On the Conflict of Memories between Father and Son in *Juneteenth*

**Xinxin JIANG and Zhan YE**

*College of Foreign Languages, Xiangtan University, China*

Ralph Ellison, one of the most talented novelists in American literature, is best known for his first novel, *Invisible Man*. It won him the National Book Award in 1953 and established him as one of the most outstanding writers. In the following forty years, he exerted great efforts to surpass the achievement of the first novel and worked very hard to create the “multifarious, multifaceted, multifocussed, multivoiced, multitoned” novel, *Juneteenth* (Kakutani). However, he never finished it during his lifetime. His literary executor John F. Callahan edited a complete chronological story, *Juneteenth*, from more than two thousand manuscripts and prints. In America’s critical field, it is well recognized that *Juneteenth* is America’s *Ulysses*. Some scholars and researchers make studies on *Juneteenth*, but most studies put emphasis on its unfinished nature or its writing style. Little attention is paid to the theme of memory in it.

The theme of memory is so important that it reveals the essence of memory,
whose stuff is provided by culture. The conflict of memory is caused by the struggle for the authority. Both sides want to gain the power of utterance. This battle takes place in every level of the society. In *Juneteenth*, there are three main battle fields, namely, family, black community, and ethnic groups.

I. The Conflict of Memory between Father and Son in Family

The memory in the family is the core of collective memory. It includes family history, important events in the family and some trivial things in ordinary family life. It is also formed when family members communicate with other and exchange their memories. The most typical form of memory in the family is individual memory. As a result, the conflict of memory in the family performs in the way of one family member’s individual memory against another one’s. In *Juneteenth*, the conflict of memory mainly demonstrates itself by the conflict between Hickman and Bliss’s individual memories.

Hickman and Bliss have different understanding towards their past experience in the family. Their divergence in understanding comes from their unequal amount of information about past experience in the family. As an elder member in the family, Hickman has more memory of their family. However, he prevents Bliss from getting the same amount of memory for some reasons. For the sake of it, Bliss has limited memory of their family history.

Bliss knows there are two other family members, but he never meets them. Therefore, he has limited memory of these two persons. Although Bliss is not familiar with them, he can still learn something from their photos. Photos, as the physical objects in the family, contain some memory of family members. They serve as the device whereby the collective memory of these persons can be recalled. In the photos, these two persons release from the frame of time and remain alive in the pictures even though they are already dead. The photos keep traces of their past experience in the family. Other family members can memorize them by keeping the photos. As long as these traces are kept, their collective memory of these family members can be reproduced. However, the photos still have their limitations. A photo only keeps an image at a time. It can not convey enough information to those family members who are not familiar with them. Therefore, Bliss has to try other ways if he wants to know more things about these two persons. However, the most direct way is prevented by Hickman, who does not want to mention them. The point is that this part of family history is related to Bliss’s parentage. Bliss’s lack of
information about this family history leads to his ignorance of his parentage.

Like many other Americans, Bliss is always puzzled by his identity. Since he can remember things, he lives in the black community. His white-skinned appearance is obviously different from other black people. As he recounts his past, he remembers those days when he is always looking for his mother. He remembers the crazy white woman and the white actress in the cinema, and thinks they are his real mother. In Bliss's mind, Hickman repeatedly prevents him from finding his mother. Therefore, he begins to question the truthfulness of his past provided by Hickman, and believes that Hickman does this to separate him from his real mother. As a matter of fact, Hickman prevents Bliss from those white women because he knows the real identity of Bliss's mother. Bliss's mother is a white woman, but she leaves Bliss when he is a little baby. For Bliss, his ambiguous identity is caused by his unknown mother; but for Hickman, Bliss has to find out his father's identity rather than his mother. It is Bliss's unknown father that places Bliss on the horns of a dilemma. As considering Bliss's father's identity, Bliss's identity has two possibilities. If his real father is a black man, Bliss passes for white. If Bliss's father is a white man, Bliss is white American. The problem is that Hickman never tells it to Bliss. Hickman's silence gives rise to Bliss's anxiety, and finally makes Bliss rebel against the black community which raises him. This is an example of asymmetry of memory.

The asymmetry of memory is also shown in the activity of naming Bliss. The activity of naming a person has great impact on a person. Bliss has two different names. Hickman names him Bliss Hickman. He gives himself another name Adam Sunraider. To some extent, one's name is as important as his identity. Although it seems to be a simple symbol, it contains much more information. In a family, the symbol obtains new information when it is used to name a person. It refers to a specific person or thing, and signifies the person's identity and position in the family. When family members call a person's name, they immediately connect this name to collective memory of this person and to his relationship with other family members. The name of Bliss provides the position for Bliss in Hickman's family. Besides, Hickman chooses this name counterattack against white people's power as embodied in Bliss's mother. Moreover, this name contains Hickman's good wish for Bliss. He hopes that Bliss will have a prosperous future, as the name Bliss implies. He also believes that Bliss is the blessing given by God. Hickman wants to teach Bliss to become a man who will devote his life to getting rid of racial hate. Under the leadership of this child, black people will realize their democratic dream.
However, Hickman does not tell these things to Bliss. Bliss's ignorance of the hope and task that his name undertakes leads to his misunderstanding. Therefore, Bliss regards his original name as a restriction given by Hickman. He renames himself so as to fight against Hickman. Bliss even embraces racial hate as a means of denying his past. He utilizes the film making to deny his past and to distort the true history of America. Rather than those photos in the family which keep traces of history, these pictures are deceptive and convey false information about history. There is a good side and a bad side of everything. There is no exception to pictures. Their functions are determined by the operator. Hickman uses photos to keep family history, while Bliss uses film making to deny his past. His denial in Hickman is denial in him, too. In a certain sense, Hickman is more important than his natural parents. Hickman gives him life, raises him and teaches him skills.

In a word, Hickman provides all the material and spiritual support for Bliss's growth. Trust is the tie that binds Hickman and Bliss. They establish trust through recognition of memories. When Bliss does not believe the family history given by Hickman anymore, he abandons his family name and his position in the family. In this way, he severs all his relations with his family. This is more dangerous than his uncertainty of his identity. It is family that makes his childhood meaningful. The departure from his family deprives him from his spiritual support and turns him into an anxious, rootless, isolate and alien person. When he rejects Hickman and his family, he actually rejects his true source of power embodied in Hickman and his family. He is doomed to fall from the apex of power. His fate repeats Icarus' story, just as his second name implies.

II. The Conflict of Memory between Father and Son in Black Community

Because of the misunderstanding of Bliss's own family history, he separates his individual memory from the black community's collective memory. However, only in the framework of collective memory can Bliss understand his identity and black people. Therefore, in black community, the conflict of memory mainly manifests itself between Bliss's individual memory and the black community's collective memory.

An instance is their memory of a ritual held by Bliss. When the crazy white woman breaks the rules of the ritual, the congressmen in the black community fight against the white woman, in case she takes away Bliss. In their collective memory, they regard this event as a triumph over white people. They connect this event to
their ancestors' history and their sufferings in the society. White women often shift their responsibility of raising a child to black nanny. When the children grow up, they take them back. The first lesson that the white grown-up learned is how to reject and betray the black nanny's love. However, black nanny finds it hard to give up the children, because they “[find] that the only way they could turn over the responsibility of raising a child to another woman [is] to turn over some of the child's love and affection along with it” (Ellison, Juneteenth 160). As a result, a battle between white women and black nanny is determined to break out. When black congressmen protect Bliss from being taken away, they protect their love for this child, too. Bliss could not understand the black people's crazy actions. All he remembers is how crazy the black people are, how scared he is at the moment, and how strong his desire to escape from that turmoil. He only cares about his personal feeling. He isolates his individual memory rather than put it in the framework of collective memory. It is collective memory that gives individual memory meaning. Only when an individual puts his individual memory into the framework of collective memory, can he understand his past. As a result, Bliss could not understand this history until Hickman asks him to look back upon the past experience, to observe the past from the perspective of black people, and to understand the past from the standpoint of black people. The process of retrospect helps to put Bliss's memory into the same framework of black people. Through this process, Bliss begins to understand black people's motive and purposes.

Bliss's individual memory is also in conflict with black people's collective memory over the question of Bliss's parentage. Both Bliss and the black people in the black community know nothing about Bliss's parentage. Both sides can only make speculation and deduction by some fragments of memory. The conflict is caused by their different standpoints. Black people act with the agreement that one must always place high priority on the larger group interests instead of private interests. The black community is a big family. It preserves collective memory from which members derive the awareness of unity and sense of belonging. They develop collective selves. [1] In this way, they strengthen the foundation of the collective. As black people choose to believe Hickman, they share the same collective memory. The consistence among members in the black community helps to protect the framework of the black community. Juneteenth celebration has similar functions, as it consolidates the basis of collective history. On the contrary, Bliss only cares about his desire for motherhood. He is too young to understand what black people have
done. Their different standpoints make them consciously select the sources of memory. Both of them strengthen and magnify the advantageous sources of their memory, while reducing those disadvantageous sources of memory. They choose different sources due to different standpoints, and strengthen their standpoints by the chosen memory.

Except for their different standpoints, black people in the black community choose to believe Hickman because they know the crazy white woman's other abnormal behavior. Bliss never knows the past history of the crazy white woman before. When he hears it from the black people, he has formed a prejudice against Hickman, and cannot receive other negative information. The asymmetry is also shown on the continuity of their memory. Bliss's memory of the black community interrupts when he leaves there. Bliss has no acquaintances in the white-dominated society, where he can find no familiar environment, too. In this unfamiliar environment, he is the only person who keeps the memory of the black community. Without the help of others, Bliss can not successfully reconstruct his past. Compared with Bliss's oblivion, people in the black community have richer memory of Bliss. They not only remember Bliss's experience in the black community in the south, but also know every detail about Bliss in the north. Their continuous memory comes from their care for Bliss. Bliss is regarded as a member of their community. They surely bring Bliss's individual memory into their collective memory. Bliss's individual memory can find its place in the framework of collective memory in black community. Even though Bliss leaves their community and wants to sever his relation with the past, the relation is tighter than Bliss can imagine. The tight relation between Bliss's individual memory and Hickman's collective memory comes from the solid structure of the framework of black community. The solid structure benefits from black people's efforts, which in turn ensures their collective memory.

Although individual memory is restricted by collective memory, it interacts with the collective memory rather than accepts its influence passively. The battle between these two sides reflects the struggle for power. The individual's reaction expresses one's will to reconstruct the collective memory of the group. Therefore, Bliss's rebellion against the black community shows the conflict between individual memory and collective memory.
III. The Conflict of Memory between Father and Son in Ethnic Groups

In ethnic groups, the conflict of memory mainly takes place between symbolized father and symbolized son. In Ralph Ellison’s opinion, black people are white people’s cultural father. “The history of the American Negro is the most intimate part of American history.” (“The Art of Fiction: An Interview” 214) However, it is denied in the mainstream of American society. Black people and white people have their separate sources of memory. Each group believes it gets on the right side of truth.

In Juneteenth, the most evident conflict of memory is demonstrated by the different memories of Juneteenth celebration. Hickman represents the black people’s view of this celebration and its history, while Bliss represents the white people’s opinion.

Juneteenth refers to June the 19th in 1865. On that day in Texas, black people were informed that they were legally free. In order to celebrate that day in history, black people across the United States hold celebrations. They differ in memory of Juneteenth because black people and white people hold different attitudes towards this history. White people want to erase this part of memory. They try to make people “believe it never happened or that it was a mistake that it ever did” (Ellison, Juneteenth 114). Black people want to preserve this part of memory, because “[f]or generations of Negroes, slavery refused to fade into a historical abstraction. It remained alive on a number of levels” (Levine 388). The different attitude towards this history makes Hickman and Bliss response to this history in different ways. Bliss says he has already forgotten the word of Juneteenth, which he later mentions as “[t]he celebration of a gaudy illusion” (114). He can not remember it because he turns his attention to something else. Bliss explains his oblivion as “to learn some of the things I’ve learned I had to forget some others” (114). He places this memory to unimportant position. Therefore, he does not place his individual memory of Juneteenth in the framework of collective memory, and does not understand the cultural and historical meaning of Juneteenth. He does not know that “the eating was only a part; an outward manifestation, a symbol” (133). He does not notice that parades and celebrations are superficial phenomena. Bliss’s opinion represents most white people’s viewpoint. In the beginning, Juneteenth is not acknowledged or taken in the dictionary. The recognition of Juneteenth goes through a long period. Moreover, many white people are interested in the activities of the Juneteenth, but not in its history. As a result, they have no cultural sensibility of it. In their eyes, it
is nothing more than a celebration. "The function of any holiday is to concentrate people's thoughts on their common beliefs, traditions, and ancestors" (Durkheim, 420). In official history, black people is said to get legal freedom when Lincoln subscribed the Emancipation of Proclamation in January, 1863. But it did not actually implement until two and a half years later. This is exactly significant meaning of Juneteenth. The annual celebration of Juneteenth serves as an important tool for the shaping of a collective memory. The activities and rituals in the Juneteenth celebration are the way of transmission. On the one hand, they help black people to strengthen their sense of collective. Black people share their memory and strengthen their relation in this process. On the other hand, they cultivate black people’s sense of honor. It records the glorious history of their ancestors. They commemorate their ancestors’ achievement through activities and celebration.

In consequence, black people represented by Hickman takes the historical and cultural meaning as the core of Juneteenth. Except for Bliss, all the black people in the former community remember it. They want to keep their history alive in their memory. They haven’t forgotten what it means. It reminds him of their historical task and responsibility. They do not forget what the past does to them. It reminds them of the uneven path of pursuing democracy and freedom. Past experience becomes a guide for the future.

**Conclusion**

This paper analyzes the conflicts of memory between father and son from three aspects. First, it stresses the memory of names within family and the memory of family history which cause the different understandings of self-identity between father and son. Second, it explains how the influence of different standpoints and the amount of information influence the individual and collective memories of father and son in the black community. Third, it further explores the function of history and culture in the understanding of the past, which is the essential root of the contradictory memories between father and son. Therefore, the conflict of memory actually is the conflict of black and white cultures.

**Note:**

[1] The part of the self or self-concept is shared by all the members of each group to which one
belongs and is distinguished from the private and public selves. It is also called the social self. See from Matsumoto, David. Ed. The Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology. Cambridge University Press, 2009:117-18.

Works Sited:
Banner-Haley, Charles Pete T. “Transformations and Re-inventions: Juneteenth and Ralph Ellison’s American Identity.” The Journal of the Historical Society. Vol. II, No. 3-4 (Summet/Fall 2002): 363-76.
Durkheim, Emile. The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. New York: The Free Press, 1965.
Ellison, Ralph. Juneteenth. Ed. John F. Callahan. New York: Random House, 1999.
---. Shadow and Act. New York: Random, 1964.
---. “The Art of Fiction: An Interview.” Collected Essays, New York: The Modern Library, 2004.
Kakutani, Michico. “‘Juneteenth’: Executor Tidies up Ellison’s Unfinished Symphony.” New York Times. 25 May 1999. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/05/23/daily/052599 ellison-book-review.html>.
Levine, Lawrence. Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.

Xinxin JIANG, Ph. D., associate professor of English at the College of Foreign Languages, Xiangtan University. Her academic interest covers American literary studies.

Zhan YE, M. A. candidate of the College of Foreign Languages, Xiangtan University. She focuses mainly on African American literature.