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A LITERARY ARCHAEOLOGY OF REVEREND  
HICKMAN'S JUNETEENTH SERMON IN RALPH  
ELLISON'S SECOND NOVEL

**Abstract:** This is an investigation of the intertexts and allusions in Reverend Hickman's Juneteenth celebration sermon in Ralph Ellison's second novel (in both published versions). The sermon is of critical importance to Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* career. He published an excerpt containing it in 1965 and shared it with a television audience in 1966. The sermon is rich with intertexts, allusions, and literary influences that have yet to be explored. This paper establishes the sermon's importance and then begins to map its intertextual connections, focusing on a series of 30 adjectives with the suffix "-less" spoken in a total of 80 instances by Hickman and/or Bliss in the course of the sermon. An argument is presented for the influence of Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* on this sequence on adjectives, despite Ellison's youthful dismissal of her work. An argument is presented (offering textual evidence) for Hurston's influence being connected in Ellison's thought process with James Joyce's influence. James Weldon Johnson's influence is brought into the discussion as well. Another scholar's argument for C.L. Franklin's influence is discussed but argued against. The study has implications for Ellison's conception of the human face as a conduit for communication and for varied forms of possibility, thus connecting this reading of the sermon to some of the major themes of his career. It also has implications for developing a richer understanding of his artistic relation to the work of women writers.

**Keywords:** Ralph Ellison, sermons, African American Church, Juneteenth, faciality, Book of Ezekiel, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, James Joyce, Gilles Deleuze, C.L. Franklin, Louis Armstrong

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ЛИТЕРАТУРНАЯ АРХЕОЛОГИЯ ПРОПОВЕДИ  
ПРЕПОДОБНОГО ХИКМЕНА НА ДЕНЬ ОСВОБОЖДЕНИЯ  
В РОМАНЕ РАЛЬФА ЭЛЛИСОНА «19 ИЮНЯ»

**Аннотация:** Статья представляет собой исследование интертекстуальных связей и аллюзий, содержащихся в проповеди преподобного Хикмена из романа Ральфа Эллисона «19 июня» (в обоих опубликованных вариантах). Эта проповедь имеет огромное значение для творчества Эллисона после «Невидимки». Отрывок, в который она входила, он издал в 1965 г., а в 1966 г. выступил с ним на телевидении. Текст проповеди изобилует еще не изученными интертекстуальными отсылками, аллюзиями и приметам литературного влияния. В статье обозначена важная роль этой проповеди и прослеживаются интертекстуальные связи; в центре анализа – тридцать прилагательных с суффиксом “-less”, которые на протяжении проповеди восемьдесят раз произносит Хикмен и/или Блосс. Приводится довод в пользу влияния романа Зоры Нил Херстон «Их глаза видели Бога» на такое нанизывание прилагательных, несмотря на то, что Эллисон в молодости игнорировал ее творчество. Также высказывается мнение (подкрепленное примерами из текста), что в мышлении Эллисона влияние Херстон переплеталось с влиянием Джеймса Джойса. Учтено и влияние Джеймса Уэддона Джонсона. Рассматривается – и отвергается предположение другого исследователя о воздействии К.Л. Франклина. Статья содержит некоторые выводы относительно трактовки Эллисоном человеческого лица как средства коммуникации, обладающего самыми разными возможностями (ср. «лицевость» – концепт Делеза и Гваттари, предложенный в книге «Тысяча плато. Капитализм и шизофрения»), и, таким образом, связывает анализ проповеди с некоторыми темами, ключевыми для творчества Эллисона. Кроме того, высказывается предположение, что было бы полезно реконструировать более полную картину его творческих отношений с некоторыми писательницами.

**Ключевые слова:** Ральф Эллисон, проповеди, афроамериканская церковь, роман «19 июня», лицевость, Книга пророка Иезекииля, Зора Нил Херстон, Джеймс Уэддон Джонсон, Джеймс Джойс, Жиль Делез, К.Л. Франклин, Луи Армстронг

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Reverend Alonzo Hickman's sermon to the Juneteenth commemoration camp meeting in Ralph Ellison's second novel, as remembered decades later by Adam Sunraider in his hospital bed (where Hickman is visiting him and helping him remember) is one of the most important scenes in the second half of Ellison's career, one that he emphasized specifically through the publication of an excerpt and a television appearance. Despite the sermon's centrality to the plot of the novel and to Ellison's thinking in mid-1960s, it has not yet been explicated thoroughly. Hickman's sermon, a historical allegory which features a riff (with a twist) on chapter 37 (the Valley of Dry Bones) of the Book of Ezekiel, is about the formation of subjectivity and unfolds through employing particular modernist intertexts and allusions. It is imbued with modernist concerns<sup>1</sup>. This essay is an attempt to sketch the intertextual architecture of the sermon. It will present a text-based argument (centered on a sequence of adjectives and the subsequent causes of their reversals) that the sermon is a response to several aspects of the *oeuvre* of Zora Neale Hurston, which in turn interlocks with Ellison's elaborate, long-running engagement with the work of James Weldon Johnson. The sermon also alludes to the Invisible Man's recollection, at the end of chapter 16 of *Invisible Man*, of Professor Woodridge's lecture (itself probably a comment inspired by Hurston) on James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. At stake in understanding the sermon in these contexts is not just a glimpse (however imperfect) into the winding paths of Ellison's artistic process and intertextual depth and debts, but an understanding of the sermon in relation to Ellison's thinking about sound, subjectivity, communication, and possibility.

I am arguing that Hickman's sequence of adjectives with the suffix "-less" (e.g., Hickman's "eyeless, tongueless, drumless, danceless" [Ellison 2010: 318-19]), which he uses to create an extended metaphor of blankness and absence in order to describe the state of African slaves in the early years of North American bondage, derives from paragraph four of chapter one of Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in which certain residents of Eatonville, Florida are described as having been "tongueless,

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Germana has recently offered a compelling Bergsonian reading of a different aspect of the sermon than what is primarily being investigated here [Germana 2017: 215-21]. Germana's reading is not at odds with this study. They are complementary. A future scholar could combine certain insights from his interpretation with this study to form a more comprehensive conception of the sermon as a whole as a modernist text.

earless, eyeless conveniences all day long” while at their places of employment [Hurstun 2006: 1]. Hurstun’s characters regain their humanity at the end of the workday, after the sun goes down and in the absence of their supervisor(s), becoming “lords of sound and lesser things” [Hurstun 2006: 1]. In Ellison’s novel, the sequence of adjectives carrying the suffix “-less” enables Hickman’s sermon to take its turn toward the Book of Ezekiel, or at least to the section about the Valley of Dry Bones (with Ezekiel himself omitted as a character). In fact, it would be difficult to imagine another path to the central conceit, that beings having been dispossessed of most physical features (aside from various nerves) are re-endowed/re-animated through the Word of God. Hurstun’s passage could have provided (and appears to have provided) a plausible poetic model of people possessed of facial features going from possessed to dispossessed and repossessed (through an aural catalyst) in the same day.

The form of the sermon itself alludes to Hurstun again – less directly and somewhat obliquely – as well as to James Weldon Johnson, Ellison’s antecedents as writers who understood and attempted to make known the literary potential in African American sermons. James Joyce’s influence may be observed here as well, and I will attempt to demonstrate that it has been filtered through (or perhaps merged with) Ellison’s apparent interest in Hurstun’s trope of sense organ-lessness. If all of this could be somehow proved historically incorrect, the similarities between the texts still demand attention. Finally, I will discuss the Book of Ezekiel and how and why it fits especially well into the novel by examining its relation to twentieth-century riffs on the Biblical text, aside from its stature as a much-discussed text in African American religious traditions. In the process, C.L. Franklin, Oscar Micheaux, and Louis Armstrong will enter into the exploration as well.

Hickman’s sermon is the focal point of the excerpt “Juneteenth,” published in 1965 (reprinted in the appendix of *Three Days Before the Shooting...* [Ellison 2010: 1055-65]. It appears in the 1999 *Juneteenth* [Ellison 1999: 116-31] and in Book II of *Three Days Before the Shooting...* [Ellison 2010: 314-30], each time within the same plot setting. The 1965 version is almost identical to the versions in the posthumous novels. It is the apotheosis of the Hickman-Bliss performance. Hickman’s sermon is punctuated by the child’s well-rehearsed antiphonal responses. Toward the end of the sermon comes the kidnapping attempt from which Bliss never recovers psychologically, and setting him on the path to becoming Adam Sunraider. The sermon is the hinge of Book II.

The sermon<sup>2</sup> is also a moment that Ellison chose to showcase for a television audience<sup>3</sup> in the episode (“Work in Progress”) of the documentary series “U.S.A.: The Novel” solely about him and his work. In that 1966 documentary, in order to demonstrate his method of composition at that time, he reads portions of the sermon (portions under consideration here) into a tape recorder. He then plays it back, assessing how the sound of the words strike his ear [Ellison 2012: 20:28-22:46]<sup>4</sup>.

In 1941, under the influence of Richard Wright, Ellison criticized and dismissed Hurston as an important writer. But there is strong intertextual evidence for her later influence on his work. Wright and Hurston were famously at odds in the late 1930s, with each rejecting one another’s vision of African American life as rendered in their respective fictions. Ellison’s youthful foray into writing about Hurston’s work is embarrassing not just for its ill-considered summaries of the content of two of her novels, but for its typographical errors, which I believe may be revelatory. As I will attempt to untangle below, Ellison dismissed Hurston’s work in a review-essay in *New Masses* without an especially rigorous critical engagement, but later – I think – he entered into a complex artistic relationship with it. It appears as if Ellison reconsidered Hurston’s work after obtaining artistic distance from Wright’s. Later negative comments Ellison may have said about Hurston could be deflection and appear to be undermined by the text of his second novel<sup>5</sup>.

Ellison wrote the following about Hurston’s work in his 1941 review-essay “Recent Negro Fiction” in *New Masses*:

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2 In her essay “Ellison and the Black Church: The Gospel According to Ralph” Laura Saunders calls this sermon “Ellison’s *credo*” [Saunders 2005: 47; emphasis in original].

3 Arnold Rampersad writes that the documentary was broadcast on 1 February 1966 to “hundreds of thousands of viewers in six major cities from coast to coast” [Rampersad 2007: 425].

4 Specifically, he reads from most of what became page 318 and the top of page 319 in *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, starting with “They cut out our tongues” [Ellison 2010: 318] and ending with a sentence not in the 2010 text, but the sentence that precedes it is “So that we may listen and not become discouraged” [Ellison 2010: 319]!

5 There are more connections as well. For instance, the last sentence of Hurston’s 1943 article “High John de Conquer” is remarkably similar to the last sentence of *Invisible Man*. And there is a character named Janey in the second novel. As for the brief discussion of Hurston that appears late in Rampersad’s biography [Rampersad 2007: 452], it is unclear from the Rampersad’s notes as to when Ellison made the comment that Rampersad asked R.W.B. Lewis about. Perhaps he asked him about the 1941 piece.

In her turn Zora Neil [sic<sup>6</sup>] Hurston's latest work, though possessing technical competence retains the blight of calculated burlesque that has marred most of her writing. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* tells the story of a Southern Negro woman's love-life against the background of an all-Negro town into which the casual brutalities of the South seldom intrude. Her next work, *Moses Man of the Mountains* [sic<sup>7</sup>], a fictional biography, is presented as the American Negro's conception of the life of Moses. [Ellison 1941:24]

Ellison misses much about both of these works, but especially about the second half of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. What did he think of Teacake, the Hurricane, and the court room scene<sup>8</sup>? In any case, Ellison's mature fiction ended up much closer to Hurston's than to Wright's.

"Recent Negro Fiction" contains fulsome praise for Wright's work. Ellison ends the essay by claiming "there must be no stepping away from the artistic and social achievements of *Native Son* if the Negro writer is to create the consciousness of his oppressed nation" [Ellison 1941:26]. In this sentence, in an essay in which he discusses Hurston, Ellison is thinking about and clearly alluding to Joyce. I will argue below that in *Invisible Man* he combines allusions to Hurston and Joyce, setting the stage for his grand-scale engagement with Hurston in Hickman's sermon (taking her series of

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<sup>6</sup> Ellison misspells Hurston's middle name as "Neil" three times in the course of the essay (on page 22 and twice on page 24). Perhaps he did not have had her books in front of him while composing the essay, and apparently his editor(s) and/or fact checker(s) did not while preparing the essay for publication. Ellison was already an astute critic by this point, so his very poor summaries of these two novels, combined with three mis-spellings of "Neil," raise the question of whether he had read them at all or had seen copies of them.

<sup>7</sup> The title of the book is *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. Again, it is difficult to imagine Ellison making this mistake with the book on his desk.

<sup>8</sup> *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has a strong Emersonian thrust and contains Emersonian allusions. Perhaps – if in fact Ellison had actually read it – he picked up on this and it caused him to recoil from the book, as he was still conflicted about the work of the man he was named after. For instance, after Jody Starks dies, and Janie begins reflecting on her life, the narrator says "But Nanny belonged to that other kind that loved to deal in scraps. Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon – for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you – and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her" [Hurston 2006: 247]. As Ellison will in the prologue to *Invisible Man* (with the Invisible Man's musings on an anthropomorphic ear; think of Emerson's transparent eyeball), Hurston alludes to Emerson's *Nature* here: "There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet" [Hurston 2006: 9]. Nanny could not integrate the parts – she "loved to deal in scraps."

three “noun-less” adjectives and scaling the trope up to 30 iterations stated a total of 80 times in four pages).

By the time *Invisible Man* was published, Ellison had also ventured beyond his youthful understanding of his allusion (paraphrased in the quote above as “create the consciousness of his oppressed nation”) to Stephen Dedalus’s stated goal toward the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: to “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” [Joyce 1999: 217]. At the end of chapter 16 of *Invisible Man*, the Invisible Man relays, and possibly believes, the interpretation of this by his erstwhile professor Woodridge: “Stephen’s problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the *uncreated features of his face*. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals” [Ellison 1995: 354, emphasis in original]. Dedalus’s politicized ethno-literary identity-forging project is the link between Ellison’s 1941 comments on Hurston and his later adoption of a series of her adjectives and images in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as well as one of his links to their (his and Hurston’s) shared interest in poeticized sermons and/or the sermon as a literary device. It is a significant and not at all obvious leap (though it is a Joycean leap, redolent of *Finnegans Wake*) to go from “conscience of my race” to “*features of his face*.” Ellison got there somehow, and a path through the opening chapter of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* would make for an interesting if unsupported conjecture if he had not followed it up in Hickman’s sermon with Hurston’s array of adjectives combined with the similar trope of facial-featurelessness. As Hickman’s sermon takes a turn toward the supernatural (so that it may build toward its crescendo in which God addresses the dry bones), the question of facelessness becomes paramount<sup>9</sup>. Hickman says “And they treated us like one great inhuman animal without any face.” Bliss replies, “Without a face, Rev. Hickman?” Hickman replies,

Without personality, without names, Rev. Bliss, we were made into nobody and not even mister nobody either, just nobody. They left us without names. Without choice. Without the right to do or not to do, to be or not to be [Ellison 2010: 317].

Bliss replies, “You mean without faces and without eyes? We were eyeless like Samson in Gaza? Is that the way, Rev. Hickman?” After further

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<sup>9</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, the “scapegoat” is “faceless” [Deleuze, Guattari 1980:117, 124].

explanation, Hickman says “Yes, Reverend Bliss, we were eyeless like unhappy Samson among the Philistines” [Ellison 2010: 317]. “Eyeless” in this sentence is the first instance of an adjective with the “-less” suffix, to be followed by 78 more (49 more by Hickman, 29 more by Bliss), including those that relate to facial features (20 iterations, including several of Hurston’s [“eyeless,” “tongueless,” and “earless”]) but also to other body parts (“armless,” 319), abstractions (“wrongless, rightless,” [Ellison 2010: 319]), aspects of culture (“drumless,” “danceless,” “songless” [Ellison 2010: 318]), and other concepts (“mindless,” “godless,” [Ellison 2010: 319]). A little later on, talking to Bliss in the hospital in the novel’s present moment, Hickman refers to the years just after Emancipation as “closer to the faceless days” [Ellison 2010: 324]).

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have many problematic ideas as well as some that are valuable in their chapter “Year Zero: Faciality” in *A Thousand Plateaus*. For the purposes of this argument, at this juncture (more to come later), one gnomic pronouncement that obtains is their assertion that “the face is a politics” [Deleuze, Guattari 1980: 181]. Whether in the back-porch politics of an Eatonville evening or in the national politics poetically abstracted by Hickman, the face becomes a political conduit and politically charged site of information exchange<sup>10</sup>. For the Invisible Man, in the moment quoted above, the problem that causes him to recollect Woodridge’s lecture on Joyce is whether or not he will be able to be his own person within the Brotherhood and on the rostrums, podiums, and stages to which the Brotherhood sends him to speak, or whether he will have to wear the ideological mask that the Brotherhood constructs for him<sup>11</sup>. Woodridge’s interpretation is recollected by the Invisible Man in the context of his incipient career as a public speaker.

I will soon turn to Ellison’s concern with the literary appropriation of the African American church sermon, an appropriation pioneered by James Weldon Johnson and followed closely by Hurston. But first, Hurston’s perspective on the form of the sermon and its literary potential, as shared

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<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere in the book, Deleuze and Guattari claim “The face is what gives the signifier substance; it is what fuels interpretation, and it is what changes, changes traits, when interpretation reimparts signifier to its substance. Look, his expression changed. The signifier is always facialized. Faciality reigns materially over that whole constellation of significances and interpretations” [Deleuze, Guattari 1980:115].

<sup>11</sup> I read this later concern with faciality and the recollection of Woodridge’s interpretation of Joyce as functioning differently from the Invisible Man’s simpler metaphor of one-eyed mice earlier in the chapter.

in two letters of 1934, will be of interest here as it intersects neatly with Ellison's perspective, which will be described subsequently. Hurston wrote to Johnson in 1934, complaining of a reviewer in the *New York Times* who doubted the authenticity of the sermon in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, "He ["a Negro preacher"] must be also be an artist. He must be both a poet and an actor of a very high order. . . .they are the first artists, the ones intelligible to the masses" [Kaplan 2002: 302-303]. Hurston sought commiseration, telling Johnson that "you and I...seem to be the only ones even among Negroes who recognize the barbaric poetry in their sermons<sup>12</sup>" [Kaplan 2002: 302]. Writing to Lewis Gannett four days later, Hurston noted that "only James Weldon Johnson and I give it [the sermon tradition] praise," adding "the truth is, the greatest poets among us are in our pulpits and the greatest poetry has come out of them. It is not merely set down. It passes from mouth to mouth as in the days of Homer<sup>13</sup>" [Kaplan 2002: 304].

Ellison had a similar understanding of the sermon tradition, thinking of it as something quasi-archaic, bursting with emotionally-explosive energy yet circumscribed by form, and full of literary potential. Ellison wrote to Albert Murray in 1953 "even the most sincere preacher must depend on rhetoric, raw communication between the shaman and the group to which he's spiritually committed is just too overpowering. Without the art the emotion would split him apart" [Callahan, Murray 2000: 43]. In the 1966 documentary discussed above, Ellison expands on his perspective on sermons from 1953, bringing James Joyce (who appears to have been connected to Hurston somehow in Ellison's mind) into the discussion explicitly. Ellison thus opens up the idea of the influence of literary modernism on his modifying approach to the African American sermon tradition. This section follows immediately after his on-camera reading from Hickman's sermon:

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<sup>12</sup> Hurston famously transcribed a 1929 sermon by C.C. Lovelace and folded a version of it into her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934). Despite her comments to and on Johnson, she seems to have been in friendly competition with him. Ellison, it seems, entered into competition with both of them. Eric Sundquist claims that "one can look at Johnson's sermonic verse and his theory of dialect as a way of estimating Hurston's pointed divergence from his model" [Sundquist 1992: 55]. Comparing Johnson's sermons in *God's Trombones* to Hurston's livelier, and probably more idiomatically accurate free verse representation of C.C. Lovelace's sermon, Sundquist writes "Johnson's is the more composed, the more conventional aesthetic work, demonstrating, as in his theory of the spirituals, a 'development' of vernacular materials into a more 'cultivated,' authorial form" [Sundquist 1992: 56]. Hurston was moving in another direction with regard to a greater emphasis on the rendering of colloquial and idiomatic speech.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Reverend Homer Barbee in *Invisible Man*.

One of the, shall I say, *literary* traditions, although it's really a tradition of *eloquence*, which I bring to fiction from my Negro background is the eloquence which you find within the Negro church, wherein the minister, who might preach variations on the same sermon a hundred times a year or more, but who must at the same time believe. He is initiated, he is a manipulator of emotions and of eloquence, of sacred visions, so to speak. So as to keep his own values alive, to keep his own faith and his own belief alive, he concentrates on the *technique* of arousing these visions, arousing, making the WORD, in caps, manifest. It's one of those ironies wherein you find that you've been prepared to approach your given art form at a time when you weren't even concerned with any kind of art, except maybe that of shooting marbles. Not that I got it solely from Negro churches or listening to Negro orators. But it jelled, with for instance, with the long sermons in Joyce, in *The [sic] Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and so I was feeding that Negro church experience into Joyce and I was also learning to see that this kind of eloquence was a very valuable thing for a writer of fiction not only because it's something – it has possibilities of presenting something new and fresh for readers who are not Negro, who don't share that particular experience, but because it has its own rhetorical shape, it has its own stable – well, not stable – but its own cluster of imagery, imagery which gets into folklore and it gets into the blues, it gets into folk song and it gets into popular songs written by Negroes.... This is part of the general American literary heritage. [Ellison 2012: 23:42-26:31]

I understand Ellison to be saying that while a preacher has a certain store of tropes, images, rhetorical devices, and patterns to work with, so does a writer, and a preacher's toolkit may become a writer's when a writer creates a character who is a preacher. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* thus has two points of connection with Hickman's sermon (through the form of the literary sermon in a general and the Invisible Man's rhetorical inversion of "uncreated conscience of my race," recapitulated in Hickman's extended metaphor of featurelessness). A writer may look to Joyce or to African American sermons, just as a preacher may look to folklore or the blues for intertextual play, guidance, and flavor. A creator finds a haven and a treasure trove in various forms preceding the work under construction. It is a very old argument, familiar to all students of the arts, but what Ellison is doing is reminding the viewers (of the documentary) that sermons too are art forms, operating with similar procedures with regard to the relationship between form and content and in turn may become artistic models for secular writers. As Ellison constructed Hickman's sermon, he was looking not only

to sermons he may have heard in person, but to literary sermons by Joyce, Hurston, and James Weldon Johnson. Ellison makes his debt to Johnson the most explicit in the text of his second novel.

Ellison had Johnson on his mind for much of his career. Alan Nadel has noticed that the similarities between *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *Invisible Man* go well beyond each novel's anonymous narrator. Nadel has called the Invisible Man, who is "'taken' for black" at every turn (that is, through various symbols and stereotypes associated with blackness), "the dark alternative to the ex-colored man," who is taken for white (Nadel 2004: 158). For Nadel, the moment that "underscores" *Invisible Man's* "inversion" of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is when the Invisible Man rejects Mr. Emerson's offer of a job as his valet: "he is turning down exactly the position that the ex-colored man accepts: to be the companion of a rich, white, ne'er-do-well" (Nadel 2004:158).

There is of course much more to this intertextual relationship between the novels, but I am quoting Nadel's compelling argument above in order to set up the following claim: if Ellison's first novel is (among much else) an intricate response to Johnson's 1912 novel, Ellison's second novel offers a running commentary on Johnson's 1927 volume of poetry, *God's Trombones*, made explicit through Reverend Alonzo Hickman's nickname: "God's trombone" (Ellison 2010: 5, 1004<sup>14</sup>) and "God's righteous trombone" [Ellison 2010: 509]. Like Hurston, Ellison seems to have had a somewhat (perhaps lightly) ambivalent relationship with Johnson's work, which included a deep respect for it as well as a desire to comment on it and build on it. Aware of the modernist sermon tradition that preceded him, Ellison reached into that tradition for the most significant sermon in his *oeuvre*, but also incorporated a trope found in Hurston's writing, but not in her sermons. With this in mind, I will turn to Hurston. Ellison's allusion to Johnson's work is explicit but superficial. His allusion to Hurston's work is subtle but crucial.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* begins with the protagonist's (Janie's) return to Eatonville, Florida at sundown after a long absence. The narrator describes the scene as follows:

The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches

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<sup>14</sup> The nickname "God's Trombone" appears in Book I of *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, in the 1960 excerpt "And Hickman Arrives," and in *Juneteenth* [Ellison 1999: 2].

beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. [Hurstson 2006: 1]

While on the bossman's clock, alienated from themselves while their labor is commodified, the narrator describes these subjects as akin to automatons – “tongueless, earless, eyeless” – the features of their faces remaining uncreated indeed. The “time to hear things and talk,” in the logic of this novel, is a different temporal realm from that connected with wage labor – it is an enclave with sound (as the philosopher Günther Anders might have said), separate from the experience of those hours in which time is money, where “mules and other brutes occupied their skins.” Alternatively, it is a space of sympathetic or at least comprehensible exchange between individuals, where the ebb and flow of subjectivity can transpire, rather than a workplace where individuals are turned into “conveniences” in and for the machinations of capital. In the evening the people of Eatonville regain their senses and become “lords of sound,” transforming through their re-found faces from automatons into subjects with autonomy. Indeed, they become “lords of sounds and lesser things,” perhaps implying that everything then and thus becomes subordinated to the sounds they create.

In Hickman's sermon an uncannily similar process occurs. In Hickman's sermon the enslaved Africans in North America are compared to the dry bones in the valley in Ezekiel's vision (but without Ezekiel). They are face-featureless in exactly the same way as the residents of Eatonville during the work day, prior to sundown.

The skeletons from the Valley of Dry Bones are employed by Hickman as figures representing enslaved Africans also transform from automatons to autonomy through sound – not through regaining their own voices, as the residents of Eatonville do when freed from wage labor for the day, but through the sublime word of God, with which they too enter an enclave of sound. Here is a long, if much abridged excerpt of that sermon in the novel. The crucial borrowings from Hurston occur in the quoted segment on the pages after this one:

They cut out our tongues...  
 ...They left us speechless...  
 ...They cut out our tongues...

...Lord, they left us without words...

.... .And they left us without language....

...They took away our talking drums....

...Drums that talked, Daddy Hickman? Tell us about those talking drums....

Drums that talked like a telegraph. Drums that could reach across the country like a church bell sound. Drums that told the news almost before it happened. Drums that spoke with big voices like big men! Drums like a conscience and a deep heartbeat that knew right from wrong. Drums that told glad tidings! Drums that sent the news of trouble speeding home! Drums that told us *our* time and told us where we were...

Those were some drums, Rev. Hickman....

...Yes, and they took those drums away....

Away, amen! Away! And they took away our heathen dances....

...They left us drumless and they left us danceless...

Ah yes, they burnt up our talking drums and our dancing drums...

...Drums...

...And they scattered the ashes...

Ah, Aaaaaah! Eyeless, tongueless, drumless, danceless, ashes...

And a worse devastation was yet to come, Lord God!

Tell us, Revern' Hickman. Blow on our righteous horn!

Ah, but Rev. Bliss, in those days we didn't have any horns....

No horns? Hear him!

And we had no songs....

...No songs....

We were eyeless, tongueless, drumless, danceless, hornless, songless!

All true, Rev. Bliss. No eyes to see. No tongue to speak or taste. No drums to raise the spirits and wake up our memories. No dance to stir the rhythm that makes life move. No songs to give praise and prayers to God!

We were truly in the dark, my young brothern and sistern. Eyeless, earless, tongueless, drumless, danceless, songless, hornless, soundless.

....

...[Hickman's] trombone entering his voice, broad and somber and noble....

**WE WERE LIKE THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES!**

...Lord, we were dead! Except...except...

...Except what, Rev. Hickman?

Except for one nerve from our ear...

Listen to him!

And one nerve in the soles of our feet...

....

...and right there in the midst of all our death and buried-ness, the voice of God spoke down the Word...

...Crying Do! I said, Do! Crying Doooo-

These dry bones live!<sup>15</sup>

....

Amen! And we heard and rose up. Because in all their blasting they could not blast away one solitary vibration of God's true word... We heard it down among the roots and rocks. We heard it in the sand and in the clay. We heard it in the falling rain and in the rising sun. On the high ground and in the gullies. We heard it lying moldering and corrupted in the earth. We heard it sounding like a bugle call to wake up the dead. Crying, Doooooo! Ay, do these dry bones live! [Ellison 2010: 318-21].

I have searched extensively over a period of nearly ten years for a common source, and there appears to be no other source for the series "eyeless, tongueless" (et cetera) other than the opening of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. (Facial features are not mentioned in the Biblical text.) Even if there is a third and as yet unknown common source for this section, Ellison still seems to have been influenced by Hurston's particular employment of metaphor in terms of the mechanism for the problem's resolution (sound). Nevertheless, Hurston appears to be the source, and this is extraordinary, both for how Ellison is understood in relation to the work of women

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<sup>15</sup> Hickman changes the "can," asked by God of Ezekiel, to "do." Ezekiel 37:3-6 in the King James Version reads "And he said unto me, Son of Man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest. And he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you and ye shall live: and I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the Lord" [The English Bible 2012: 1497-98]. Changing "can" to "do" enables Hickman to omit Ezekiel as a character and allows God to speak directly to the bones. Hickman states that commemoration of Juneteenth ought to be analogous to the Jewish commemoration of Passover. He states that with his forthcoming sermon he is "taking one more page" from the book of the "Hebrew children" in order to "tell ourselves a story" [Ellison 2010: 314]. In other words, Hickman is announcing early on that this will not be a traditional gloss on a Biblical text, but a (political) allegory. Including Ezekiel as a personage in the sermon would have been problematic. Who would he have been in the historical allegory? It would not have made sense. Thus, in Hickman's sermon God addresses the dry bones directly with "do" instead of posing the question of "can" to Ezekiel.

writers and more expansively, how sound is understood in relation to the formation of African American subjectivity in modernist works. Entering into a communal sound, for Ellison's and Hurston's characters, can subvert enforced labor and curtailed freedom, creating a space for autonomy while the face opens up vistas of possibility.

Richard Rushton, an astute commenter on Deleuze and Guattari's ruminations on faces and faciality, makes explicit through his explication of their work the bearing it has on that most Ellisonian of concepts, possibility. As the Invisible Man says of Bliss Rinehart, whose face signifies something different to different people on different Harlem blocks, "His world was possibility and he knew it" [Ellison 1995: 498]. Rushton writes "It is the face that opens up the world as an experience of possibility; it is the very conception out of which worlds are born" [Rushton 2002: 225]. Yet for Rushton this possibility is not an un-alloyed good.<sup>16</sup> Rushton notes that fascism, for instance, is among the possibilities that exist [Rushton 2002: 226-27]. Rushton's commentary on Deleuze and Guattari's approaches to faciality helps (without mentioning Ellison) to draw out Ellisonian frequencies in their concepts:

An endless possibility is, however, channeled by the specific possibilities I come across when I come before another. This experience of circumscribing and of curtailing possibility is the experience of the face. But it is this circumscribing that gives the world its shape; it is quite impossible to do anything in a world of infinite possibility if that world maintains its infinity. The face is therefore a reduction of the infinite to the finite—it is the channel that both connects the infinite with the finite and separates the infinite from the finite; it reduces infinite possibility to finite possibility, but in doing so, it unleashes potential. [Rushton 2002: 228]

Hickman (like Rinehart, Rushton, Deleuze, and Guattari) is well aware of the potential that can be unleashed through face – potential for good and for evil, for form and for chaos, for progress and for lateral or retrograde movements. Thus, Hickman admonishes the congregation several times to "keep to the rhythm," to remember the past and retain its values, to "[L]earn

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<sup>16</sup> Indeed, "Rine the Rascal," who lives in a "vast seething, hot world of fluidity" [Ellison 1995: 498] does not actually appear in the novel, but from what the Invisible Man relays of him, he seems to be up to little good. Of course, in the Epilogue, the Invisible Man famously notes that his "world has become one of infinite possibilities" and that "[U]ntil some gang succeeds in putting the world in a straight jacket, its definition is possibility" [Ellison 1995: 576].

from what we've lived [Ellison 2010: 322]. Hickman's sermon celebrates the possibilities of faciality, of a new subjectivity ("He means for us to be a new kind of human") and yet is full of warnings about the dangers of this new subjectivity [Ellison 2010: 322]. For Hurston, faciality is also fraught with dangers. Not long after the faces of the Eatonville residents re-form or re-emerge, they start gossiping about Janie.

All of the above is quite far afield from the Biblical Book of Ezekiel, which contains considerably less ambiguity than Hickman's sermon. Horace Porter, in his book *Jazz Country: Ralph Ellison in America* (2001), suggests the possible influence on Reverend C.L. Franklin's famous sermon on Ezekiel on Hickman's sermon [Porter 2001: 114–15]. I appreciate Porter's line of thought, but ultimately, I reject his idea. Franklin may well have helped Ellison to see an aspect of the dramatic potential of the sermon, but Ellison's change of Biblical "can" to "do" (see note 15) strains Porter's claim to an unfeasible extent. Porter's comparison mainly relates to the moment in each sermon when the dry bones come together to form animated individual beings. The scenes are similar, as they draw from the same Biblical source, but there appears to be no precise connection.

Franklin (1915–1984) was Ellison's contemporary. Ellison heard his popular sermons on the radio or on record<sup>17</sup>. Porter suggests that "the climax of Rev. C.L. Franklin's sermon may have been Ellison's model. Rev. Franklin had invoked the Word as a compass against chaos" [Porter 2001: 117]. Perhaps. But it is also probable that any two sermons on the same Biblical text are going to be similar. Furthermore, the climax of Franklin's sermon is the repetition of the question "can these bones live?," with a difference each time, addressing the listener (the person being questioned) as a practitioner of a variety of modern professions<sup>18</sup> each time between "Son of Man" and "can these bones live." This is probably the most distinguishing feature of Franklin's sermon, but it has nothing to do with Hickman's. Ellison, as noted above, has changed "can" to "do" and has God speak directly to the bones without the intermediary of Ezekiel. *Do* the bones live, in the scheme of

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<sup>17</sup> In a 1976 interview Ellison mentions Franklin as an example of an outstanding preacher [Stepto, Harper 1976: 329].

<sup>18</sup> In Franklin's sermon, God says "Son of man, you are a scientist. Can these bones live? Son of man, you are an engineer! Can these *bones* live? Son of man, you are a heart specialist. Son of man, you are a geologist. You are a botanist. You, you are a specialist in various phases of the human body. You are a psychologist and psychiatrist! You know all about drives and reactions and responses and tendencies! I want to know, with all of this knowledge, can you tell me, *can these bones live*" [Franklin 2008: 12:46–13:40]?!

Hickman's sermon? In fact they do, but they must hear a certain sound first. They do not live in an enclave of sound separate from the sound of God's word. They must form an enclave with it in order to live, in Hickman's formulation.

According to Allen Dwight Callahan, Ezekiel 37:1–14 is a text with a long tradition in African American churches [Callahan 2003: 46]. Without mentioning Ellison, Allan Dwight Callahan may have inadvertently identified another source for a critical moment a little later in Hickman's sermon. Callahan writes:

Oscar Micheaux's 1925 silent film classic *Body and Soul* is the film debut of Renaissance man Paul Robeson, who plays the charismatic, conniving, and abusive Reverend Isaiah T. Jenkins, a black flim-flam man and ex-con who poses as a teacher in a small southern town. Toward the end of the film, after Jenkins has robbed, raped, and bullied members of the local community, he preaches a sermon entitled "Dry Bones in the Valley."....The intertitle reads that this 'is a sermon which is every black preacher's ambition.' This without further comment: Micheaux implicitly expects that his audience is already familiar with the biblical text that Jenkins has taken for his sermon. Micheaux does not provide intertitles for the contents of the sermon in the silent film. [Callahan 2003: 46]

Ellison may have heard many sermons on Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones while he was growing up. But Micheaux's film may indeed have given Ellison another idea. In *Body and Soul*, at the 1:07:27 mark, Jenkins's sermon on the dry bones is interrupted by a woman (apparently white) who accuses him of murder. Hickman may have made mistakes in raising Bliss, but he is nothing like Jenkins; he is a man of great integrity and morality. The connection is that Hickman's sermon is interrupted by a white woman (claiming to be Bliss's mother) [Ellison 2010: 338].

I would like to suggest one more possible source: Louis Armstrong. This paragraph is purely speculative. In 1958, as Ellison was working on his second novel in earnest, Armstrong recorded "Ezekiel Saw De Wheel," which appears on his album *Louis and the Good Book*. Ellison surely did not need Armstrong's rendition of the old spiritual to teach him anything about Ezekiel. But Armstrong's singing of spirituals – difficult to imagine in the 1920s or at any time before the 1950s – is analogous (although it was a one-off album and not a career shift) to Hickman transition from the jazz musician's world to the pulpit. Armstrong's engagement with the spirituals

in *Louis and the Good Book* is something like the non-religious Ellison's engagement with African American religious traditions – not necessarily for supernatural reasons, but for historical, cultural, formal, artistic, and anthropological reasons, plus out of respect for all of the above. Ellison may have imagined that the shadow of Armstrong, or the sign of Armstrong, or the spirit of Armstrong, could thus hover over both of his novels, through “What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue” in *Invisible Man* and “Ezekiel Saw De Wheel” in the second novel. (Ezekiel, as noted above, does not actually appear in the sermon.)

In any case, it is the exploration of the vast and complex African American aural experience and a related origin myth of establishing a framework for subjectivity and possibility under an oppressive system that appears to be a goal of Hickman's Juneteenth sermon, which appears to be constructed upon a trope derived in all likelihood from the opening chapter of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Ellison's sources for Hickman's sermon are probably manifold and some are undoubtedly lost to history. As described above, it appears that Johnson, Hurston, Joyce, Armstrong, and Micheaux may have helped his creative process along and that Franklin may have bolstered his resolve. Following Michael Germana, it seems that Hickman's sermon contains Bergsonian ideas as well (and thus the sermon's intersection with concepts and concerns of Deleuze and Guattari makes a certain amount of sense). But Hickman's sermon appears scaffolded by the Johnson-Joyce-Hurston nexus, with Hurston's formulation for the emergence of facial features through sound providing the mechanism for writing a sermon on the Valley of Dry Bones without Ezekiel as a character.

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