems this concept has guided Ellison's imaginative thoughts about American social cohesion and integration. What precipitates this change of attitude towards Sumner? His notes do not reveal any explicit reasons for his reengagement with the nineteenth century sociologist. Seeing that Ellison's work makes a more explicit turn towards “vernacular” arts in the 1970s (if not earlier), revisiting Sumner, particularly Folkways would make sense.⁵⁹ If Sumner became recoverable for Ellison it would seem to rest on two critical elements of Sumner's thought. The first, as Hanno Hardt writes in Social Theories of the Press: Constituents of Communication Research, 1840s to 1920s, is Sumner's recognition that language is “a product of the need of cooperative understanding in all the work, and in connection with all the interests, of life” and central to social and cultural mobility (Sumner 134; Hardt 164.) In particular, Sumner saw literature as “discharg[ing] an important function in acquainting peoples with one another's characteristics; the novel has been highly effective in that way” (Sumner 144). Using Sumner would allow Ellison to think around the Arendtian (and Kantian) non-poetic conceptions of “common sense” and language. Besides Sumner's interest in the connection language – and in particular literary language – had to social cooperation, another key component to Sumner's thought would have undoubtedly appealed to

⁵⁹ See end of this chapter.

Ellison. As Bruce Curtis remarks, from Folkways onward, Sumner's work ventured further and further away from the influence of Herbert Spenser and biological concepts of social progress and evolution. Instead, Sumner took recourse to physics, the Law of the Composition of Forces and to a limited extent, Henry Adams "in seeking to understand [the] meaning" of progress (Curtis 355, 364). Curtis notes that one manuscript version of Folkways concluded with this turn but it remained unpublished (Curtis 362).

After the publication of Folkways, Sumner emphasizes these lines of thought in his private notes and public lectures. Speaking in 1905, Sumner describes society's "progress" in terms that show the influence of the Second Law of Thermodynamics and entropy. Notions of social progress and antagonistic cooperation are not teleological in a Spenserian sense, but dependent on what he calls "conjuncture," (Sumner 13, 51). This phenomenon, Sumner writes, "is capable of infinite variation, so that it produces a rolling, tossing, swaying and endless dissolution of successive forms and stages in the sequence of all superorganic forms. That is what history shows us" (Sumner 51). Despite, the seeming pessimism of Sumner's later thought and the unpredictable nature of antagonistic cooperation, he still saw it as the "most productive from of combination in high civilization" (Sumner 18). There is enough of a latent sense of nineteenth-century American exceptionalism in Sumner's thought, Curtis writes, that he could still view "his country as the acme of political progress" (Curtis 358). This later work would then also appeal to Ellison since it is freed from the teleology and metaphysics under-girding the Kantian line of thought Arendt inherits. Also, it is clear that Sumner's dynamic non-teleological version of progress through antagonist cooperation was ultimately optimistic; and this optimism is crucial to Ellison's own thinking.

These elements make Ellison's use of Sumner's terms in "The Little Man" essay seem like a conscientiously strategic choice to think American integration. Judging from the political timbre of Ellison's notes about the "Little Man" essay, he was trying to counter the dogmatic representational politics of his moment. Sumner allows Ellison, whose essay celebrates "the processes of democratic cultural integration" in America, a way to reiterate Cold War liberalism through Sumner's idea of antagonistic cooperation (Ellison 492, 512). Traces of these sentiments appear in Ellison's understanding of this same cooperation and its emphasis on "truth" through "act(s) of democratic faith" (Ellison 492, 494). Adding to this is Ellison's invocation of the documents of state as well as past and present American concepts of social cohesion like "the melting pot", a "nation of nations" (Ellison 501, 510, 519).

Rhetorically, Ellison uses these phrases to construct a narrative of American intellectual and political history that is *already* this dynamic process of integration and antagonistic cooperation. Even when these ideals were so "brazenly violated", in the despicable institutions of slavery, Ellison writes that such violations were just "sources of morale in that continuing process of antagonistic cooperation and of adjusting the past to the present in the interest of the future..." (509). The optimistic zeal of these words also contains a warning. The social transformations that allows for these new dimensions of truth also harbor forces that could arrest them. These forces are not impersonal but come from a very specific source for Ellison. He writes that the possibility of the "little man's" existence is under-siege by the "sociological word-magic" of "ethnic and genetic insularity," which are both ironically the very product of this endless process (Ellison 505-8). Recalling Ellison's private notes and his own anxiety over Black Nationalism, it makes sense that his fear of "ethnic and genetic insularity" would appear in the essay. It is the very same insularity Ellison saw preventing blacks from understanding the

“complexity” of their own background. But they could just as much describe the racist logic undergirding Federal integration.

Integration and “antagonistic cooperation” are the cure to “sociological word magic” and “ethnic insularity” alike. Whether conscientiously used by Ellison to remark upon this issue or not, the appearance of the word integration in “Little Man” marks a crucial semantic shift already made by American policy makers and intellectuals concerning the problem of race in America. The emphasis on “integration” as well as his obvious swipe at the “purity” of “militant black nationalists” suggests that these terms and concepts are mobilized in the “Little Man” essay as a counter weight to the “ideology of blackness” that concerned Ellison in his notes (Ellison “Miscellaneous”, 505-7). The claims of cultural purity espoused by white supremacists and black nationalists are ironic to him. In the face of these categorical imperatives it is still possible to observe the “irrepressible movement of American culture toward the integration of its diverse elements,” (Ellison 505). This movement – bearing great similarity to the anarchic forces Sumner described in American society – is also anarchic. So much so that in America, a “white youngster” can shout racial epithets at black youths trying to swim at a public beach while listening to a “Stevie Wonder tune” – all in the name of “ethnic sanctity” (505). Even the “bebopish” nature of Black styles – which have given “our streets and campuses a rowdy, All Fool’s Day carnival atmosphere,” – is an expression of this integration, despite its own ironic investment in ethnic sanctity, (505).

The relationship Ellison draws between integration and his aesthetic version of “antagonistic cooperation” suggests a sense of identification between the two. By the force of Ellison’s rhetoric in this essay, the concept of integration he exposes in this essay is aligned with the Great Society liberalism of Lyndon B. Johnson. His apprehensions about Black Nationalism

are profound enough that it would make sense for him to draw a connection between his aesthetic concerns and the legacy of liberalism. Looking beyond the force of Ellison's rhetoric however his concept of integration also undermines the racist logic in the very liberalism he supported. When read as an essay about the conceptualization of literary creation we can see how Ellison understands the American and the human as departures from these representational politics. The tension between the political rhetoric in this essay and his powerful lines of thought can be seen in Ellison's description of the "little man". Here you can see the influence of Sumner's antagonistic notion of "progress"; down to the metaphors of physics he uses. When Ellison starts describing the "little man" he calls him as a "linguistic product of the American scene and language, and a manifestation of the idealistic action of the American word as it goads its users toward a perfection of our revolutionary ideals (Ellison 493). At the moment when Ellison should describe the *syntax* of the little man (to continue this grammatical and linguistic metaphor), he leaves linguistic metaphors behind and instead invokes metaphors of music and physics (493). This change comes in part to dramatize Ellison's point that this little man is representative of "those individuals we sometimes meet whose refinement of sensibility is *inadequately* explained by family background, formal education or social status" (493, my emphasis) and hence defies description by traditional representational signifiers of presence.

Instead of using either social or biological ways of accounting for the presence of this "representative" little man, Ellison describes him as "sensitized by some obscure force that issues undetected from the chromatic scale of American social hierarchy" (493). From this mixed metaphor of physics ("force") and music ("chromatic scales"), the obscurity of these forces is compounded by their anarchic properties. These forces have "errant" trajectories yet are "sympathetic" to all individuals since Ellison sees American society as offering unfettered

access to “the finest products of the arts and intellect” (493). Instead of invoking specific institutions or dogma to convey such knowledge, Ellison suggests the capricious nature of knowledge; these “errant” trajectories guarantee their democratic accessibility. At the conclusion of this description, Ellison once again echoes Sumner’s idea of “antagonistic cooperation” by describing the little man as a “configuration of forces” capable of “an incalculable scale of possibilities for self-creation” (Ellison 494).

Leaving the province of grammar and language and delving into the metaphors of music and physics, Ellison’s communicates the enigmatic presence and simultaneous absence of the little man. He is signified by a “configuration” not as an object that can be completely accounted for by representational language. It also suggests the relationship syntactical and referential operations of language should have to the boundlessness of physics and music forms. If America and Americans are capable of such infinite potential, Ellison wants the syntax we use to think our humanity to be up to the task of accounting for it. Ellison’s move away from linguistic metaphors as well as the crucial stakes of his little man’s existence is captured in an important word that is related to “antagonistic cooperation”: incongruence.

If the American audience were “fully aware of his incongruous existence,” Ellison writes, “the little man’s neighbors would reject him as a source of confusion, a threat to social order, and a reminder of the unfinished details of this powerful nation,” (Ellison 492-3.). Near the essay’s end and at the conclusion of his encounter with the African-American coal-heavers, Ellison returns to this word. Discovering the unlikely source of their knowledge of grand opera, Ellison writes that “I joined them in appreciation of the hilarious American joke that centered on the incongruities of race, economic status and culture,” (Ellison 519). Like the metaphors of physics and music, incongruence gives his little man a similarly complex non-representational

presence. In the first passage, “incongruence” reveals a play between levels of consciousness and unconsciousness since it appears after the phrase “fully aware.” Earlier in the essay, Ellison describes the “little man” as both “unrecognized and unassimilated” into the cultural life of the nation. In this use, Ellison seems to be channeling Freud. More specifically, he appears to be referring to Freud’s psychoanalytic understanding of consciousness as “states of feeling” that must be brought to awareness and then reconciled in the subject.⁶⁰

With Sumner’s thought in mind, I think Ellison’s use of incongruence is centered on the enigmatic physical and spatial character of the little man’s existence. As Ellison’s anecdote suggests, there is not much physical space between the “little man,” audience and artist; that is, if we take his anecdotal beginning as a metaphor where Ellison is the artist and the audience is represented by the people waiting in Chehaw Station. He calls the little man a “neighbor,” a word implying both physical proximity and belonging to a shared community. Yet, despite his neighborly association and physical proximity his existence is unknown. Etymologically, congruent is a derivation of the Old French verb “congrue”, which means to “meet together, coincide, agree, correspond, accord” (OED). Most usages of the word convey this sense of the root verb. Of these usages two bear an interesting relationship to Ellison’s word choice. First is

⁶⁰ I talk about Ellison’s use of Freud in the first chapter of my dissertation. This psychic dimension of the “little man’s” presence and absence is discussed by Hortense Spillers in “Formalism Comes to Harlem” (1982) and Nicholas Taylor Boggs in his unpublished dissertation The Critic and the Little Man: On African-American Literary Studies in the post-Civil Rights Era (James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison) (2005) is useful in that it forces us to treat seriously Ellison’s emphasis on the complex psychic “presence” of the little man. Throughout the first few pages of the essay, Ellison collapses the “little man’s” physical characteristics and intellectual capabilities with those of the “American audience.” Spillers and Boggs see this conflation of the individual intellect and the “many” as emblematic of the “endeavor of criticism itself,” which they cast in the psychoanalytic concepts of “self and other,” (Spillers, Boggs). As Spillers suggests, the act of criticism should not reinforce this divide but can bridge it if critics conceptualize themselves not as “selves” but as a “one,” (Spillers). Psychoanalytically, the “one” does not reinforce this divide but instead conceptualizes the self as “simultaneously singular and mass, an isolated reading subject and part of the broader interpretative community that Ellison calls ‘the American audience,’” (Boggs, Spillers). Spiller sees this function as crucial for African-American critics.

the use of congruence to signify “grammatical agreement and concord” (OED). The other usage, which was obsolete by the eighteenth century, refers to correspondence in “physical shape and form” (OED).

Ellison presents his “little man” as “incongruent” to description by language and grammar. This incongruence also extends to the word’s use to denote harmonious shape and form. While there is no question of the little man’s humanity, at the same time, by describing him as a “configuration of forces” Ellison resists confining his humanity to an identifiable physiological form. It is here that Ellison makes a metaphorical comment about the complication race adds to our physiology and imaginative understanding of the human. Although he dissuades us from assuming his “little man’s” race, it plays a crucial role in the questions about humanity and politics Ellison is writing about. There is an irony in Ellison’s comment that this little man already appears “in the flesh,” since we are never given a specific description of the little man outside of his gender, old age and diminutive size (Ellison 491). Nonetheless, this figure becomes a way for Ellison to meditate on the relationship race has to conceptualizing our idea of the human (Ellison 498, 519). While congruent to America’s “revolutionary ideal” and aesthetic principles African-Americans are treated as a social incongruity to the very artistic and intellectual practices enabled by this ideal (Ellison 509).

The absurdity of this social incongruity – yet the necessity of understanding humanity as an incongruous, antagonistic configuration – is brought to light in the coal-heaver’s episode that closes his essay. This episode is built around Ellison’s retelling of a story about his time as a volunteer for the Federal Writer’s Project. By happenstance he descends into a cellar and finds four coal heavers whom he realizes stand in for the enigmatic “little man” he had been told to look for. I read this scene as a complex rendering of Ellison’s aesthetic sense of integration. In

it he dramatizes the *necessity* of the “little man’s” incongruence as a willful “antagonism” to the dogma of race within representational politics.

This antagonism is demonstrated through a restaging of the same historical and aesthetic chain of signification Ellison elaborated in his notes. Ellison disrupts the dogma of “racial purity” Black Nationalists held by making the coal-heavers humanity contingent on their heretical violation of this very “purity”. With Louis Armstrong so strongly associated with this violation in Ellison’s notes and published essays it is no surprise that strong allusions to the trumpeter are made in the final scene of the essay. Like Armstrong, the coal-heavers “contest” the meaning of black history and expression by ultimately satirizing its contemporary representational modes of authenticity and power in Black Nationalist discourses. The framing allusion Ellison makes in telling this story is Dante’s Inferno. Like a Dante, Ellison – who is also a writer – passes through “the depths of the social hierarchy” in order to reach his metaphoric understanding of American cultural possibility (Ellison 519). And in what seems like parody, this scene is even filled with images of fire (fireplace, a coal pile, and at the end the “vernacular phoenix”). Connections between African-American writers and Dante’s Divine Comedy can be found as far back as the early nineteenth century slave narratives (Looney). Ellison’s invocation of Dante’s “decent” does not wholly fit within the role of liberator that the poet has represented in many African-American cultural traditions (Looney). I see him using Dante to reiterate the thematic of his essay but also to amplify his satire of the representational politics that deny the “little man’s” existence.

Ellison plays multiple roles in this retelling of the Inferno. In his “present” narrative voice he plays the role of Virgil guiding the reader of the essay. Within the narrative itself, the young Ellison plays the role of Dante and Farinata. It is Ellison’s role as Virgil that I think is

most relevant to this reading. Our Virgil does not end leading us to the transcendence of Canto XXXVI. Instead I read him as dropping us off in the Sixth Circle, the one reserved for heretics and Epicureans. I think it apt to read the intellectual and political stakes of Ellison's Dantesque "descent", through Canto X from the Inferno. As Paul Bove writes in "Dante, Gramsci and Cultural Criticism", Gramsci's focus on Cavalcante's disappearance and the "unexpressed" description of his sorrow by Dante was in part should be read as Gramsci's thinking about the nature of leadership, "the people's right and ability to struggle to make their own future" and the representational politics of Gramsci's time (Gramsci; Bove 214).

Ultimately, Bove see Gramsci's obsession with Canto X as his critique of the authorizing power of representation, as "ideology, language and government" (Bove 214). Ellison's concerns in his notes as well as in this essay are about the representational politics of the 1960s and 70s. And in the backdrop the threat Black Nationalism poses to American liberal visions of social integration. With Gramsci's concerns in mind and Ellison own non-representational vision of democracy in this essay, reading Ellison's Dante's allusion through Canto X proves fruitful. In Canto X, Dante is confronted by Cavalcante dei Cavalanti and Farinata, who both have been exiled because of their involvement in Florentine political upheaval. Their particular punishment is confinement to tombs of fire. More importantly, they are unable to know the present and eventually to have all knowledge wiped away when the future ends. As "Epicures", this punishment is fitting. The atomistic, secular basis of their knowledge would require a sensual apprehension of their "present". And it is this that is denied to them.

The "drama" of Canto X has been a point of contention in Dante scholarship. Most read it through Dante's interaction with Farinata over Florentine politics and elide Cavalcante's sorrow over his son. Gramsci's intervention was to take the non-representational drama of

Cavalcante's sorrow, which bursts to the surface when Dante mistakenly suggests that Guido, Cavalcante's son, is dead, (Forgacs, Nowell-Smith; Bove; Gramsci). As David Forgacs, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Paul Bove note, Gramsci's shift in emphasis was to correct the misreading of Dante's work he saw in Italian literary criticism. More specifically, Gramsci wanted to deal a blow to the "idealistic concept of language" found in the work of Benedetto Croce and replace it with an approach to language in its "materialist aspect" (Gramsci 150). Paul Bove sees Gramsci's take on Dante as the thinker's own search for forms of leadership that avoided "nonorganic modes of representative politics" and the tropes of "masterful fathers or vanguard political intellectuals" (Bove 214).

The Canto's significance to "The Little Man" reveals a similar need to displace Farinata (Gramsci; Bove 213). Instead of Farinata's heroic "distain", what I see displaced is the representational stakes in Farinata's first "contemptuous" question to Dante and Virgil: "What's thy name and race?" (Dante 129). Ellison's "little man" is a mockery of these same questions since he is given neither in the essay. These two questions more specifically come to bear on the coal-heavers scene at the end of Ellison's essay. In part, it is the young Ellison himself who suggests this question when he initially hears the coal-heavers behind the closed cellar door. Recalling the scene up until this point is important. It begins in a tenement building in San Juan Hill, an old, predominantly African-American neighborhood in New York City. In describing it, Ellison makes a note to say that this neighborhood had already "disappeared with the coming of Lincoln Center" (515). The overlap between this old "Negro district" and Lincoln Center is significant. Ellison's decent in the essay is spatial as much as it is temporal.

As a storyteller he leads his reader into a space and place doubly removed. Not only do we return to the New Deal, Harlem Renaissance 1930s, but also to a place that is no longer there.

We are presented a landmark that is already just as enigmatic as the “little man” itself. Ellison’s descent from the “ground floor” of this temporal and spatial miasma “to the basement level” as well as his initial confrontation with the “profane...idiomatic vernacular...spoken by formally uneducated Afro-American workingmen” should not be read as a descent into origins then. This would assume a definitive spatial and temporal component of this image that Ellison is clearly playing with. The willful nature of memory and imagination are the only modes of excavation Ellison can deploy here. The initial voices Ellison hears are also important in this portion of his story. They lead Ellison to a falsely assumed pride in his “knowledge of my own people”. But the assumptions behind this knowledge are shattered as he draws nearer and hears the content of their “profane vernacular”. Here, I see a parallel between Ellison’s assumption and Farinata’s contemptuous question. For the partisan Farinata, this question would ultimately distinguish friend from foe. While Dante is both a Tuscan and Florentine, he is also a Guelph. And as such, Dante is Farinata’s ancient foe (“They were/Foes to me always,.) (Dante 129).

The young Ellison is not attempting to distinguish friend from foe. And to a certain extent there is a similar moment of bafflement since Farinata at first does not know anything about Dante except his speech signifies that he is a Tuscan (“O Tuscan, walking thus with words discreet”,) (129). Dante’s answer, finally gives Farinata the designation he desires and categorizes Dante as Guelph, not a Ghibellines (Dante 132). The coal heavers however do not yield up such a categorical designation. The young Ellison expresses this bafflement when he says that he cannot understand how working-class black coal-heavers could have such “intimate familiarity with the subject of” opera (Ellison 517). At this point, Ellison realizes that this knowledge and the assumptions he made are “under attack” (515). Like the first scene with Miss Harrison, this one is also pedagogical. But unlike that original scene, the lesson is more

heretical. After his bafflement, the young Ellison switches roles. He goes from holder of race knowledge to that of Dante, who is the beholder of the Inferno's multiple spectacles and the poetic conveyer of this experience to the reader in The Divine Comedy.

Ellison's abandonment of the "knowledge of my own people" is also an abandonment the essay desires its reader to perform. It paves the way for a new scene of instruction where knowledge is presented to us as the configuration of forces Ellison invoked earlier. The coal heavers are presented as this very configuration. The heretical nature of their knowledge is foreshadowed when one of the coal heavers, after reading the political petition the young Ellison has brought to him, says "What the hell...signing this piece of paper won't do no good" (Ellison 518).

It is uncertain whether Ellison is nostalgically privileging the politics of that period through his invocation of the 1930s [a point I will return to in my conclusion]. Ellison's own recollection of the petition is that it supported "some now long-forgotten social issues that I regarded as indispensable to the public good", which reinforces the ambivalence Ellison conveys about this past (Ellison 515). Symbolically though, "politics" is abandoned at this cellar.

With race knowledge and Ellison's political affiliations abandoned at the door, Ellison finally enters. Putting aside these modes of knowledge returns Ellison to the role of student, a role he holds at the beginning of the essay. But unlike that first scene of pedagogy, Ellison does not find himself in an institution of knowledge. It is worth noting that this fact echoes a part of Miss Harrison's advice to the young Ellison. It is not at Tuskegee that she suggests he will find the little man but instead at a train-station, a place for all intents and purposes outside traditional places of knowledge formation. The same can be said for the cellar in a more demonstrable way.

Ellison is forcibly disabused of this institutional knowledge by the coal-heavers. All of this clears the way for Ellison to ask his next question: “Like where on earth did you gentlemen learn so much about grand opera?” (Ellison 518). The coal-heavers’ response is what makes them the heretics occupying Dante’s Sixth Circle of hell and more importantly heretical to the dogma of representational politics Ellison targets in his essay.

As one of the coal-heavers responds, they learned about the grand opera as extras at the Metropolitan Opera: “Strip us fellows down and give us some costumes and we make about the finest damn bunch of Egyptians you ever seen. Hell, we been down there wearing leopard skins and carrying spears or waving things like palm leafs and ostrich-tail fans for years!” (Ellison 519). With this revelation, the aforementioned play on San Juan Hill’s presence/absence and its relationship to Lincoln Center becomes clear. The trope of incongruence as well as that of aesthetic integration is reiterated here. The scene of their aesthetic instruction, the old Met at Broadway and 39th Street was moved to Lincoln Plaza in 1965. So by staging his interaction with the coal-heavers in the San Juan Hill of the past, Ellison plays on the simultaneous congruence and assumed incongruence African-Americans have with an assumedly inaccessible form of expression: opera. In other words, Ellison makes opera a contiguous form of expression with African-American expressive sensibilities by drawing these two spaces together across time.

I do not get the sense that Ellison plays this scene completely straight in making this point. Continuing the Dantesque frame of reading, Ellison’s exaggeration of the coal-heavers’ racial characteristics brings the comic nature of this scene to the fore. When Ellison first sees the coal-heavers he describes their blackness as “accentuated in the dim lamplight by the dust and grime of their profession,” (Ellison 517). This description takes on the level of absurdity when

we find out the nature of their employment at the Met as Egyptians. Their already “accentuated” blackness is further made affective by their being cast as stereotypical Africans at the Met. As a profound mockery of the representational politics Ellison is thinking against, he casts the coal-heavers as doubly “black”. Ellison’s invocation of this grossly affective nature of racial representation brings to mind the connections made between minstrelsy and early jazz music in his notes.

It also recalls his symbolic use of Louis Armstrong in these same notes as well as in “On Bird, Bird Watching and Jazz”. Recalling the original fragment for his essay, the coal-heavers were part of a chain of signification that included Louis Armstrong and other early jazz artists (Ellison “Miscellaneous”). This connection and in particular Ellison’s counter-narrative to the prelapsarian reading of older generations of blacks is invoked in the revelation of the coal-heavers as “a bunch of Egyptians”. Louis Armstrong sneaks in here since the description of this “bunch of Egyptians” is reminiscent of The Zulus, a Creole jazz troupe that dressed up in blackface and donned stereotypical African garb. Louis Armstrong was named “King of the Zulus” in 1947 and subsequently became the target of criticism as did The Zulus during the 1960s.

This comic accentuation of their blackness serves to dramatize the stark incongruence their aesthetic knowledge has to their assumed knowledge as African-Americans. These coal heavers are also critics (described as “*arguing* about the qualities of Metropolitan Opera sopranos”); an activity that further contradicts their race and class position as laborers. This is truly where we see the emergence of the little man. It is not in their presence, which Ellison has so grossly exaggerated to the point of these coal-heavers being absent in this scene, but their critical activity that makes “flesh” the “little man”. To put this in the language of Ellison’s

essay, this scene demonstrates the “irrepressible movement of American culture towards integration” by showing the configuration of Dante, black Southern vernacular, the grand opera of the Met and the Creole jazz traditions into an enigmatic vision of the human. As he wrote in his notes, this scene demonstrates the “the unstructured class availability of knowledge, techniques and tradition” (Ellison “Miscellaneous”).

The scenes of instruction Ellison leads us to in this essay are important. The “errant” trajectories and “obscure forces” of knowledge Ellison sees in America are at their most concentrated in-between traditional institutions of instruction. Hortense Spillers makes a similar point about the train station and other spaces of cultural traffic in “‘The Little Man at Chehaw Station’ Today” (2003). With this we return to the concerns of Gramsci who sought, as Bove writes, to conceptualize a notion of polity that preserves “the people’s right and ability to struggle to make their own future” (Bove 214). Ellison seems to suggest that this potential and just as importantly, the ability to chose, are at their highest in these in-between places. Outside the institutions or ideologies that produce race knowledge or conceptualize human community along other ideological grounds are where these errant trajectories and obscure forces are at their most democratic. Cellars in vanished neighborhoods and the empty whistle-stops are not outsiders or origins, but in-betweens; they are metaphors for the integrative operations of mind and imagination. What makes these coal-heavers and the little man itself “a source of confusion, a threat to social order” is their composition in these non-places. This is why these two figures are heretics and products of writerly heresy. As Charles Williams writes in The Figure of Beatrice: A Study of Dante (1944), Dante would have understood heresy as “an obduracy of the mind; a spiritual state which defied, consciously, ‘a power to which trust and obedience are due’; an intellectual obstinacy. A heretic, strictly, was a man who knew what he was doing” (Williams

142). Speaking specifically about both Farinata and Cavalcante place in the Sixth Circle, Dorothy Sayers writes that “the tombs of the intellectually obdurate – iron without and fire within – thus fittingly open the circles of Nether Hell; the circles of deliberately willed sin (Sayers 132). As an act of Ellison’s own imagination, the little man demonstrates and is presented to us as willed by the integrative imagination. If the dogmas of Black Nationalism and other forms of racial intelligibility were the powers to which trust and obedience were due, the “little man” is Ellison’s conscious defiance of them. This is where Ellison, as our Virgil leaves us at the end of “The Little Man at Chehaw Station”. Not to a moment of transcendence but somewhere along the way. Having confounded Farinata, we arrive at the parodic, willed obduracy of a writer who hopes we will complete this journey.

CODA: ELLISON AS CAVALCANTE

Ralph Ellison's appropriation of Sumner as well as his renewed interest in American vernacular culture can be traced to his tenure as the Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at New York University. During his first year at NYU, Ellison taught a course entitled "The American Vernacular as Symbolic Action" ("Miscellaneous"). In the lecture notes, syllabi and other materials from that course we can detect the reasoning for Ellison's turn towards integration and "antagonistic cooperation" in "The Little Man in Chehaw Station." Despite his oft-mentioned polemic against traditional sociological methods to understand human action, the materials from Ellison's course show that he clearly relied upon literature, sociology and other material studies of American vernacular culture to theorize American aesthetic expression. Not only do novelists and critics like Henry James, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Kenneth Burke and Constance Rourke appear in his notes and syllabus but so do more unfamiliar names like John Kouwenhoven and Hugh Dalziel Duncan. Placing such emphasis on language as well as his concept of "antagonistic cooperation" marks a synthesis of the political and aesthetic strands of thought Ellison grappled with since Who Speaks for the Negro?

Combining Kenneth Burke's sociological concern with language with Constance Rourke, Robert C. Toll, and John Kouwenhoven's studies of American vernacular culture Ellison attempted to read the relationship American literature had to what Kouwenhoven understood as America's "vernacular" impulse. "Antagonistic cooperation" in many ways is tied to this and Ellison's heavy reliance on Kenneth Burke in this course. In particular Burke's writing in Permanence and Change. What becomes apparent is Ellison's desire to combine sociological methods of inquiry with the study of literary and rhetorical language in order to understand the American experience. Ellison's "little man" is enigmatic only because as Ellison writes, there is

no “reliable sociology” to account for him (494). It appears that Ellison was struggling to elaborate one for him. And while Sumner, Duncan and others might have led Ellison to conceptualize the anarchic forces of American life, it is W.E.B Dubois that resonates strongest in this comment. In “Sociology Hesitant” (1901), written almost seventy years before Ellison’s “Little Man” essay Dubois came to the same conclusion. He write that the study of man up to the twentieth century was hindered by metaphysical laws that did not allow for the human will to make what he called “undetermined choices,” (Dubois). This hindrance was made clear in America’s approach to what was called “The Negro Problem.”

Dubois felt that new methods of humanistic inquiry were needed since present methods were incapable of explaining the “undetermined” and willful transformations African-Americans made to Western ideas. For him, the political, social, and economic failures of post-Civil War Reconstruction were linked to the failures of such inquiry. Ellison’s and Dubois’ realizations were that neither naturalistic nor metaphysical approaches to the study of man can account for his acquisition of such knowledge and capability of judgment or action. Beyond the not so distant institutional legacy of Segregation and the contemporary ideological rise of racial tribalism, Ellison saw more than just de jure social segregation as the problem. The demise of the “little man” by the word magic of “genetic” belonging was a move away from the intelligibility about the human Ellison was desperately seeking.

Ellison’s essay is dominated by his anxiety about his own present. His feared elimination of “the little man” stands for more than a moral concern over racism’s social effects or the way it creates an incomplete picture of America’s literary history. When “incongruity” and “antagonism” are eliminated so are the grounds upon which critique could emerge. Between the little man as audience, the artist and art itself Ellison does not see a purely passive relationship

but one akin to – in a collapse of artisan, orchestral and juridical metaphors – collaborator, conductor and judge (Ellison 492). This sense of the little man’s active incongruity and antagonism is also an allusion to the work of Kenneth Burke. In Permanence and Change (1935) Burke declares “critique” as the innate biological function of human life (Burke 6). And part of this critique is waged by what he call “perspective by incongruity”, an activity which he sees “violates the ‘proprieties’ of a word in its previous linkages,” (Burke 119). More importantly, Burke sees this necessarily cultivated incongruity the “nearest *verbal* approach to reality since it will give us something more indicative than is obtainable by the assumptions that our conceptualizations of events in nature are real...” (Burke 94).

In the realms of literature, politics and social life Ellison saw critique as the way these assumptions must be perpetually challenged and violated. Yet the outcome of this violation is as capricious as any act of the human will or the tumultuous forces of history. With this in mind, it is clear why we should read Ellison’s ambiguity and our own into this “little man”. As a figure of critique it reminds us of the necessity of this all important human capability. Ellison deployed it to advocate for a certain kind of American exceptionalist politics. Without question his “little man” was a necessary check to the dangers of representational politics in the 1970s. But as Ellison’s notes bear out, he did not see the changes germinating within the object of his criticism. Third Worldism and the emergence of a transnational, anti-colonialist politics was an important outcome of the maturation (and decline) of Black Nationalism in the 1970s. This confrontational, antagonistic bloc was crucial in checking America’s overt and covert aspirations for political domination.

Ellison’s essay leads us to the exiled coal-heaving heretics that would violate our false conceptualizations about race. Yet he himself was also one of Dante’s “exiles”. I think a

rereading of an aforementioned scene in the “Little Man” essay bears this out. The coal-heaver’s episode takes place a few years after Ellison is first warned of the “little man’s” existence at Tuskegee. Now it is the 1930s, his first years in New York City and we find Ellison working for the Federal Writer’s Project (Ellison 515). When we are introduced to the scene, past and place are presented to us in a state of flux. “I found myself inside a tenement building in San Juan Hill”, Ellison writes, “a Negro district that had disappeared with the coming of Lincoln Center” (515). Ellison presents us with a sense of place that is simultaneously present (in Ellison’s recollection) yet long since disappeared (since the construction of Lincoln Center in the 1960s). Adding to the initial spatial and temporal displacement is a double historical remove. The San Juan Hill gentrified by Robert Moses in the 1960s and its association with the inner city crisis of that era is very different than the post-Depression, Popular Front era scene Ellison invokes in the essay. And the allusions in this scene harkens to an even more distant past. What is interesting about Ellison’s description is what is not there: the San Juan Hill of the immediate past; the one that was demolished. Instead, Ellison brings into configuration what was once there – the San Juan Hill of the 1930s – and what comes after, Lincoln Center.

Thinking about Ellison’s notes and his desire to bring into “antagonistic cooperation” seemingly non-contiguous modes of expression and thought, putting San Juan Hill (doubly removed to the past) into a relationship with Lincoln Center is important. The “low” uncivilized images of the predominantly black San Juan Hill are held together with the later high cultural modernist structures of Lincoln Plaza. After reading the essay it makes sense why since Ellison wants to make these black coal-heavers contiguous with the arts of Western modernity and violate our assumptions about race, identity and humanity. Absent from his description are the people displaced by the brutal, contemporary forces deployed in Robert Moses’ urban renewal

programs. These programs signified America's slow turning away from the politics of the 1930s. In a very literal way Moses dismantled the products and politics of the New Deal. As Tricia Rose, Jeff Chang and other recent African-American critics have noted, the configuration of artistic, political and economic forces released by Moses' "renewal" projects spurred the creation of Hip-Hop. Hip-Hop is an example par excellence of an aesthetic form that Ellison would call "integrative". Yet Ellison is blind to this chain of events and its eventual product in his immediate present. Instead he decides to metaphorically burn an effigy of Black Nationalism sporting a Huey P. Newton mask. He invites us to a post-1968 American version of Guy Fawkes Night.

Keeping Ellison's ambivalence about his present in mind, this further spatial and temporal displacement gains more meaning. Ellison projects himself and the "little man" into the doubly displaced past of the 1930s not that of the recently displaced San Juan Hill of the 1960s. His blindness to the more recent version of San Juan Hill signifies Ellison's distance and ambivalence towards the forces behind this "urban renewal". Then again, with Invisible Man in mind, I would hesitate to say that his invocation of the 1930s signifies Ellison's nostalgia for Popular Front, the CPUSA or the Harlem Renaissance either. Like Cavalcante in Canto X, Ellison could only faintly see his own present. His city and the American State were playing their own game of representational politics; something his little man allows us to see but Ellison himself was silent about. Like Cavalcante again, Ellison despairs for the unseen fate of America's progeny, both black and white. Perhaps it was this despair that motivated Ellison to think our democratic potential in errant trajectories and obscure chromatic forces. In these he saw the possibility to think democratically; to envelope even the absurd acolytes of Black Nationalist ideology as potential friends. COINTELPRO and the ideological Cold War games

played on a global scale made starker, Schmittian designations by making humanity itself the province of politics. For the American State the line between friend and foe was much clearer.

Drawing on Bergson, Burke and Brer Rabbit; William Sumner and Louis Armstrong, Twain, Crane and Henry James; Ralph Ellison's notion of integration should not be resuscitated as a politics. As such, it is (and was) too easily recuperated by the very logic it sought to undermine. Instead, it should be seen as Ellison's hopeful attempt at truly democratic thinking about the human.

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