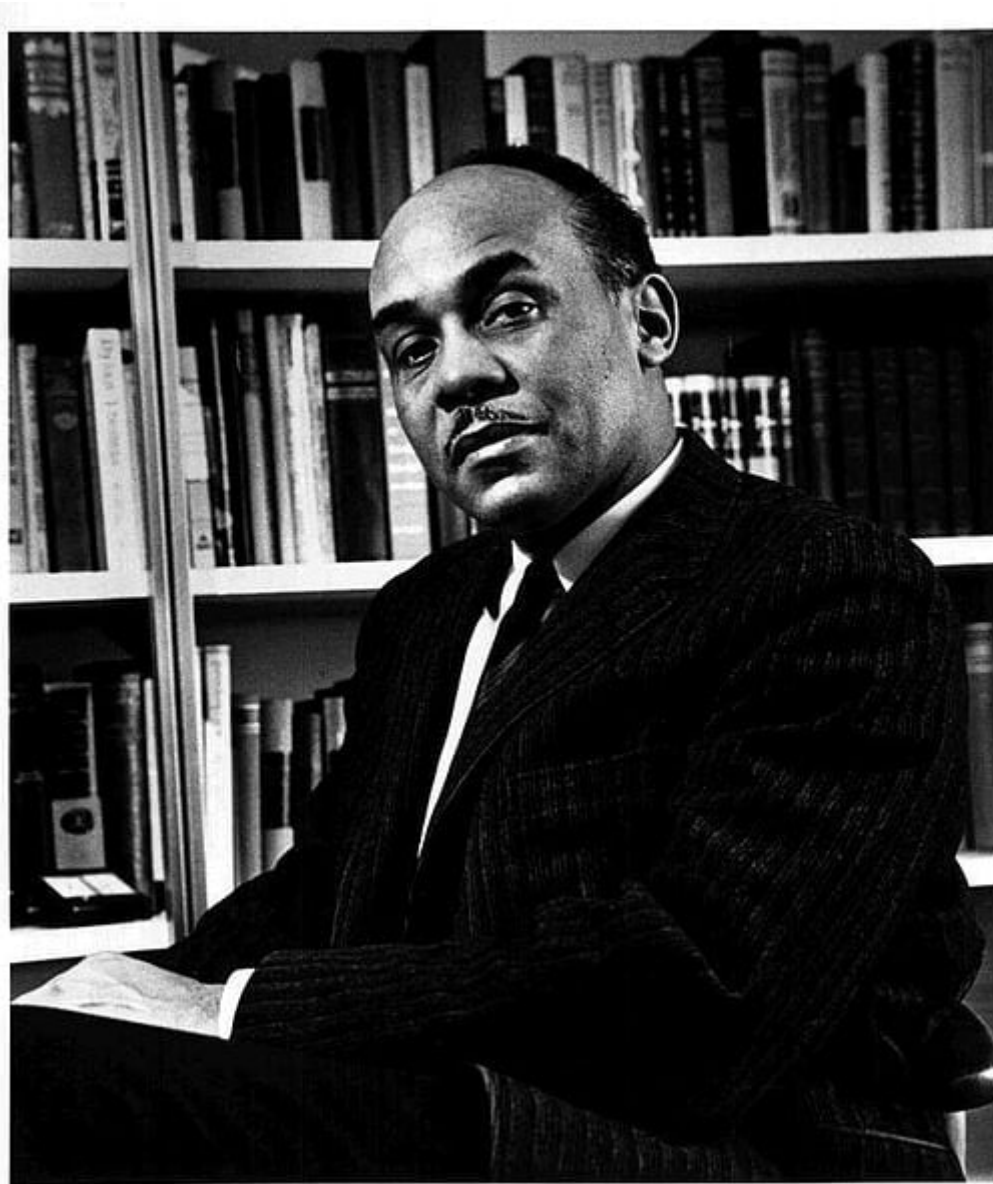


Juneteenth, Ralph Ellison, and Me

by Phyllis Chesler



I first knew about Juneteenth from my esteemed professor, Ralph Ellison, with whom I studied Literature at Bard College between 1958-1962. Ellison was a consummate gentlemen who always wore a tie, a jacket, and a hat. I thought of him as the soul of “dapper.” Unlike other professors at the time, he never flirted with, harassed, or embarked upon affairs with any of his female students. I was a very brash young thing

and, in an American Literature class with him, chose to write about "Racism in Melville's Moby Dick." And he gave me an A-. Not bad. Not bad at all. I was overjoyed.

I visited him and his wife Fanny once at their Manhattan home but cannot remember any details. Ellison was working on his novel "Juneteenth" for more than a quarter-century, perhaps for much longer than that. He was at it when the Brown v Board of Education decision came down; still at it when Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus; and was still working away when the Reverend Martin Luther King was assassinated. In 1967, a fire (arson? An electrical failure?) destroyed his manuscript pages but he went right back at it and reconstituted it. I have not read the versions that his executor finally issued. But now I will.