Left of the Color Line
Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States

Edited by
Bill V. Mullen and
James Smethurst

The University of North Carolina Press
Chapel Hill & London
Barbara Foley

From Communism to Brotherhood:
The Drafts of Invisible Man

That Ralph Ellison was during the late 1930s and early 1940s a fairly close fellow traveler of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) remains one of the best-kept secrets of U.S. literary history. To no small degree, Ellison himself helped to veil his Leftist past. A biographical sketch accompanying a review of Invisible Man in the April 1952 Saturday Review of Literature—for which it was surely the author who supplied the information—alluded to Ellison’s having “lectured at Bennington and NYU, worked in a factory, for a psychologist, and at free-lance photography; tinkered with audio-electronics, and done a wartime stint in the Merchant Marine.” When he received the National Book Award (NBA) less than a year later, it was noted in the Saturday Review that the suddenly famous young novelist had been a “published writer since 1939, with articles, short stories, and criticism appearing in Horizon, Cross Current, The Reporter, The New York Times Book Review, and this magazine.” Omitting mention of the approximately two dozen pieces of journalism and fiction that had appeared in the New Masses during the late 1930s and early 1940s, Ellison was clearly
bent upon dissociating himself from the organized Left. In subsequent interviews and writings, he emphatically distanced himself from communism, insisting that he had always viewed Leftist politics with suspicion and that the Brotherhood of *Invisible Man* was not to be specifically associated with the CPUSA.

Although many critics over the past half century have taken Ellison at his word—about both himself and his novel—the record indicates otherwise. The *New Masses* writings, as well as his contributions to the New York branch of the Federal Writers Project (fwp), give clear indications of Leftist sympathies and, in fact, exhibit the young writer’s willingness to follow the often dramatically shifting Party line. The recent publication of several more short stories from this period—discovered after Ellison’s death under the dining room table in his apartment by literary executor John Callahan—reveals that the apprentice Ellison repeatedly sought to express a Leftist vision through the medium of fiction of a decidedly proletarian cast. Early letters from Ellison to his mother and to his high school English teacher, Josie Craig Berry, also portray a young man animated by a radical political outlook.

Yet *Invisible Man* is, unequivocally, a text of the Cold War, manifesting a thoroughgoing antipathy to the organized Left and participating fully in the discourse of anticommunism pervading the moments of its reception in 1952 and its garnering of the National Book Award the following year. Until the entire Ellison archive at the Library of Congress—including his journals and correspondence—becomes open to the general public, we can only speculate about the reasons why Ellison relinquished, and finally turned against, his former Leftist sympathies and affiliations. The drafts of *Invisible Man* are, however, now available for viewing; they reveal that the process by which Ellison created his Cold War classic—what we might term its “anticommunization”—was hesitant and gradual. Indeed, the careful symbolic patterning for which the novel is so famous—for example, the accreted meanings associated with blindness; the repeated instances in which the hero is given slips of paper determining his destiny; the homologous character structures of his antagonists, from Norton to Brother Jack—was, evidently, absent from the novel begun in a Vermont barn doorway in the summer of 1945. Moreover, although the entire text was reworked extensively, the section dealing with the hero’s Brotherhood experiences seems to have gone through particularly dramatic revision. In this essay I shall indicate the key elements in the hero’s Harlem organizing experience that were reworked in such a way that the text’s initially positive—albeit iron-

Ellison appears only gradually to have reduced his Communist characters, black and white, to the cartoonish exemplars of Stalinist authoritarianism appearing in the 1952 text. Cool and aloof in the published text, Brother Hamby, the invisible man’s theoretical mentor, is originally named “Stein,” has “three blue stars . . . tattooed on the back of his left hand,” and exhibits considerable humility regarding the Brotherhood’s attempt to gain a beachhead in Harlem. “We don’t know too much about your people,” he tells the protagonist. “We thought we did but we don’t, even though some of us still think we do. What we have is a theory . . . So instead of trying to tell you how or what to do I’ll tell you to work it out in your own way.” Lincolnseque in stature and bearing, the avuncular Stein/Hamby observes that “to be part of a historical period, a people must be organized and able to make themselves felt as a force. To do this a group must find its voice. It must learn to say ‘yea’ or ‘nay’ to the crucial decisions of the times.” Harlem’s Negro population, the Brotherhood theoretician urges, must act rather than react, and prevent lynchings and riots before they happen, “swerv[ing] the developing forces away from the destructive event and transforming it into [a] socially useful one.” Where the Brotherhood in the 1952 text is shown abandoning
Harlem in the hope that a riot will occur, in the earlier drafts its chief ideologist wishes Harlem's inhabitants to become conscious historical agents so that they may stave off disaster. That the sympathetically portrayed Stein/Hambro of the early drafts is demonstrably Jewish further suggests Ellison's intent to defend U.S. communism from attacks that would portray it as a Jewish conspiracy.  

In the drafts, other Brotherhood leaders lack the robotic traits attributed to them in the published version of the novel. As we work backward, various puns and wordplays disappear. Brother Wrestrum ("restroom"), in one previous version designated as "Brother Thrilkid," is "Brother Elmo" in a still earlier version. That Ellison recognized the political implications of his changing portrayal of Wrestrum/Thrilkid/Elmo is shown in his penciled comment, "a totalitarian type, eager to regiment all aspects of life"—a notation signaling a growing intention to caricature, as well as a Cold War-era awareness that there is indeed such a thing as a "totalitarian type." Brother Jack, demonic in the 1952 text, is considerably more likable in earlier incarnations. At the Cthlon party, there is no scene where Brother Jack asks the hero to become "the new Booker T. Washington" and proposes the mechanistic toast "To History." In the chapter about the arena rally, the statement that "Brother Jack spoke about economics and politics" is crossed out and changed to "Brother Jack spoke coldly." In the early version, too, there occurs no meeting in which the invisible man is chastised by the leadership for political incoherence and opportunism; instead, he and Brother Jack go out for a beer. When the protagonist later realizes that the Brotherhood has been losing its base of support in Harlem, he notes, in an early draft, "When I met Brother Jack he was as bland as ever, but now that I admitted to myself that I no longer liked him I told myself that I was being subjective." This formulation was changed to "When I met Brother Jack he was as bland as ever, but now I admitted to myself that my old uneasiness had returned." As Ellison worked toward his final draft, apparently it was crucial that his hero should never acknowledge having felt positively at any point toward the Brotherhood leader. Furthermore, Ellison seems to have added only late in his writing the climactic scene in which Brother Jack's eye pops out and he starts gabbling in a foreign tongue (presumably Russian), thereby signifying the hero's invisibility to the Russian-ruled Reds. Finally, although in all the drafts the warning note handed to the hero by Brother Tarp is said to be written in a handwriting that the hero "faintly recognize[s]," all do not contain the culminating episode in which the hero, having crawled down a manhole during the riot, finds in his briefcase the note enabling him to identify Brother Jack as his hidden enemy. Rather than having conceived in advance a narrative structure in which Norton, Bledsoe, Emerson, and Brother Jack possess homologous character structures, Ellison evidently discovered only after extensive rewriting that—as noted to himself in a marginal comment—the novel's "antagonists must all be connected, merged into every other antagonist. White against black."

Indeed, if we move from the portrayal of individual members of the Brotherhood to the more general representation of the organization's relationship to the African American working class, the drafts of Invisible Man suggest that, at least when he first conceived the New York sections of the novel, Ellison wished to pay a degree of tribute to the CPUSA's work in bringing a class-conscious politics to Harlem. In an early draft, it is not the recognition that he is in debt to Mary Rambo and needs money, but instead the impact of seeing a Brotherhood-sponsored march through Harlem after the eviction demonstration, that decides the hero to cast in his lot with the Left:

There were hundreds of them, marching six or eight abreast in a kind of wild discipline beneath a blaze of phosphorescent flares. . . . I now saw the whites, not old and at the head, . . . but young, of all ages and mixed indiscriminately throughout the procession. . . .

Their chanted words were now becoming distinct:

No more dispossession of the dispossessed
We Say,
No more dispossession of the dispossessed!

In the wake of the parade, a group of boys do a riff on the marchers' slogan:

I dispossessed your mama 'bout half past nine,
She said, "Come back, daddy, any ol time."
I dispossessed your sister at a quarter to two,
Said, "If you stay 'til six, daddy, you will do."
I dispossessed your grandma at a quarter to one,
She said, "Daddy, daddy, daddy, thy will be done."

"Jesus Christ," I thought, looking at the strutting, nose thumbing boys. I haven't heard anything like that since I left home. They were playing the dozens in the same rhythm as the chant.

The message of the march, moreover, resonates with the invisible man's inherited beliefs and present mood. One of the speakers, a white man, "talked in economic terms, . . . describ[ing] scenes of eviction and dis-
possession and men laid off from jobs, and the work of unions and the
activities of strike-breakers and the attempts to set white workers against
black workers.” The rally concludes with the singing of “John Brown’s
Body,” and the invisible man joins in, remembering that his grandfather
“had often sung [the song] in a quavering voice when by himself.” Curious
and thrilled, the hero ascends the speaker’s platform, is congratulated
on having sparked the march by his speech earlier that day, and de-
cides to take the job previously offered by Brother Jack.7

Ellison’s decision to omit the parade scene from the 1952 novel is crit-
cical. Whereas in the published text the and theorizing of the Brotherhood
is shown to be out of touch with the pulse of Harlem, here Harlem
youth take up the rhythms of the Left, just as the Communists couple
new, radical lyrics with the songs of the black church. The parade testi-
ﬁes to the multiracial mix of people brought together under the banner
of Brotherhood, with whites of all ages blending through the crowd.
Moreover, the speech underlines the politics of class-conscious multirac-
ial unity. By contrast, the closest Ellison gets to voicing the discourse of
the depression-era crusade in Invisible Man is in the arena speech, where the
hero speaks against “dispossession” and in praise of the “uncommon
people” (334–38). The words “white worker” and “black worker,” how-
ever, never appear. The hero’s resistance to the unfamiliar scene dis-
solves, ﬁnally, when he hears whites and blacks join in singing “John
Brown’s Body,” a favorite song, he muses, of his skeptical, subversive
grandfather—who, in the epilogue to the 1952 novel, is quoted not as a
proponent of the tradition of Brown, but rather as a believer in the mes-
 sage of the Founding Fathers (560–61).8

Another omitted episode depicts the hero overhearing a conversation
in a tenement called “The Jungle,” where the Brotherhood has been at-
tempts to organize a rent strike. One man comments on his having be-
come friends with a white Brotherhood couple, noting that “these here
fays dont act like ofays, they act like people!” Though at ﬁrst he was
skeptical of the white man’s offer of friendship, the Harlemite now con-
duces: “This is something much bigger than I thought. I’m in it for
good now. They invite me to they house, I invite them to mine; they
serve me saukraut and winnies [sic]. I serve em red rice and beans, and
we building the movement together.” The Red-inspired multiracial unity
that the invisible man glimpsed at the parade to Mount Morris Park is
apparently being built on the interpersonal level as well.9

Indeed, the invisible man’s entire experience as a Brotherhood organ-
izer, viewed retrospectively as sheer hoodwinking and manipulation in

the 1952 text, is depicted quite nostalgically in the drafts. In the pub-
lished text, Ellison restricts his account of the hero’s Brotherhood or-
ganizing to a description of the “Rainbow of America’s Future” poster
campaign and a brief account of a parade of “fifteen thousand Har-
lmites . . . down Broadway to City Hall,” in which he features a cohort
of dancing teenagers, “the best-looking girls we could ﬁnd, who pranced
and twisted and just plain girded in the enthusiastic interest of Broth-
erhood” (371). In what appears to be the earliest draft of this material, the
protagonist omits the prancing girls and offers a fuller description of the
demonstrations he helped to organize:

At the time we were stepping up the ﬁght against evictions and un-
employment and it was my job to work closely with other community
leaders. Oh in those days I worked. Speaking, studying, throwing the
old ideology around; marching, picketing. It was nothing to pull ﬁve
thousand men and women into the streets on short notice; or to lead
them to mass with groups from other sections for a march straight
down Broadway or Fifth, or even Park, to City Hall. We must have
worn an inch or two off the surface of the streets. Just give me the
hungry and dispossessed and I could make them forget black and
white and rush a squad of police, or throw an iron picket line around
City Hall or the Mayor’s Mansion.

Whereas the Brotherhood in the 1952 text is shown to engage in only
one march on City Hall, in the earlier draft it does so routinely. And
whereas in the published novel the Brotherhood exploits the mobile bod-
ies of young black women to further its cause, in the draft the Harlem
masses respond favorably to the Brotherhood for what seem to be more
principled reasons. Even though the retrospective narrator speaks some-
what caustically of “throwing the old ideology around,” he looks back
on his earlier activism with some fondness.10

In this early draft, moreover, the protagonist speaks of the non-
Harlem Brotherhood sections with affection and respect:

They were like no other people I had ever known. I liked . . . their
selfless acceptance of human equality, and their willingness to get
their heads beaten to bring it a fraction of a step closer. They were
willing to go all the way. Even their wages went into the movement.
And most of all I liked their willingness to call things by their true
names. Oh, I was truly [sic] carried away. For a while I was putting
most of my salary back into the work. I worked days and nights and
was seldom tired. It was as though we were all engaged in a mass dance in which the faster we went the less our fatigue. For Brotherhood was vital and we were revitalized.

Ellison later penciled in a number of telling revisions. "They were willing to go all the way" became "they seemed willing to go all the way."

"Their wages went into the movement" became "a good part of their wages went into the movement." The narrator adds to the statement that he contributed "most of my salary" the comment that "money was not necessary, when we found so much in our group." Such alterations suggest Ellison's growing desire to ironize the protagonist's naive faith in his comrades, downplay the extent of their shared commitment, and suggest that the Brotherhood has clandestine ties with the wealthy class it purports to wish to overthrow. It would appear that Ellison came to view even these qualifications as implying too positive a portrayal of the Brotherhood, however, for he eventually cut the entire passage from the novel.11

Furthermore—and of crucial importance in the representation of Leftist history in Invisible Man—the drafts do not accuse the Brotherhood of sacrificing Harlem on the altar of Soviet expediency in the period following the collapse of the 1939 Nonaggression Pact and the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. In the published novel, the invisible man learns that the Brotherhood has lost its base in Harlem as "a result of a new program which had called for the shelving ofHeight of our old techniques of agitation" and "a switch in emphasis from local issues to those more national and international in scope," in which "it was felt that for the moment the interests of Harlem were not of first importance" (418). Ellison would later make the implied charge here explicit: "The Communists recognized no plurality of interests and were really responding to the necessities of Soviet foreign policy, and when the war came, Negroes got caught and were made expedient in the shifting of policy."12

In the drafts, the reasons given for the Brotherhood's diminished influence in Harlem are a good deal more complex. In a handwritten version appearing to be the earliest account, the hero observes that he lost some influence with "the committee" early on by mistakenly carrying out a campaign to free a young Negro writer who had been imprisoned for murder—but who, when freed (largely as a result of the hero's efforts), commits another murder. Thus when the hero tries to caution the Brotherhood about the riot brewing in Harlem, the organization rejects his warnings not because its abstract theory cannot admit the possibility of contingency and chaos, but, in large part, because the invisible man's credibility has been damaged. More strategic reasons are cited as well:

We found that with the slight rise in the nation's economy our issues were being won too quickly... And it was at this point that the opposition went into action [and] picked Harlem for the showdown and we were given a shock... First membership began falling off, but we were unaware because for some reason the Harlem committee falsified their reports, making it appear that things were going smoothly, or were at least stable. But History forced the truth. I learned that a deal had been made with a congressman back during the time of my first speech and now... with election time drawing near and we would have to throw our support behind him, the people were not responding.

The criticism lodged here focuses primarily on the perils of reformism: the Party pays the price for its involvement in electoral politics. But it appears that what precipitates the crisis in the Brotherhood's relationship to Harlem is the attack from the "opposition," which "picked Harlem for the showdown," rather than any pattern of manipulation and betrayal on the part of "the committee." Although opportunism is evident in the Harlem leaders' handling in "falsified... reports," there is no clear suggestion that the organization has abandoned the fight against racism.13

Among the most significant revisions of the Brotherhood materials in the early drafts of Invisible Man is Ellison's decision to efface a young white woman named Louise. In the 1932 text, the hero's interactions with white women in the movement are confined to his flirtation with Emma, mistress to Brother Jack, an attempted seduction by the red-robed wife of a Brotherhood leader, and his abortive relationship with Sibyl, another leader's wife, who lusts to be taken in violence by a black man. The woman who was once Louise remains only as the nameless young woman who, in the eviction scene, tells the hero that "you certainly moved them to action." She disappears from the novel after he last glimpses "her white face in the dim light of the darkened doorway" (277–78). In the drafts, however, the shadowy young woman plays a meaningful role. Encountering her at the Ctholian on the evening of the eviction and the parade, the invisible man is taken with her beauty and flirts with her openly, testing the limits of her antiracism. Though initially skeptical about her motives for belonging to the Brotherhood, he is attracted by her honesty and openness. Her father is a wealthy businessman, she tells him; she hopes through her Brotherhood activity to undo some of the damage her source of wealth has done. Furthermore, the hero is shown
to be fully aware of his own mixed and conflicting motives in wishing to make a romantic conquest of such a markedly “white” woman. The following passage is marked “omit” in the margin:

And I knew at that moment that it was not her color, but the voice and if there was anything in the organization to which I could give myself completely, it was she. If I could work with her, be always near her, then I could have all that the Trustees had promised and failed to give and more. And if she was not the meaning of the struggle for the others, for me she would be the supreme prize of all. “Oh you fair warrior,” my mind raced on, “You dear, sweet, lovely thing, for you I’d rock the nation with a word. You’ll be my Liberty and Democracy, Hope and Truth and Beauty, the justification for manhood, the motive for courage and cunning; for you I’ll make myself into this new name they’ve given me and I’ll believe that Brother Jack and the others mean what they say about creating a world in which even men like me can be free. […] I took a drink and for an instant I remembered the Vet laughing in the bus as it shot away from the campus. […] So I would play the fool, and if it was my being black that made me desire the white meat of the chicken, then I’d accept my desire along with the chitterlings and sweet potato pie.

Louise’s subsequent appearances in the draft text are fragmentary. There is a rather bizarre two-page imitation of the style of Finnegans Wake, in which an unspecified voice riffs on “Sweet Georgia Brown” as the hero meditates on the whiteness of Louise. There is also a handwritten paragraph describing the invisible man’s forcing her to sit under a sunlamp so that she will be less visibly white when they go out. But Louise is referred to several times as the invisible man’s love interest: when he follows the parade, he searches for Louise in the crowd, and later it is his pursuit of Louise to “The Jungle” that results in his overhearing the conversation about the hip red “ofays.” On the day when he has his grand confrontation with “the committee,” the protagonist remarks that he had originally wished to spend the day with Louise; when he cuts his ties with the Brotherhood, his greatest regret is losing her. She was evidently a figure of central importance in Ellison’s first conception of the novel’s Harlem section.14

Ellison seems to have removed Louise from the novel only by degrees. In various later drafts she appears — albeit not as “Louise” — as the wife of Tod Clifton. In the 1932 text, Clifton is an exemplar of martyrdom, betrayed by the Brotherhood and then murdered by the Nazi-like New York police; while attractive to all the young women in the Brotherhood, he is single and uninvolved. In at least two of the drafts, however, Clifton’s mourning the collapse of his marriage with a young white woman is among the most important facets of his role. In the earlier draft, it is Clifton who reports having put his wife under a sunlamp to minimize her whiteness; moreover, he voices uneasiness at having felt that they were in a showcase marriage, “symbolic of this and symbolic of that.” Penciled-in editorial changes show Clifton later stating to the invisible man his suspicion that Louise may have married him “under orders” from “the committee”; the hero demurs, thinking, “He hates himself. […] He doesn’t believe that she — any white girl — could love him simply because she is white.” In the later draft, Clifton openly charges the Brotherhood with having used Louise as “nigger bait.” “I didn’t know whether we were together for love or for discipline,” he says. “We were like that couple in a sign advertising one of those jungle movies; she was the blonde and I was the gorilla.” Although Clifton’s final bitter comment unambiguously affirms the anti-Communist charge that the CPUSA used white women to attract African American men to the movement, the evolution of Clifton’s wife from her earlier incarnation as Louise shows that Ellison originally had in mind a much more psychologically nuanced — and self-critical — depiction of the appeal of white women to black men in the radical movement. Ellison’s eventual elimination of the Louise character from the text suggests, however, his desire to avoid anything resembling a three-dimensional portrayal of interracial sexuality. Emma, Sibyl, and the woman in the red robe were easier to handle.15

For all the bitter anticommunism Ellison poured into this last conversation between Clifton and the invisible man, apparently he was not yet ready to accuse the Brotherhood of driving Clifton to his death. For none of the early drafts contains a description of Clifton’s murder by a policeman in midtown Manhattan. In one version, the hero sees Clifton performing the grotesque dance with his Sambo doll only in a nightmare, not in reality. In another — seemingly still earlier — draft, the man whom the hero encounters handling the dancing Sambo doll is not Clifton but “one of the younger brothers. One of the most enthusiastic.” The young man chants:

What makes him happy?
What makes him wanna dance? heh?
This Sambo, the joy boy?
He’s more than a toy, he’s Sambo the dancing doll.
He lives in the sun shine of your smile, that’s his secret[.]
Ladies and Gentlemen, only 25 cents, because he likes to eat!
Shake it Sambo, Shake it and take it... Thank you.

That a young Negro comrade should engage in such grotesque self-caricature obviously raises important questions about his relationship to the Brotherhood. But it remains unresolved here whether we are witnessing an allegory of internalized racism or one of Leftist oppression. Moreover, the young man is not murdered by a policeman, so the cost of his falling out of history is not so high. In the 1952 text, by contrast, Clifton’s chant contains unambiguous allusions to the Brotherhood as the source of his humiliation. The doll will “kill your depression / And your dispossession”; it begs for a “brotherly two bits of a dollar.” But that the Brotherhood’s betrayal of Harlem would propel Clifton into this desperate self-parody, and hence into murder at the hands of New York’s finest, was clearly not in Ellison’s mind when he first imagined the scene with the dancing Sambo dolls.16

As is suggested in the parade and tenement episodes, early drafts of Invisible Man represent the Brotherhood as both relevant to and welcome in Harlem. The openness of Negro migrants to Red politics is further explored in the draft portions of the novel set in Mary Rambo’s boarding-house. In the 1932 text, the Harlem characters who stick most in the mind are those who are the least proletarianized. The street peddler Peter Wheatstraw, master of verbal wizardry, recalls such legendary folk trickster characters as Brier Rabbit and Sweet-the-Monkey. Mary Rambo is perhaps most memorable for her owning the grotesquely racist cash-bank that the invisible man cannot get rid of; as well as for her statement, “I’m in New York, but New York ain’t in me”: both narrative details stress her rural backwardness. Such still-unassimilated migrants as Wheatstraw and Rambo correspond to types whom Ellison interviewed during his stint as an investigator of Harlem living conditions for the rwp in the late 1930s; indeed, Rambo’s signature declaration directly replicates the words of one of Ellison’s interviewees. But during his rwp research Ellison also encountered a number of Harlemites who displayed acute class consciousness; that he chose to omit from the 1932 text the voices of radical Negro migrants turned proletarian was a choice rather than a necessity.17

The early drafts of Invisible Man reveal that Ellison originally intended a more politically and sociologically variegated portrayal of Harlem’s working-class population than appears in the 1952 text. Mary Rambo is not just a kind voice and face appearing mysteriously when the dazed hero reeks out of the hospital after his electroshock therapy (a scene absent in the early drafts), but instead a worker at Harlem Hospital who takes him in after he has been injured in a brawl with a white racist. Hardly the folkish isolate of the published novel, this Rambo runs a boardinghouse where, among other things, the Brotherhood is the topic of everyday dinner conversation. The widowed Mrs. Garfeld—who whose husband “worked with his hands and believed in unions and strikes and things”—comments that “[our people] are acting really radical,” since “every evening or so when its [sic] not too cold you can see a group of both colored and white holding meetings.” Mr. Portwood, who admires the Brotherhood because “they got some colored big-shots right along with the whites [sic] ones,” opines that perhaps the invisible man “ought to join up with them. Or maybe be a union leader so our folks can get some of the good jobs.”18

Above all, it is the hovering shadow of Leroy, the former inhabitant of the invisible man’s zoom, that dramatically shapes Ellison’s original representation of the philosophy and politics embraced by Harlem’s migrants. A young man—about the hero’s age—who left the South at the age of fifteen after “escap[ing] from a mob,” Leroy lived at Mary’s for three years and then went to sea, where he became best friends with a white sailor (also a native of the South) by the name of Treadwell. Visiting Mary’s apartment with the news that Leroy “drowned at sea,” Treadwell notes that because Leroy was a union militant he “might have been pushed off the ship.” The invisible man’s sense of identification with this touchstone character—he even wears some of Leroy’s clothes—was to serve as an index to his expanding consciousness: as Ellison commented in a marginal notation, “IVM must sum up LeRoy in his own mind at different stages of his own development.”19

In several of his meditations on the status of African Americans, Leroy manifests a markedly radical tendency:

Would it be that we are the true inheritors of the West, the rightful heirs of its humanist tradition—especially since it has flourished through our own dehumanization, debasement, through our being ruled out of bounds; since we have been brutalized and forced to live inhuman lives so that they could become what they consider “more human”? Doesn’t the pattern of our experience insist that we seek a way of life more universal, more human and more free than any to be found in the world today?...

To be redeemed my life demands something far larger, broader: A change in the rules by which men live. For now for me to be more
human is to be less like those who degrade me. Is to be more appreciative and respectful of those who differ from me in both my thoughts and my actions. I wish to be, in my thinking, neither black nor white, and in my acting, neither exported [not] [exploiter]. And yet I'm willing to accept the human responsibility of soiling my hands with the blood of those who spill my blood whether wearing a hood and using a gun or sending out the orders in a telegram. 20

The thoughtful tone of Leroy's journal anticipates the epilogue to the 1952 text. When Ellison eliminated Leroy from his novel, he transferred to his narrator some of his character's concern with what it meant for African Americans to be the "true inheritors of the West, the rightful bearers of its humanist tradition." But Leroy's remarks are inflected by a number of Marxist assumptions that are wholly alien to his successor. African Americans possess the greatest capacity to understand social reality because they have been most oppressed by and alienated from it: Leroy's thinking closely parallels Frederick Engels's formulation of the dialectical relation of knowledge to class in the Anti-Dühring. Moreover, in postulating that his "we" are objectively positioned to bring into being a "pattern of life" that will be "more universal, more human and more free," what Leroy describes in all but words is the classless society of the "Internationale," where the revolutionary proletariat will abolish class and become "the human race." "The change in the rules by which men live" apparently entails the abolition of both race ("I wish to be, in my thinking, neither black nor white") and of class ("and in my acting, neither exploited [not] [exploiter]"). The process by which this "change in the rules" will be achieved will be, of necessity, violent, leading Leroy to "accept the human responsibility of soiling my hands with the blood of those who spill my blood." That he announces his willingness to act violently against both those who are "wearing a hood and using a gun" and those who are "sending out the orders in a telegram" evinces his awareness of the class purposes served by the likes of the Ku Klux Klan, whose members function as shock troops for elites using racism as a means of social control. Leroy might as well be a card-carrying member not just of the National Maritime Union—to which, incidentally, Ellison himself belonged for several years—but of the CPUSA. 21

Indeed, Leroy's comments on Frederick Douglass show him to the left of contemporaneous Communist doctrine:

Frederick Douglass, a typical 19th century idealist. Made the mistake of throwing his best energies into speeches. Had he spent his time in organizing a revolt he would have been a far more important man today; he would have fathered a tradition of militant action around which men could rally today. What methods? Why guerrilla warfare, the tactic and strategy of John Brown, a man more reasonable in his so-called madness than Douglass dared allow himself to admit.

Always a CPUSA hero, Douglass occupied an especially important position in the Red pantheon in the war years. During the Civil War Douglass had urged fugitive slaves and freedmen to join the Union army, even under the prevailing conditions of intense racial discrimination, in order to defeat the greater enemy that was the slave power. Eager to find historical precedent for their call upon African Americans to postpone an all-out antiracist struggle until after the defeat of fascism—including acceptance of a Jim Crow army—the CPUSA explicitly analogized Douglass's stance with its own some eighty years later. Leroy, however, expresses skepticism about Douglass and prefers the legacy of John Brown, contrasting the former's reliance on rhetoric with the latter's "tradition of militant action." 22

Mary Rambo's departed lodger also serves to draw out the radical potentials in others, most significantly Treadwell. Noting that Leroy disturbed a number of his deep-seated prejudices, Treadwell describes how their friendship gave him insight into the role that racism had played in externalizing and deflecting his own antipathy to the different sorts of authority by which he—and, by extension, all southern white male workers—were being controlled:

We're trained to hate you, to suppress and repress you. It is our major discipline [sic], our equivalent of a state church, or a recognized military cult, or the entering into the service of the king. And so thorough is the discipline [sic] that everything else that we're trained to suppress becomes mixed up with it—hate for the father, mother, brother; sexual impulses, unclean thoughts—everything becomes mixed up with the idea of suppressing you. So that it's [sic] hard to change anything deeply within us without images of you rushing into our minds.

Thanks to Leroy, Treadwell has come to realize the extent to which white supremacy functions ideologically to bind white workers to their own oppression; Freud is recruited into an alliance with Marx. 23

One conversation with Leroy particularly sticks in Treadwell's mind. Describing a group of U.S. white college students disembarking at Le Havre from Treadwell and Leroy's ship, Leroy remarked that the students were "some of the most fortunate and unfortunate people in the world" because, as "unconscious vessels of our whole way of life," they
would assume that they were going to visit "an inferior people" and miss the cultural riches before them. By contrast, Leroy opined, there were "only two really and deeply human groups in the whole country," namely "yours and mine. We fight each other and hate each other and fear [one] another. And yet our hope lies in the fact that we do. We're the only two groups that aren't ashamed to admit that we're the most miserable bastards in the world. And that all the money and power in the world is no cure for it." Here Leroy examines the differential effects of ideology on different sectors of the population. Interpellating the youth of the U.S. elite—"unconscious vessels of our whole way of life"—as superior to the people of all other lands and times, the gospel of American supremacy deprives them—"some of the most fortunate... people in the world"—of their full humanity, making them "some of the most... unfortunate" as well. Paradoxically, it is the black and white members of the working class—pitted against one another in violence and fear, "the most miserable bastards in the world"—who, by virtue of their having no stake in the survival of the system, have the capacity to "feel love or even real joy." To be "really and deeply human" results from the experience of oppression, which positions its victims to understand that "money and power" are what violate their humanity in the first place. This is a distinctly Marxist formulation of epistemic privilege.

We cannot at this point know why Ellison eliminated the boardinghouse characters in general, and Leroy in particular, from Invisible Man. The effect of this decision, however, was to omit his most concrete demonstration of the openness of the black working class to a politics of class-conscious multiracial unity—indeed, in Leroy's case, of the extent to which many key components of those politics were already embraced by Harlem's most advanced denizens. One cannot help wondering what the novel would have looked like if the invisible man of the 1952 text had used the radical Leroy as a benchmark in "the different stages in his own development." Given the drafts of Invisible Man, the final version is irrevocably haunted by the ghosts in Mary Rambo's boardinghouse.

The drafts of Invisible Man do not signal that Ellison originally set out to write a proletarian novel. Even in formation his text was more about identity than commitment, internal change than social transformation; in various places, moreover, its treatment of American communism is undeniably satirical. But the political stance implied in Ellison's early depiction of his hero's encounter with the organized Left is hardly that of a Cold Warrior and in fact suggests considerable admiration for various facets of the Communist activity in Harlem with which Ellison himself was quite familiar. Furthermore, revisions in the drafts—on the level of sentence, passage, and episode—reveal that Ellison changed his mind, and his text, only gradually. Anticommunization was, it appears, a process, not a single act. If an alternative text of the novel were to be culled from the early drafts, the result would lack much of the rhetorical tidiness that no doubt contributed to the novel's receiving the NAA in 1953 and that continues to make the text so seductive to pedagogues teaching their students to read for pattern and irony. The drafts show that Ellison did not originally pattern the novel around the homologous character structures that, in the more thesis-driven 1952 text, render equivalent the invisible man's white antagonists, thereby equating Jim Crow racism with elite dominance with communism. Indeed, the greater political complexity of the drafts requires us to historicize the novel in ways that a New Critical reading does not, thereby enabling us to query the politics accompanying the formalist logic of the well-wrought urn and to remember that the Cold War was fought on the aesthetic as well as the explicitly political front.

Read in the light of its early drafts, Invisible Man suggests a new meaning to the trope of invisibility, for Ellison engaged in an act of purposive self-disappearing when he produced his revised text. Just as Mary Rambo's boardinghouse is peopled by the ghosts of Mrs. Garner, Mr. Portwood, Treadwell, and Leroy, throughout the 1952 text there roams the specter of a Ralph Ellison who once "hent closer, excited," eager to spread the news of a multiracial radical working-class movement in the making.

Notes


2. That the old canards about African Americans and communism persist into
these presumably post—Cold War years is evidenced in a relatively recent article appearing in the flagship journal of African American literature; see Jesse Wolfe, "Ambivalent Man: Ralph Ellison’s Rejection of Communism," African American Review 54 (Winter 2000): 621–38. Some of Ellison’s FWP pieces are contained in Ann Banks, ed., First-Person America (New York: Knopf, 1980); some unpublished writings are in the microfilm version of the FWP’s "The Negro in New York" writings (reels 2 and 3) at the Schomburg Library, New York City. A number of Ellison’s previously unpublished radical short stories are reproduced in John C. Callahan, ed., Flying Home and Other Stories (New York: Random House, 1996). For more on Ellison’s proletarian short stories, see my "Reading Redness: Politics and Audience in Ralph Ellison’s Early Fiction," Journal of Narrative Technique 29 (Fall 1999): 325–39. Though access to Ellison’s correspondence is still restricted, two letters to his mother have been reproduced in Callahan’s American Fiction Is of a Whole: From the Letters of Ralph Ellison, New Republic (April 1, 1999): 35–17. A 1937 letter from Ellison to Berry, in which he boasts of his association with the Young Communist League—sponsored magazine the Champion, is among Berry’s papers in the Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman. Berry subsequently noted Ellison’s editorial activity in her regular column in the Oklahoma City Dispatch.

5. On the dates on which the NBA was announced and awarded, the New York Times was replete with articles about the Smith Act trials and the need for a foreign policy to “defeat red encirclement” (New York Times, January 28, 31, 1951). The keynote address at the NBA ceremony, delivered by William O. Douglas of the U.S. Supreme Court, focused on the need to help Asian nations like Malaya “coordinate their efforts in the counter-revolution against Communism.” “Address of Justice William O. Douglas,” NBA Award Ceremony, New York City, January 27, 1953, Random House Papers, Special Collections, Butler Library, Columbia University. For the term “homologous character structures” I am indebted to my friend Gregory Meyerson.

4. Ellison’s letters to Richard Wright show that both men were angered by the reception of Native Son by certain members—especially African Americans—of the CPUSA leadership. They also reveal, however, that Ellison agreed with certain aspects of the Party line until as late as 1948. Of particular interest in the Ellison-Wright correspondence are the letters of April 22, 1940, August 18, 1945, June 14, 1946, and February 1, 1948, box 97, folder 1314, Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn. Ellison began work on Invisible Man while staying with Amelia and John Bates, an interracial Leftist couple who lived in Waitsville, Vt. John Bates—whose brother Ad was active in CPUSA-aided union work—posed as the invisible man in Gordon Parks’s photo essay on Ellison’s novel that was published in Life magazine on August 25, 1942, pp. 9–11. For the information about John and Amelia Bates, I am indebted to their daughters Beth and Grace, whom I interviewed in Waitsville in August 1996.


7. “Brotherhood,” folder 2, box 143, EP.


10. “Brotherhood,” folder 3, box 143, EP.

11. Ibid.

12. Ellison, Going to the Territory, 296.

13. “Brotherhood,” folders 2, 5, box 143, EP.

14. “Brotherhood—Louise,” box 143, EP. Here is a sample of the joyful passage: “Astonishing [sic], you erred her face, go to the head of the roof! Sun! The rush of wings, who neighed? Cops with horseshoes anvil the streets. . . . Impossible. Snowflakes (continued on page plucked from dissection) time floating like flake in her drawers, snow fleeting disillusion its best to grab her though with fragment clinging reads: My Negra Primus Provoed by me out of Missy rummied and threw into Cuba libre, ignorant across me a side of maco a jog of goyemun this first Aproosed dies are of ’72 too soon to be forgo. Color? Brown.” “Brotherhood—Louise,” box 143, EP. We may be grateful that Ellison decided to omit this material from the 1952 text. Notably, representation of the protagonist’s racial insecurity is not limited to the Louise chapters in the early drafts. Ellison describes the protagonist’s attempt to find acceptance among the Harlem elite: “I took to going around to well known places and trying to adopt the values of society I read all the books on etiquette [sic] and all the ’how to win friends’ books. I dressed faddishly, spending much of my salary and many tedious hours on my toilet. I tried all of the preparations for straightening the hair. I piled them on until my hair turned dry and red and fell out by the handfuls. But I wasn’t discouraged. I was desperate. I smeared strong bleaching ointments on my face until it was a time a mass of running sores and that forced me to stay within the house for months, but at best I achieved only a muddy, green-tinged complexion.” “Bar Scene—Downtown,” box 142, EP. Clearly Ellison originally intended a much sharper ironization of his protagonist than appears in the 1952 text.

15. “Brotherhood,” folders 1, 4, box 143, EP. For an instance of the charge that the CPUSA dangled white women before black men, see J. Saunders Redding, On Being Negro in America (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1933): 51–70. Marvin Cooke, active in the Harlem CPUSA for many years, claimed that this charge was without foundation; interview with author, 7 October 1991.

16. “Brotherhood,” folder 4, box 143, EP.

17. The prototypes for Rambo and Wheatstraw are apparent in Ellison’s FWP interviews that are reproduced in Battles, First Person America, 244, 250–52. See also Foley, "Ralph Ellison as Proletarian Journalist," Science and Society 62 (Winter 1998–99): 437–6, esp. 441–43.

18. "At Mary’s," folder 1, box 142, EP. In 1963 Ellison published an earlier version of the Mary Rambo material, featuring her as a worker in Harlem Hospital, as “Out of the Hospital and under the Bar,” in Herbert Hill, ed., Sam, One Morning (New York: Knopf, 1963), 242–90.
19. “At Mary’s,” folders 1 and 2, box 142, EP. In a ruminating note to himself, Ellison characterized Leroy as “a young student who came North to study. An orphan he is self educated and distinctly different from those who like him were born in the South. He has learned to read, and has linked up his humanity with that of Humanity generally. He is interested in problems of leadership. He is Leader, psychologically, who has seen the dichotomy of his position as consisting of a need to act on folk level, or of building up organization whereby he can operate on more sophisticated urban level. In folk he can see only limited possibilities, which are nevertheless vital. On the other hand he feels need to possess the meaning of the entire American culture, if not emotionally, intellectually — although he does not believe that such a division is necessary.” “At Mary’s,” folder 2, box 142, EP. In another draft passage the invisible man describes the books Leroy has left behind, including “Darwin, Marx and Freud, Frazier, Malinowski and Raglan; a study of Luther Burbank, a Bible, a work on navigation, the enid [sic], a Shakespeare, a work on mathematics, something titled ‘How to Abandon Ship,’ something titled ‘Sickness unto Death,’ and a large work titled ‘Myth and Leadership: A Study of the Leader and His Mission.’” “At Mary’s,” folder 1, box 142, EP. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Ellison envisioned aspects of himself in Leroy (whose name he sometimes spelled “LeRoy”).

20. “Brotherhood,” folder 2, box 143, EP.


22. “Leroy’s Journal,” box 143, EP. Some African Americans criticized the CPUSA for withholding full support from the “Double-V Campaign,” an effort to use the crisis of the war to push a full civil rights agenda. Although Leroy may be read as joining in this criticism, it should be noted that his designation of Brown as greater than Douglass hardly fits in with the implicitly or explicitly anti-(white) Communist cast that the charge often assumed. For more on Ellison’s views on the Double-V Campaign, see his various commentaries in the *Negro Quarterly*, a short-lived radical black magazine that Ellison coedited with African American radical (and sometime CPUSA member) Angelo Herndon, especially “Editorial Comment,” *Negro Quarterly* 1 (Winter 1943): 294–95. The entirety of Douglass’s July 6, 1865, speech urging full African American participation in the Civil War was reprinted in the *Communist* (the CPUSA’s theoretical organ) in 1944, with a prefatory note by James Ford. “Negroes and the National War Effort,” *Communist* 21 (April 1942): 262–64. See also Ben Davis Jr., “The Communists, the Negro People, and the War,” *Communist* 21 (August 1942): 613–19, and A. B. Magil, “Lessons of the Civil War for Our Day,” *Communist* 21 (August 1942): 644–62. See also the symposium “Have the Communists Quit Fighting for Negro Rights?,” *Negro Digest* 3 (December 1944): 57–70.

23. “At Mary’s,” folder 2, box 142, EP. Ellison further treats the damaging effect of white supremacist consciousness on the white working class in his remarkable story, “A Party Down at the Square,” in *Callahan, Flying Home and Other Stories*, 3–11; see my commentary on this story in “Reading Redness.” Ellison’s interest in yoking Freudian psychology with Marxist analysis is displayed in his 1945 review of Gunnar Myrdal’s *American Dilemma*, see Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 503–17.


Mary Helen Washington

Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front

Until very recently Cold War scholarship routinely resegregated the 1950s, giving us versions of the white Hollywood Ten, white HuAC hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), white Red feminism, and a white blacklist.1 In the 1990s a new generation of scholars began to reverse that trend, but most of us still have no sense of the important cultural and political work done by U.S. blacks in the Cold War decades, or the extent of the repression blacks faced during that time, or how Cold War pressures deeply influenced racial issues.2 But, as books like Thomas Borstelmann’s *The Cold War and the Color Line* (2001), Mary Dudziak’s *Cold War, Civil Rights* (2000), and Gerald Horne’s *Black and Red* (1986) suggest, in the logic of the Cold War, being black equaled being Red.3 White people who were called before HUAC found themselves under suspicion for having black friends, or being in an interracial marriage, or listening to black music—as if that mighty one drop of black blood could even produce a Communist. Even John Foster Dulles, certainly no friend to