

# Pragmatic Strategies of Resistance: Ralph Ellison's Radical Second Act

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**Abstract:** This article argues that Ralph Ellison in *Three Days Before the Shooting...* radicalizes John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy. To that end, the character arc of the black jazzman LeeWillie Minifees, who sets his expensive Cadillac aflame in the public sphere, discloses a dormant revolutionary zeal in Ellison's political imagination. The two narrative spaces Minifees occupies—chapters four and fifteen—articulate a scathing critique of late capitalism and its attendant effect on US democracy. This article therefore posits that Minifees's Cadillac-burning dissent constitutes a mode of creative democratic experimentation that is typical of the Deweyan pragmatic tradition, except that the jazzman's actions suggest that the unmaking of the extant material conditions of existence is a precondition for African American subjects' acquisition of proper political agency. In light of the analysis conducted herein, this article concludes that Minifees's character arc should occasion a reassessment of Ellison's textual politics, which are too often reduced to the thesis that black and white US citizens cannot escape their shared histories.

In 2010, a voluminous, edited manuscript of Ralph Ellison's much anticipated follow-up to *Invisible Man* (1952) was posthumously published as *Three Days Before the Shooting...*<sup>1</sup> Ellison's unfinished second fiction work provides valuable intellectual context for important twentieth-century moments of social irruption and political transformation and it does so while challenging both the boundaries and political implications of the novel form.

Ellison's incomplete manuscript attempts to formulate a grand thesis about the symbolic significance of African Americans to the US nation-state. The output of scholarship concerned with *Three Days* reflects this objective.<sup>2</sup> But scholarship on

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1 The typescript of Book I referenced herein was finalized in 1972.

2 Part of LeeWillie Minifees's character arc was published as the excerpt "Cadillac Flambe" (1973) in *Callaloo*. To this date, only five studies explicitly analyze the character LeeWillie Minifees: Horace

Ellison, I argue, has yet to adequately explore a more radical dimension of the unfinished second novel. Indeed, an alarming paucity of critical investment in the narrative's minor characters limits the scholarship's breadth. For instance, the character LeeWillie Minifees—an African American jazzman who embodies a political vision that contests traditional conceptions of Ellison's politics—has been insufficiently examined.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, this article adds a new and different perspective to critical debates about Ellison's view of US democracy, a perspective that highlights a dormant revolutionary zeal within his political imagination.<sup>4</sup>

This article will explore how Minifees's character arc intersects with the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism. Notable first-generation pragmatists include Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. I propose that the doctrine of Deweyan pragmatism, which in large parts concerns the configuration of democracy and public life, constitutes an intellectual backdrop for Minifees's character. Ellison, I suggest, extends Dewey's philosophy into the realm of African American life, and in doing so, Ellison complicates some of Dewey's foundational philosophical claims. On that score, we can read Minifees's character arc as a creative riff on the too often exclusionary logic of the US democratic project. Ellison urges readers to reconsider how late-capitalist materialism interferes with the formation of an egalitarian, democratic society. Minifees's character arc stresses that Deweyan-stylized democratic experimentation should not seek to 'reposition' the structures of US society (including late-capitalist modes of production and consumption), but rather 'unmake' these structures entirely, which would allow the

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Porter, *Jazz Country: Ralph Ellison in America* (2001); Paul Gilroy, *Darker Than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (2010); Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (2012); Christa Buschendorf and Astrid Franke, "The Implied Sociology and Politics of Literary Texts: Using the Tools of Relational Sociology in American Studies" (2014); and, Nathaniel Mills, "Playing the Dozens and Consuming the Cadillac: Ralph Ellison and Civil Rights Politics" (2015).

3 Part of LeeWillie Minifees's character arc was published as the excerpt "Cadillac Flambe" (1973) in *Callaloo*. To this date, only five studies explicitly analyze the character LeeWillie Minifees: Horace Porter, *Jazz Country: Ralph Ellison in America* (2001); Paul Gilroy, *Darker Than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (2010); Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (2012); Christa Buschendorf and Astrid Franke, "The Implied Sociology and Politics of Literary Texts: Using the Tools of Relational Sociology in American Studies" (2014); and, Nathaniel Mills, "Playing the Dozens and Consuming the Cadillac: Ralph Ellison and Civil Rights Politics" (2015).

4 In his book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003), black studies scholar and poet Fred Moten similarly identifies a radical strain in the prologue of *Invisible Man*. As the title of his book suggests, however, Moten places Ellison within the black radical tradition, while I position Ellison in extension of John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy. For more, see pp. 63-84 in Moten.

subjects who occupy the underside of US society to imagine the world anew in terms other than those of the dominant social group.<sup>5</sup>

Section one outlines central concepts from Dewey's philosophy. This section also connects Deweyan pragmatism with its potential political uses for African American subjects. To that end, I stage a dialogue between Dewey and the contemporary pragmatist philosopher Eddie Glaude in order to translate Dewey's intellectual enterprise into the realm of African American political life. Section two offers a brief summary of LeeWillie Minifees's character arc, after which I conduct an analysis of Ellison's critical depiction of late-capitalist materialism. In this section, I also establish links between Deweyan pragmatism and Ellison's portrayal of Minifees's political dissent. Finally, section three merges the findings from section two with a critical discussion of the intersections of white supremacy, late capitalist materialism, and US democracy, including an elaborate analysis of how the system of representation Ellison deploys in Minifees's character arc reflects a radical, revolutionary, and communal strain in the author's political imagination.<sup>6</sup>

### 1. DEWEY, GLAUDE, AND THE SHORTCOMINGS OF US DEMOCRACY

In John Dewey's terms, 'democracy' is not a fixed value, nor is it even a system of governance. Rather, democracy denotes an ongoing process wherein the egalitarian struggle for equal social and political participation is undertaken. According to literary critic and cultural historian Louis Menand, Dewey sought to promote "in every area of life, including industrial life, democracy, which he interpreted as the practice of 'associated living'—cooperation with others on a basis of tolerance and equality" (373). In his view, democracy is a structural impossibility in the absence of individual efforts to change the social practices that organize the sociopolitical

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5 In this article, the term 'late capitalism' designates a system of production that enables the over-saturation of consumer goods in everyday life. By distinguishing between 'capitalism' (in the traditional Marxian sense) and 'late capitalism,' I adopt Fredric Jameson's rationale from *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991): "What 'late' generally conveys is [...] the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because more thoroughgoing and all-pervasive" (xxi). Ellison, I posit, critiques in LeeWillie Minifees's character arc the "thoroughgoing and all-pervasive" dimensions of late capitalism, especially the ways in which material consumption inhibits the realization of an egalitarian social order.

6 I adopt Eddie Glaude's definition of white supremacy, which he takes to be a structural condition, "a set of practices informed by the fundamental belief that white people are valued more than others" ("James Baldwin and Black Lives Matter" 363).

order. Moreover, Dewey's philosophical doctrine suggests that a democratic social formation takes the individual to be a "function" of the total political body (Dewey, "Ethics" 205). To vote in representative democratic systems is not simply a mechanic expression of political participation but rather "a manifestation of some tendency of the social organism through a member of that organism" ("Ethics" 189). The norms and values of the polity are, in other words, determined and expressed at the level of the individual.

In "Creative Democracy" (1939), Dewey repeats this sentiment. "Instead of thinking of our own dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions," he writes, "we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions, projections and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes" ("Creative" 226). Proper democracy materializes in individual practices, not theoretical abstractions nor institutionalized policies. The democratic process is 'always' in the stage of becoming. In that spirit, Dewey concludes his essay with idealistic fervor, positing that "the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute" ("Creative" 230).

In its ideal mode, then, democracy manifests in effective action, a process that allows for the continuous reconfiguration of the structures that undergird US society. Scholar of pragmatism Giles Gunn has noted that such democratic impulses, which are part and parcel of a vibrant political community, promise to enrich the political experiences of all who partake in the community's formation, especially when these democratic impulses are framed by "forms of creativity and critical discourse" (79). Eddie Glaude, who self-identifies as a "Deweyan pragmatist," (*Shade of Blue* 5) has nonetheless commented that if "pragmatism is native to American soil,"<sup>(2)</sup> then it "carries with it all the possibilities and limitations that have defined our [American] fragile experiment in democracy" (2). As Glaude points out, the subjects who occupy society's margins define the boundaries of the US democratic experiment. In this context, the social practices that inform ordinary people's day-to-day routines—the spaces we inhabit along with the ways we include or exclude other people in our personal lives—crystallize as "projections and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes" (Dewey, "Creative" 226). In order to transform the political status quo, this line of argumentation implies that the individual subject must be willing to critically and creatively examine and thereafter modify her habits.

“Habits” is a keyword in Deweyan pragmatism. Dewey views the individual subject’s behavior as systematically organized by a set of experientially learned responses, the primary function of which is to automatize how we individually address both quotidian and unexpected events in our daily lives. But, for Dewey, “habit” is an unfixed, unstable category. The formation of habits is an ongoing endeavor, and “an individual” can undergo “a modification through an experience, which modification forms a predisposition to easier and more effective action in a like direction in the future” (“Theories” 212). In Deweyan pragmatism, lived experiences constitute a rich source for cultivating and refining one’s own relationship with the material world; Dewey even endows this mode of knowledge production with the capacity to transform the individual subject’s social and political outlook.

However, the vitality of Dewey’s philosophy will be undercut if one’s engagement with the past is perfunctory or superficial. On that account, it is crucial to act shrewdly and with care, because a “habit apart from knowledge does not make allowance for change of conditions, for novelty” (“Theories” 212). Phrased more succinctly, habits form a backdrop for life choices, and it is not only the formation of habits but also their re-formation that influences how an experience can lead to “easier and more effective action” (212) in the future. The democratic thrust of habit (re-)formation should thus be clear: It requires an intelligent response from the individual subject to the particular circumstances that engulf her life. To that end, past experiences must govern the subject’s life choices if these experiences are to affect how she navigates and, in turn, influences social, cultural, and political landscapes. “While the content of knowledge,” in Dewey’s formulation, “is what has happened, what is taken as finished and hence settled and sure, the reference of knowledge is future or prospective. For knowledge furnishes the means of understanding or giving meaning to what is still going on and what is to be done” (214). As a matter of course, we are bound to reproduce regressive habits if we do not engage our lived experiences creatively and intelligently. Only by way of intelligent action—which “includes deliberate choice,” that is, agency—can we institute a more egalitarian future (212).

Dewey proposed that a modern democratic society only could be improved when the social and political practices of its participants are grounded in the creative application of experiential knowledge. Thus, lived experiences are inseparable from habit formation; and, given that habits are ultimately expressed in actions, it is

important to identify how the individual subject orients herself in the world of experience. To that end, Dewey distinguishes between what he calls ‘cognitive experiences’ and ‘cognized experiences.’ The term “cognitive experience” describes an experience that transpires immediately without any deep or significant reflection on the part of the individual subject (“Postulate” 396). In contrast, the concept of “cognized experiences” charts a series of experiences in retrospect, which enables the actor to “transform” or “reorganize” the meaning of those experiences so they can be oriented towards meaningful prospective action (396). As a consequence, Deweyan pragmatism has serious political ramifications. Subjects who have been excluded from the “fragile experiment in democracy” (Glaude, *Shade of Blue* 2)—African Americans, in the present context—can, within this philosophical framework, develop future-oriented strategies of sociopolitical participation that subvert the authority of the political powers that be.

These strategies demand an imaginative leap by the African American subject, Glaude observes, and he asserts that African American slaves achieved a unique type of personal freedom when they imagined themselves “in terms that are not those of the slave master” (*Uncommon* 9). In light of the historical continuity of racial oppression, Glaude’s commentary on the possibility of self-creation during slavery informs how African Americans have carved out spaces, or gaps, that are theirs to define within an oppressive sociopolitical structure in antebellum and postbellum United States alike. For even though African American subject positions have evolved over time and transcended the relation of legalized enslavement, “the afterlife of slavery,” to borrow Saidiya Hartman’s term, always already structures African Americans as second-class citizens (*Mother* 6).<sup>7</sup>

Similar to Glaude’s observation that the imagination can be a powerful resource for self-making, Dewey posited: “The connection between imagination and the harmonizing of the self is closer than is usually thought,” and “the *whole* self” is indeed “an ideal, an imaginative projection” (*Common Faith* 17). A subject’s life unfolds in accordance with certain ‘known’ circumstances or facts, but these only partially reveal the world of experience. Indeed, it is at any given time impossible to

7 Saidiya Hartman defines the afterlife of slavery as: “Slavery had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (*Mother* 6).

actively perceive more than a small fragment of the social world. At the level of the imagination, however, vast spaces of possibilities emerge and African Americans have in these novel spaces imagined ideal ends, or particular purposes, that are independent from the fixed ascriptions of subjectivity that otherwise limit their prospects of political agency.

As Glaude would have it, the African American subject's imaginative engagement with her lived experiences elicits a mode in which she can envision alternative futures that deviate from the status quo. This "new vision," Dewey might add, "does not arise out of nothing, but emerges through seeing, in terms of possibilities, that is, of imagination, old things in new relations serving a new end which the new end aids in creating" (*Common Faith* 46). Undoubtedly, such a commitment to an open-ended, future-oriented life world can result in the violent subjection of the dissenting subject and her political ideas. But Glaude notes that the imaginative disengagement from the structures of domination already in place incites social change as well. He uses the term "meliorism" to describe "the belief that our circumstances at a given moment, be they comparatively good or bad, can be improved (*Shade of Blue* 31). Glaude further states that "[s]uch a view commands intelligent action in the sense that it encourages us to inquire into the amelioration of problems, individual and social, and the obstructions to their resolution" (31). As Glaude explains, meliorism calls for categorically open-ended and intelligent action; therefore, the African American subject must be prepared for potentially fatal consequences when embracing the possibility of improvement.

In his short essay "I Believe" (1939), Dewey identifies the impact that subjects who deviate from the social, cultural, and political norms can have on large-scale social change. Dewey argues that "those who can escape the hypnotic influence exercised by the immediate contemporary scene are aware that movements going on *in the interstices of the existing order* are those which will in fact shape the future [emphasis added]" (271). Creative and intelligent utilization of the unaccounted for gaps in the sociopolitical structure may thus gradually transform the US social formation, even as African Americans embrace the melioristic view that the "open-ended character of experience does not offer clear pathways to achieve desired ends" (Glaude, *Uncommon* 48). Rather than constituting a preexisting material structure that ensures the rights and liberties of all citizens, Dewey holds that democratic societies constantly reconfigure their outer boundaries to produce a more inclusive social formation.

As highlighted above, the democratic process is, in Dewey's view, an experimental enterprise. Although he admits, "democracy is a complex affair," Dewey's ideas still equip the individual subject with the capacity to impact the sociopolitical structure ("The Public" 287). According to Dewey, political communities, whether progressive or regressive, always follow the will and actions of individuals, not *a priori* notions of 'Truth' or other abstract philosophical principles.<sup>8</sup> Rather, all subjects are individually responsible for the state of US democracy, because habits can always be changed to reflect a greater degree of empathy and inclusion. With recourse to creative experimentation and a liberated imagination, Dewey in fact maintains that each subject always already possesses the tools necessary to re-form her habits and thus the larger sociopolitical world.

## 2. "NOW IT'S A QUESTION OF WHETHER YOU CAN AFFORD IT IN TERMS OTHER THAN MONEY"

In accordance with the doctrine of Deweyan pragmatism, creative democratic experimentation is also an article of faith for Ralph Ellison. Michael Magee speculates that "there are good reasons to consider Ellison the preeminent African American pragmatist" (12). Writing from the perspective of black America, however, Ellison is more suspicious of the exclusionary logic of the US democratic experiment than Dewey. To that point, the unfinished *Three Days Before the Shooting...* employs a system of representation that points toward Ellison's own creative riff on the material circumstances of African American life. Ellison proposes a vision of democratic experimentation that both challenges and expands upon the underlying themes of Dewey's philosophy.

The manuscript of Ellison's unfinished second work is an incomplete, fragmented text. Select excerpts from the "novel-in-progress" were published in various magazines and literary journals during the course of its composition, but the full scope of Ellison's project was not revealed to the reading public until the 2010 publication of *Three Days*.<sup>9</sup> Conceptualized as a multifocal narrative, the manuscript has three important point of view-characters: Bliss/Sunraider, a boy preacher (named Bliss) of racially ambiguous heritage who eventually, in the style of

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8 For an overview of the complex and complicated history of political philosophies concerned with "democracy," see Jeffrey Alexander, *The Civil Sphere* (2006).

9 The phrase "novel-in-progress" is Ellison's own. It stems from a prefatory note to the excerpt "Night-Talk" (1969).

a conman, transforms himself into the race-baiting New England Senator Adam Sunraider; Bliss's African American surrogate father, reverend Alonzo Z. Hickman; and the white journalist Welborn McIntyre, a politically liberal New Yorker who has relocated to Washington, DC to report on the affairs of the US Congress.

*Three Days* derives its dramatic tension from its opening scene wherein the attempted assassination of Sunraider in the US Congress connects an array of temporally displaced narrative tangents. The character arc of the flamboyant African American jazzman LeeWillie Minifees predates this event. Chronicled by McIntyre, the two narrative spaces Minifees occupies—chapters four and fifteen in Book I—position the jazzman over and against the white reporter and the Senator. In chapter four, McIntyre finds himself strolling past Sunraider's Washington, DC estate when a white Cadillac, operated by Minifees, drives onto the Senator's front lawn. Sunraider is hosting a barbecue for an esteemed crowd of white guests, and McIntyre initially suspects that the opportunistic Senator has orchestrated the bizarre episode unfolding in front of his mansion. But the white reporter eventually realizes that this is the scene of Minifees's public dissent. Having captured the attention of the Senator's party and pedestrian onlookers (such as McIntyre) alike, the jazzman proceeds to harangue the bigoted Sunraider while lighting his luxurious automobile aflame. This ostensibly odd performance of incivility, Minifees explains, was prompted by one of the Senator's orations in Congress during which he 'joked' that Cadillacs should be renamed "Coon Cage Eight [...]" because it has now become such a common sight to see eight or more of our darker brethren crowded together enjoying its [the Cadillac's] power, its beauty, its neopagan comfort, while weaving recklessly through the streets of our great cities and along our superhighways" (Ellison, *Three Days* 47). At the end of the chapter, following Minifees's articulation and demonstration of his dissatisfaction with Sunraider's (and America's) racial politics, the jazzman is forcefully subdued by "a veritable football squad of asbestos-garbed policemen" and "lashed into a straitjacket," after which he is committed to a mental ward (46).

In chapter fifteen, in the wake of the attempted assassination of Sunraider in Congress, McIntyre chances upon Minifees's location in an unnamed hospital. Assisted by a "white-suited attendant" named Charleston, McIntyre gains access to the jazzman-turned-arsonist's isolation cell (Ellison, *Three Days* 204). Surmising that the Cadillac-burning incident and the attempt on Sunraider's life are somehow interrelated, the white reporter interviews Minifees in order to uncover new

evidence and establish such connections. Rather than proving causality between the two events, however, the interview allows Minifees to articulate the political sensibilities that underwrote his dissenting performance on Sunraider's front lawn in greater detail. In spite of McIntyre's self-professed professionalism, Minifees manages to unnerve the liberal journalist, who ultimately is "relieved" to conclude his investigation of the jazzman's eccentric politics (230). "I didn't know how to continue the interview," McIntyre admits to himself, "I wasn't prepared for it and wouldn't have been even if I hadn't been exhausted by all of the wild events which had exploded since he [Minifees] burned his Cadillac" (229).

The white reporter's inadequate understanding of the political significance of Minifees's behavior is revealing. Unable to detect the jazzman's subtle politics, McIntyre reads the jazzman's transgression of social and cultural norms as a "heretic act" (Buschendorf and Franke 87). At the level of allegory, Minifees literally burns to the ground an icon of modernity, technological progress, and, as such, the capitalist value hierarchy. His visible occupation of the public sphere diminishes the ideological power of white supremacy, and McIntyre resolutely notes that the "spirit" conjured from the burning "white machine" has "no place here [in Washington, DC]" (Ellison, *Three Days* 39-40). In this brief moment of sociopolitical disruption, Minifees's actions supersede the ideological matrix comprised of white supremacy and late capitalist materialism.

On the surface, the equation between luxury car ownership and the individual subject's purchasing power stresses the free market's democratic character. Scholar of literature and sociology Christa Buschendorf rightly notes that "the luxurious car is not just an expensive consumer item but it serves as an object of symbolic power" (Buschendorf and Franke 83).<sup>10</sup> The destruction of the "expensive consumer item" thus signifies the jazzman's break with a social order that cannot be separated from material consumption. As an iconoclast, he riffs on the symbolic logic of market goods, thereby attributing new political meaning and value to high-priced commodities. In Dewey's terms, Minifees changes his (consumption) habits, which in turn effectuates his rejection of the extant conditions of existence.

Throughout Minifees's character arc, Ellison suggests that economic and material growth cannot be likened to social and political progress. However

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<sup>10</sup> In an article co-authored with Astrid Franke, Buschendorf's subchapter on LeeWillie Minifees analyzes how humor allows the symbolically violated subject to "see beyond the boundaries erected" by Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence (90).

exuberant the material conditions of African American life may be, Sunraider's racist tirade ultimately accentuates the fantastical character of this capitalist fiction. Minifees's symbolic sabotage of the logic of late capitalism critiques the idea that an unregulated market is a panacea for all fixed distinctions in the social landscape, but the philosophical insight manifest in the jazzman's character suggests more than US society's submission to twentieth-century materialism. Upon hearing a radio transmission of Sunraider's diatribe in Congress, Minifees is overcome with frustration: "I said to myself, LeeWillie, what on earth is this man *talking* about? Here you been thinking you had it *made*. You been thinking you were as free as a bird. [...] And now here comes this Senator putting you in a cage!" (Ellison, *Three Days* 42). Minifees comes to realize that subjects without access to the sources from whence US society derives its form and character have little, if any, agency with which they can influence its structural arrangement in the future.

In *Darker Than Blue* (2010), social theorist Paul Gilroy pinpoints the complex forces that have historically organized the African American body politic in relation to material consumption. "African Americans," Gilroy contends, "were being interpellated as consumers long before they acquired citizenship rights" (9). African Americans' political consciousness was consequently "reshaped by patterns of interaction in which racialised subjects discovered themselves and their agency through their social life as consumers rather than as citizens" (11). In a brief but sharp analysis of Minifees's dissenting political act, Gilroy further argues that Ellison understood that the drawbacks of consumer capitalism included restrictions on the dominated subject's political autonomy because cultural artifacts were transformed into substitutes for African Americans' "long-promised liberty" (18).

In light of Gilroy's commentary, Minifees's political dissent suggests that the ideology of white supremacy more often than not trumps the political differences that, say, Sunraider and McIntyre have. Moreover, conspicuous consumption habits always already inscribe the consumer in a racially classified social order. Mindful of how luxurious consumer items also function as instruments of domination, Minifees therefore performs the pragmatic idea that effective social change demands intelligent action from the African American subject. The jazzman's choice to burn his Cadillac is deliberate, and he is fully aware of the potentially fatal consequences of this political stance.

Ellison links Minifees's pragmatic frame of mind to the unmaking of the material conditions of African American life. When Minifees renounces his

luxurious Cadillac, he conceptualizes an alternative social world wherein the relations of power that minimize the African American subject's political agency cannot be impressed on the material environment. In a dream-like passage that resists paraphrase, Minifees attains a clear sense of the restrictions his loyalty to late capitalist material culture has placed upon him. He recounts driving past an elderly African American man who walked "behind a plow hitched to an old, white-muzzled Missouri mule" (Ellison, *Three Days* 42):

And when that old man looked up and saw me, he waved. And I looked back through the mirror as I shot past him, and I could see him open his mouth and say something like, 'Go on, fool!' Then him and that mule was gone even from the mirror, and I was rolling on.' 'And then, ladies and gentlemen, in a twinkling of an eye it struck me. A voice said to me, '*LeeWillie, that old man is right: You are a fool. And that doggone Senator Sunraider is right; LeeWillie, you are a fool in a coon cage!*' 'I tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that old man and his mule both were talking to me. I said, '*What do you mean about his being right?*' And they said, '*LeeWillie, look who he is,*' and I said, '*I know who he is,*' and they said, '*Well, LeeWillie, if a man like that, in the position he's in, can think the way he does, then LeeWillie, you have GOT to be wrong!*' 'So I said, '*Thinking like that is why you've still got that mule in your lap.*' I said, '*I worked hard to get the money to buy this Caddie,*' and he said, '*Money? LeeWillie, can't you see that it ain't no longer a matter of money? Can't you see it's done gone way past the question of money? Now it's a question of whether you can afford it in terms other than money.*' (Ellison, *Three Days* 42-43)

Zooming past the old man, Minifees initially disregards his senior companion. Yet "the old man and his mule" come to occupy the jazzman's consciousness, recalibrating his political spirit in the process. On the level of aesthetics, the violent contrast between the luxurious automobile and the antiquated farming implement indicates a dialectical relationship that organizes not only Minifees's conception of late capitalist materialism, but also how this materialism pins African American subjects to the margins of US political life. A certain history of technology brackets Minifees's corporality in this moment, which obscures the myth that material wealth and free market capitalism flattens the social hierarchy; and the tension between these opposing historical forces begets an insight about the essential characteristics of US society. To Minifees, the Cadillac *was* a placeholder for his

social station, but the specter of “the old man and his mule” recasts the luxurious automobile as a political sedative.

Ellison's political imagination is marked by an acute awareness of the political and juridical forces that, on the one hand, limit the opportunities of African Americans, and on the other, disguise these limitations behind the veneer of ‘social progress,’ ‘material wealth,’ and other related fictions. In accordance with Dewey's concept of “cognized experiences,” for instance, Minifees' sermon-like oration on Sunraider's front lawn emphasizes how the jazzman ‘transforms’ his lived experience of structural oppression into a taproot for political dissent. With recourse to the US Constitution, though with few expectations that its ideals will be enacted, Minifees even discloses that he never stopped contemplating “the difference between what it [the constitution] *is* and what it's *supposed* to be” (Ellison, *Three Days* 41). Throughout the jazzman's character arc, Ellison complicates Dewey's romantic assumption that “the governors and the governed” in a democratic society “are not two classes, but two aspects of the same fact—the fact of the possession by society of a unified and articulate will” (Dewey, “Ethics” 194). Ellison suggests that Minifees, as a black man, understands the marginalizing imperative of the US democratic project in ways that white subjects (à la Dewey) cannot; and the ephemeral nature of Minifees's dissenting performance, as well as the melioristic outlook it entails, allows the jazzman to temporarily uproot and transform the African American social experience by imagining himself apart from his ascribed subject position on society's margins. As the next section will demonstrate, however, this mode of self-making is entwined with communal and far more revolutionary forces.

### 3. “IT LOOKS LIKE I HIT A RIFF AND NOW ALL HELL HAS BROKE LOOSE”

Chapters four and fifteen in *Three Days* suggest that a radical strain exists in Ellison's political imagination. Minifees's character arc resonates on an aesthetic register wherein democratic experimentation is converted into a mode of unmaking the structural condition of marginalization that pin African Americans to the underside of US political life. Minifees's odd but politically vital behavior thus specifies a series of action-driven pragmatic strategies of resistance that underscore his commitment to a more radical conceptualization of democratic experimentation. Accordingly, the jazzman's dissenting political practice should be

understood as an effort to imagine the world anew in terms that are not those of the dominant social group.

Minifees's character arc also points toward the political reality that African Americans are inadequately represented in US political life, including the public spaces in which political adversaries can engage in democratic conversation. As *Three Days* details, ideological authorities police such public spaces. Cornel West has argued that white supremacy is based "first and foremost on the degradation of black bodies in order to control them" (85). The fantasy of a white democratic nation-state is an implicit corollary to West's argument. Thus whiteness is a precondition for being constructed as a modern democratic subject with civic voice within a public sphere.<sup>11</sup> That is, the democratic tradition of public conversation, which grounds the configuration of US democracy, is always already contaminated by racialized conceptions of national belonging.

From this perspective, Sunraider's lexical riff on Cadillacs—rebranding them "Coon Cage Eight"—constitutes a deliberate attempt to devalue African Americans, as well as their material conditions, which in turn reinforces the imagined ideal of an exclusively white political community. Although Ellison's philosophical position is informed by pragmatism, he complicates Dewey's claim that any given society is organized by "a manifestation of some tendency of the social organism through a member of that organism" ("Ethics" 189). Ellison proposes that this democratic ideal only rings true if we eliminate the categories—whether racial, ethnic, or economic—that comprise US society in the first place. On that account, *Three Days* aestheticizes the shortcomings of liberal democratic societies. Contained within the fabric of Ellison's unfinished second act is a radical vision of an alternative sociopolitical constellation that expels the relations of power that undergird "the afterlife of slavery."

Minifees's Cadillac-burning act is not merely an act of individual dissent, nor is its emancipatory potential limited to the jazzman himself. It is, rather, an attempted initiation of a political consciousness that would allow African Americans to break free from their ascribed subject positions on the margins of US society—break free, that is, from the forces that would degrade their material conditions and control their bodies. While conversing in his isolation cell with Welborn McIntyre, Minifees rationalizes that the destruction of his beloved

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<sup>11</sup> Ralph Ellison's powerful essay about the fantasy of a United States purged of African Americans entitled "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks" (1970) supports this interpretation.

automobile was a prerequisite for upending the US political system. As the jazzman tells it, Sunraider's bigoted tirade in Congress intimated that luxurious consumer items—icons of late capitalist materialism—reinscribe the consuming subject in a racially classified social order. For that reason, Minifees “knew that he [Sunraider] couldn't afford to have folks like me giving up all the things Cadillacs have come to stand for. And, man, if enough of us give them up, it will hurt Sunraider a hell of a lot worse than a bullet” (Ellison, *Three Days* 227). Ellison's reservations about the political effects of late capitalism have a reflexive textual presence in this passage. Minifees articulates a vision of communal destitution, a scenario in which poor people in unison renounce the material conditions of existence that permeate US society. To McIntyre's assumption that the Cadillac was “really quite important” to Minifees, a product of “aesthetic as well as utilitarian value,” the jazzman therefore replies: “Yes, you're right. [...] It was all of that, but now it's gone and I'm free” (Ellison, *Three Days* 229).

Following Dewey and Glaude, imagination can pry open vast, unlimited spaces in which the material realities of the social world can be destabilized (and influenced) by visions of alternative futures. By critically engaging the experiential backdrop that produced the Cadillac as a materially and politically attractive object, Minifees frees his imagination from white supremacy's vice-like grip, and he can in turn conceptualize an act of nonconformity to be an act of emancipation.

McIntyre, who ostensibly sympathizes with African Americans' sociopolitical struggles, is nonetheless lodged too comfortably in the nexus of racialized privilege and journalistic agency to properly deduce the revolutionary thrust of Minifees's actions.<sup>12</sup> Literary critic Horace Porter remarks that the white reporter “views himself as the most objective of journalists, but [...] his blind spots are as revelatory as his insights” (96). These “blind spots” encumber McIntyre's understanding of the political logic of Minifees's actions, which fundamentally concerns the unmaking of the materials that make up late capitalist US society. On that score, McIntyre unsuccessfully labors to displace his own devotion to the extant conditions of existence and as a result he describes Minifees's dissenting act as the deed of a deviant, wayward iconoclast who had been “taken over by the lucidity of madness”

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12 Tavia Nyong'o has instructively commented that the “sympathizer” subject position is morally self-serving in that “sympathetic identification with the plight of subaltern populations automatically recuses the sympathizer from accounting for the historical and structural conditions that produce the unequal, hierarchical arrangements that both occasion and outcast their sympathy” (139).

(Ellison, *Three Days* 229).<sup>13</sup> However, the jazzman's deviance from accepted social and political norms is not conditioned by a negative relation with the status quo, but instead by his experiential knowledge which, in that moment, allows him to infuse his past experiences with new meaning and value. Indeed, Minifees undercuts the structures of domination inherent to white supremacy as he imagines himself in terms that evade his fixed subject position on the periphery of US society. His freedom asserting act upends the arrangement of the sociopolitical structure, and it brings into the open the possibility of a different configuration of the social sphere.

Ellison's political imagination is, by way of Minifees's narrative arc, infused with pragmatic impulses that resemble Deweyan pragmatism. But Ellison also radicalizes Dewey's insight, turning the rationale of democratic experimentation on its head as a way to expose the mechanisms that produce social inequality and political exclusion. In this regard, Ellison anticipates Glaude's call to make American pragmatism "sing the blues" (*Shade of Blue* 8). In order to engender political change, Minifees's character arc implies, African Americans must articulate from within the sociopolitical structure's gaps intelligent and creative responses to environments wholly oriented against them. Moreover, these responses must accord with the melioristic view that social transformation and improved political agency are far from guaranteed. Minifees's Cadillac-burning act, as well as his subsequent political commentary, bespeaks the burden with which African Americans are tasked while also exemplifying how this burden may be borne. Well aware that agents of the State will violently subdue him, Minifees nevertheless proceeds with his dissenting act on Sunraider's front lawn. He ultimately untangles a web of oppressive experiences and reorients his experiential knowledge towards prospective social and political action, including the formation of a revolutionary political imagination that rejects late capitalist materialism. Alert to the notion that meaningful experiences have a measurable effect in the world of experience, the jazzman finally rejoices in the knowledge that his public renunciation of luxurious consumer items (and the ideological forces inscribed on them) roused a series of subsequent political events, among them the attempted assassination of Sunraider:

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13 Queer and gender theorists have in recent years inverted the Foucauldian idea that institutionalized discourses of deviance produce—and institutionalize—subjects with little or no agency. For a powerful account of this theoretical paradigm, see Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019). My analysis follows these ideas, ultimately suggesting that deviance, waywardness, and non-conformity are modes in which the subject acquires a particular form of agency.

"Damn, it looks like I hit a riff and now all hell has broke loose" (Ellison, *Three Days* 221).

## CONCLUSION

The contention in this article is that LeeWillie Minifees's character arc should occasion a reassessment of Ralph Ellison's textual politics. The novel form has the power to bring about a novelist's moral and sociopolitical sensibilities; and the language deployed by the novelist is therefore not simply a subset to her politics. On the contrary, her politics crystallize in the work of fiction, and language effectively becomes her 'political fingerprint.' In this light, the system of representation Ellison employs in *Three Days Before the Shooting...* points toward the complexity of his political imagination.

To a significant degree, John Dewey's philosophy resonates with Ellison's own conception of US democracy; however, Ellison also re-conceptualizes the principal tenets of Deweyan pragmatism—habit re-formation, intelligent action, and an imaginative engagement with the past—to make them account for African Americans. On that score, Minifees's mode of dissent entails both a rejection of the extant conditions of existence and a vision of an alternative future wherein the material circumstances of racial oppression have been eradicated. In line with Dewey's call for, on the one hand, creative and intelligent action, and on the other, a recalibration of the imagination as a site of political possibility and self- and community-making, Ellison dramatizes the flamboyant jazzman's transition from a faithful servant of the late capitalist social order to a critic of materialism and its attendant effect on the US democratic project.

As a thought for further research, scholars might consider that Minifees's character arc runs against the grain of Ellison's primary thesis famously articulated in *Invisible Man's* epilogue: that black and white Americans cannot escape their shared histories. Whereas the nameless protagonist in *Invisible Man* ultimately philosophizes that he, "on the lower frequencies," speaks "for you," the jazzman's social criticism registers on a different political scale (Ellison, *Invisible* 581). Indeed, Welborn McIntyre reflects that Minifees's public performance of dissent "had happened, but then a blast of laughter had restored us automatically to our chosen frequency" (Ellison, *Three Days* 48). Minifees's character arc therefore proposes that

African Americans occupy altogether different wavelengths than the custodians of the white political community.

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