CHAPTER TWO

RACE, CLASS, AND COMMUNISM: THE YOUNG
RALPH ELLISON AND THE "WHOLE LEFT"

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One of the key moves involved in producing a "scholarship of the 'whole left'"—the worthy goal of the essays gathered in this volume—entails reconstructing our collective understanding of the "Old Left." In the wake of feminism, multiculturalism, and calls for diversity, leftists of today—and not just academic leftists—are challenged as never before to integrate into their critiques of capitalism an understanding of the ways in which race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and environmental issues affect, and inflect, the movement to create a world fit for habitation by all. But these concerns are hardly unique to radicals and progressives of our time. Albeit with different premises and emphases—and, admittedly, with relatively little attention to the last two categories—significant numbers of twentieth-century socialists and communists grasped, and organized around, the interconnectedness of class exploitation with other types of oppression. Ignorance of this legacy can only hobble our current attempts to produce an articulation relevant to our moment. Yet another legacy from the past century, the legacy of anticommunism, has made such ignorance—or, more precisely, ignorance parading itself as knowledge—intellectually respectable. For the fallacious notion that "old leftists" forced the multifariousness of oppositional identities into the procrustean bed of class reductionism remains largely uninterrogated to this day, even if a privileging of vernacular authenticity has routinely come to perform the ideological role previously played by plain old attacks on the authoritarian party.

The consequence of many scholars' continuing acceptance of the old canards about the left's insensitivity to anything but economic oppression has been not only to distort history, both political and cultural, but also to sever class analysis from the full range of social experience, both discursive and material. Marxism, in this reading, becomes one more expression of the logocentric Western
rationalism responsible for the stifling of heteroglossia; in fact, because of its claim to offer a metatheory of human emancipation, the socialist/communist tradition emerges for some as the most nefarious, because the most "centered," inheritance of the West. The current draining off of energies on the left to which this collection of essays is addressed is thus itself to a significant degree a product of an anticomunist discourse associating class analysis with red denunciation and positing subversive but of necessity dispersed and fragmented acts of speech and representation as the only possible sites of present and future liberation. In order to get beyond this cultural paralysis and construct a "whole left" capable of meaningful praxis—and untrammeled by a notion of intersecting oppressions enabling only the most cautious of coalition politics—we must undertake some profoundly revisionary historical investigation.

I offer a contribution to such investigation in this essay by examining the representation of the connection between class and race oppression in the work of the young Ralph Ellison. This choice of authors may come as a surprise to some, since Ellison's hostile portrayal of the Brotherhood—transparently the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA)—in Invisible Man has secured the writer's credentials as a Cold Warrior since the novel's publication in 1952. Is not Ellison part of the problem, then, not the solution? Why not choose another proletarian writer focusing on the relationship between race and class—e.g., William Attaway or Grace Lumpkin—to make this argument? But it is precisely Ellison's status as canon-forming anticomunist that enables this project to proceed on two crucially interrelated levels of inquiry. On the one hand, Ellison's pre-Invisible Man Marxist writings—including his New Masses journalism, proletarian short stories, and early novelistic drafts—render cognition of the ways in which the Communist-led movement, with which Ellison for some time identified, both analyzed the relationship between racism and capitalism as well as feared the fight for racial equality as central to the struggle for communist transformation of society. The work of the young Ralph Ellison thus illuminates important holistic features of the theory and practice of the "Old Left." On another level, however, Ellison's increasingly unsympathetic representation of the CPUSA in successive drafts of Invisible Man hinges upon the countervailing proposition that Marxist class analysis leads to a politics that is at worst antipathetic, and at best irrelevant, to the welfare of African Americans. To track the process by which identity supplants class analysis and culturalism supersedes class struggle in Ellison's Cold War novel is thus to examine in race the process by which not communism, but anti-communism, has contributed to the demoralization and fragmentation of the movement for a "better world." Invisible Man's representation of the "Old Left," viewed as not simply a product but a process, helps us understand more fully the ideological forces currently necessitating the resuscitation of the "whole left." (See also Foley, "The Rhetoric of Anticommunism in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man"; "Ralph Ellison as Proletarian Journalist"; "Reading Redness: Politics

and Audience in Ralph Ellison's Early Short Fiction"; "From Communism to Brotherhood: The Drafts of Invisible Man"; and "Reading Redness Redux: Ralph Ellison, Intertextuality, and Biographical Criticism").

When Invisible Man appeared in 1952, Ellison's media image was carefully crafted to occlude the author's earlier connection with the left. Random House's dustjacket biography of Ellison featured his previous studies in music and sculpture; his work experience in a factory, for a psychologist, and as a freelance photographer; his World War II service in the merchant marine; and his lectures on American literature at New York University and Bennington College. Nothing was said, however, of the approximately three dozen pieces of left-wing fiction and reportage he had produced in the years before 1946. The biographical sketch appearing in the Saturday Review effaced Richard Wright from Ellison's background and claimed that T. S. Eliot was the dominant influence on the young novelist (Hazard 22). The New York Times literary profile made no mention of Ellison's many publications in New Challenge, New Masses, Direction, Tomorrow, Negro Quarterly, Negro Story, Common Ground, and other left or left-tending organs, noting only his previous appearances in safer venues such as American Writing in 1940 and Cross-Section in 1944 (Breit 25). Although a number of the reviews of the novel in the left press—for example, in the Daily Worker and Lloyd L. Brown in Masses and Mainstream, noted the writer's previous left connections, both the original reviews in mainstream publications and the flurry of second-round reviews accompanying Ellison's receiving the National Book Award in 1953 fostered the impression that Ellison had been publishing only in "respectable" organs all along (Berry 7; Brown 62–64).

Ellison's retrospective comments on his relations with the Communist Party were both cagey and contradictory. He routinely declared that "the Brotherhood wasn't the Communist Party" and explained, "I did not want to describe an existing Socialist or Communist or Marxist political group primarily because it would have allowed the reader to escape confronting certain political patterns... which still exist and of which our two major political parties are guilty in their relationships to Negro Americans" (Geller 7; Ellison, Going to the Territory [hereinafter GTT] 59). In a 1965 conversation with Wright biographer Michael Fohr, Ellison explained that, while he wrote for the New Masses for several years, he "never joined the Communist Party"; "I wasn't on the make in that sense. I wrote what I felt and wasn't in awe of functionaries... They never paid me anything. Finally I refused to write without money... I was so surprised [sic] when they paid" (Farber, "In Ralph Ellison's Precious Words" [hereinafter "Precious Words"] 6–7). In the 1965 preface to Shadow and Act, Ellison claimed that he "soon rejected... Marxist political theory" (Ellison, Shadow and Act [hereinafter S and A] xxi). In a 1967 interview, he stressed his alienation from left cultural practice, confessing to having written "what might
be called propaganda—having to do with the Negro struggle" but maintaining
that "my fiction was always trying to be something else. . . . I never accepted
the ideology which the New Muses attempted to impose on writers" (GT 294).
In a 1982 communication with Fabre, Ellison claimed that his outlook had
always "emphasized the Negroes' rather than the workers' point of view. . . .
[There] was no way for me to accept the Communist notion that workers and
Negroes were unite [sic] without a large dose of salts" (Fabre, "Precious Words"
20).

In the 1967 interview, however, Ellison admitted to having "gone through
the political madness that marked the intellectual experience of the thirties"
and charged that U.S. Communists

fostered the myth that communism was twentieth-century Americanism, but
to be a twentieth-century American meant, in their thinking, that you had
to be more Russian than American and less Negro than either. That's how
they lost their Negroes. 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 expendent in the shifting of
policy. (GT 296).

Reiterated in the published version of Invisible Man, this argument suggests that
Ellison's frequent claims to political naïveté were disingenuous. Bracketing for
the moment whether or not Ellison's judgment about the wartime CPUSA was
correct, we note that this critique indicates more than a passing acquaintance
with left politics and strategy. With the gradual opening up of the Ellison archive
in the past few years, it has become increasingly clear that Ellison's relation-
ship with the Communist left was indeed of substantial duration and serious-
ness. Lawrence Jackson's recent biography of the young Ellison—based, of neces-
sity, upon limited access to Ellison's letters and journals—further demonstrates
that this was the case. The notes accompanying Ellison's drafts of the novel,
moreover, contain multiple allusions to Brotherhood members as "communists."
As we shall see, the drafts themselves show that Ellison's original representa-
tion of the Brotherhood's relationship to Harlem was considerably more sympa-
thetic than the version contained in the 1952 text. In short, Ellison may
have furiously backpedaled from his youthful commitments after his novel was
published, but there is little doubt that for many years he embraced a politics
that envisioned the fight for racial equality as inseparable from the revolution-
ary struggle against capitalism.

What can Ellison's early work tell us about the "Old Left" in the period pre-
ceding the Cold War? To begin with, Ellison's late-1930s interviews with south-
ern migrants living in Harlem for the Federal Writers Project (FWP)—some
of which are still accessible only on microfilm in New York's Schomburg
Library—reveal not only the pronounced class consciousness of some of the

young journalist's interviewees but also his own fascination with Marxist analy-
sis. The richly vernacular speech of one Eli Luster, for example, combines a pre-
diction of Biblical apocalypse with something close to a call for communist rev-
olution. Claiming that God "steep[ed] in" to sink the Titanic because it carried "all big rich folks: John Jacob Astor—all the big aristocrats," Luster
proposes that "God's time is coming":

Money won't be worth no more'n that dust blowing on the ground. Won't be
no men in Washington making fifty thousand dollars a week and folks
can't hardly make eighteen dollars a month. Everybody'll be equal, in God's
time. Won't be no old man Rockefeller, no such. . . . [T]hem what done took
advantage of everything'll be floating down the river. You'll go over to the
North River, and over to the East River, and you'll see em all floating along,
and the river'll be full and they won't know what struck em. The Lawd's gonna
have his day. (257-60)

A musician named Jim Barber recalled a conversation with a white man to
whom he had declared, "[White] skin ain't no more good to you than mine is
to me. You can't marry one a Du Pont's daughters, and I know damn well I
can't" (Banks 256). Ellison interviewed other migrants from the South who
clung to rural folk identities, such as the woman who, anticipating Invisible
Man's Mary Rambo, took as her motto, "I'm in New York, but New York isn't
in me" (Banks 250-52). Notably, however, class-conscious voices such as Lus-
ter's and Barber's would be absent from the final draft of the novel.

The research that Ellison contributed to the collective project that would
result in Roi Ottley and William Weatherby's The Negro in New York (1967)
shows him exploring the proposition that racism impedes the common class
interests of the exploited. A piece about the 1741 New York slave revolt draws
explicit parallels between the insurgents' trials and the Scottsboro case and
stresses the multiracial character of the rebellion (Ellison, "The Insurrection
of 1741"). A summary of Carter Woodson's The Beginning of Miscegenation of
the Whites and Blacks points out that in early colonial life "the slaves and white
indentured servants having a community of interests frequently intermingled,
but when class lines were drawn in a locality and laborers were largely of one
class or other intermixture was not so prevalent [sic]" (Ellison, "Woodson's The
Beginnings of Miscegenation of Whites and Blacks"). Although Ellison would later
claim that from the outset he accepted the Communist line on the necessity
for black-white working-class unity only reluctantly, these FWP writings sug-
gest otherwise.

In various reviews published in the Communist-affiliated New Masses, Elliso-
on put African American writers through an exacting proletarian litmus test.
Reviewing the 1940 Negro Playwrights' performance of Theodore Ward's Big
White Fog, Ellison praises the play's "attempt to probe the most vital problems
of Negro experience." These include the hardships posed by the Depression and
the experience of Garveyism, embodied in one brother, Victor, and the emergence of communism, embodied in another brother, Lester. But Ellison chides Ward for placing greater emphasis upon Victor's experience, noting that "Lester's story... should have been in the foreground. The Negro people's consciousness [of the conditions that produced Victor's tragedy] has increased... to the point that they have produced a writer who can objectify those elements once shrouded in a big white fog." Ward should have created a protagonist as conscious as himself (Ellison, "Big White Fog" 22–23). Ellison pursues a similar line of critique in his 1941 New Masses review of William Attaway's Blood on the Forge, where he faults Attaway for failing to create a "center of consciousness" lodged in a character or characters capable of comprehending the sequence of events. While the novel's portrayal of the Mcs brothers' northward migration powerfully portrays "the clash of two modes of economic production," its dialectic is "incomplete," for it represents "only one pole of the contradictory experience from which the novel is composed." Neglecting the fact that the migration produced "the most conscious American Negro type, the black trade unionist," Attaway "grasped the destruction of the folk, but missed its rebirth on a higher level" (Ellison, "The Great Migration" 24). Both Ward and Attaway are thus praised for dialectically representing the opposing forces in contemporary black experience but faulted for failing to emphasize the primary (that is, proletarian) aspect of those contradictions. The Brotherhood may be lampooned for drinking a toast to the historical dialectic in Invisible Man, but the young Ellison clearly took his dialectics seriously.

Although the critique of the Brotherhood in Invisible Man is premised upon the notion of wartime betrayal, it bears noting that Ellison's journalistic writings before he joined the merchant marine in late 1943 conform to the CPUSA line on war and fascism throughout its various dramatic shifts. In 1939, Ellison heartily espoused the Popular Front and the view of Communism as twentih-century Americanism. In a piece entitled "Anti-Semitism Among Negroes," Ellison praises "Negro leaders" such as NAACP Secretary Walter White, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters President A. Philip Randolph, and Abyssinian Baptist Church pastor Adam Clayton Powell (Sr.) for helping raise funds for Jewish refugees from Nazism and for "cooperating... on the broad front... for Democratic rights" in "this, the greatest of Democracies" (Ellison, "Anti-Semitism Among Negroes" 38). Between February and November 1940, by contrast—during the period between the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the Nazi invasion of the USSR—Ellison made a sharp about-face in evident conformity with the altered Communist line. Now he vigorously attacked the Roosevelt Administration's pretensions to democracy and moves toward intervention. For example, in "A Congress Jim Crow Didn't Attend," Ellison places the struggle against U.S. racism in the context of a struggle against anticomunism, ruling-class liberalism, and imperialist war. Rendering Ellison's response to the 1940 Third National Negro Congress, the piece adheres closely to the altered CP analysis of the domestic and world situations. Politicians earlier praised for "democratic" leadership are now traitors to the black masses and the New Deal; the "unmistakable notes of Red-baiting" in Randolph's Congress address give Ellison "a feeling of betrayal." Now antipatriotic, Ellison presents himself proudly as a "black Yank" who is "not coming." He praises new leaders in the ranks of the black working class as "the answer to those who wonder why there is such a scramble to raise the Booker T. Washington symbol anew in Negro life" and concludes, "There with the whites in the audience I saw the positive forces of civilisation and the best guarantee of America's future." Speech-making, leadership, white people in Negro organizations, Booker T. Washington, betrayal—key themes and motifs in Invisible Man—appear here with a very different political spin than they are given in the 1952 novel (Ellison, "A Congress Jim Crow Didn't Attend" 6–8).

Ellison's writings from the years 1942 and 1943 exhibit still another political shift. In accordance with the Communists' swing back toward advocacy of intervention after the Nazi invasion of the USSR in June 1941, Ellison now adopts a "win-the-war" stance characterized by a resuscitated Popular Front rhetoric. In "The Way It Is," an October 1942 New Masses account of Harlemites' attitudes toward the war effort as typified by one Mrs. Jackson, Ellison acknowledges the widespread ambivalence toward the war effort among Harlem blacks but maintains that the hardships Mrs. Jackson faces can only be resolved by a steadfast backing of "the President's [price and rent] stabilization program." The cost to be incurred by the nation's loss of Mrs. Jackson's allegiance is otherwise too great: "Only concrete action will be effective—last irritation and confusion turn into exasperation, and exasperation change to disgust and finally into anti-war sentiment (and there is such a danger)" (Ellison, "The Way It Is" 11). Ellison, in accord with CPUSA policy, clearly fears that African American alienation will impede the war effort.

That a significant shift in Ellison's analysis of African American participation in the war was taking place in the mid-forties is indicated in his 1944 review of Gunnar Myrdal's An American Dilemma. Here Ellison remarks that both the left and the New Deal "neglected sharp ideological planning where the Negro was concerned... and went about solving the Negro problem without defining the nature of the problem beyond its economic and narrowly political aspects. Which is not unusual for politicians—only here both groups consistently professed and demonstrated far more social vision than the average political party." Ellison's 1944 criticism of the Communist wartime policy is worth reproducing at length:

The most striking example of this failure is to be seen in the New Deal Administration's perpetuation of a Jim Crow Army, and the shamefaced support of it given by the Communists. It would be easy—on the basis of some of the slogans attributed to Negro people by the Communists, from time to time, and
the New Deal's frequent retreats on Negro issues—to question the sincerity of these two groups. Or, in the case of the New Deal, attribute its failure to its desire to hold power in a concrete political situation; while the failure of the Communists could be laid to "Red perfidy," but this would be silly. Sincerity is not a quality that one expects of political parties, nor even revolutionary ones. To question their sincerity makes room for the old idea of paternalism, and the comy notion that these two groups have an obligation to "do something for the Negro." (S and A 310)

Here Ellison criticizes for the first time the Communists' acceptance of—or at least refusal publicly to criticise—segregation in the armed forces. Moreover, elsewhere in the review Ellison chastises the CPUSA for its unwillingness to merge Marx with Freud in confronting "the problem of the irrational" which, in American society, "has taken the form of the Negro problem," dubbed by Myrdal the "American dilemma." Yet Ellison still commends the CP for having "far more social vision than the average political party" and in fact refutes the charge of "Red perfidy" that would be central to Huxtable and his subsequent comments on the CPUSA. Moreover, Ellison criticizes Myrdal for psychologizing the problem of racism, which leads him to reject the "concept of class struggle and the economic motivation of anti-Negro prejudice which is an increasing number of Negro intellectuals correctly analyses [sic] their situation." Rather than rejecting Marxism, Ellison in 1944 aspires to render it more encompassing and effective. He envisions a "whole left" that is anything strengthened by a deeper grasp—political, economic, and psychological—of the relationship of race to class.

With the exception of some of his contributions to the FWP, the corpus of Ellison's left-leaning journalistic writings from the late 1930s to the mid-1940s has long been available to scholars taking the trouble to go beyond Ellison's post-1952 disavowals of left affiliations. It was, however, only in 1996—when John Callahan, literary executor to the Ellison estate, brought out Flying Home and Other Stories—that the full extent of Ellison's early ambitions as a writer of proletarian fiction would become evident. Callahan's collection does not reproduce Ellison's two unabashedly leftist tales from this period—"Slick's Gonna Lean" and "The Birthmark"—but it contains a number of short stories that, after the novelist's death, Callahan discovered under Ellison's dining room table. While all these early stories have merit, and a few are quite extraordinary, two will serve here to exemplify the young Ellison's efforts to give fictional life to his radical political vision.

"A Party Down at the Square" is a riveting story about a lynching, told from the point of view of an anonymous young white boy from Cincinnati visiting relatives in Alabama. He witnesses the ritual burning alive of an African American man (whom he continually refers to as "that Baccot nigger") one evening on a town square where men and women throng to get a closer look at the sheriff and his deputies stand guard—apparently to safeguard, not stop, what is going on. When the lynching victim calls out in agony, "Will someone please cut my throat like a Christian?" a lyncher calls back, "Sorry but there ain't no Christians around tonight. Ain't no Jew-Boys either. We're just one hundred percent Americans" (Ellison, "A Party Down at the Square" [henceforth "Party"] 8). The "party" is interrupted by the heavy winds and rains of a cyclone, which causes a blackout at a nearby airport and makes the pilot of a plane swoop low over the lit-up town square, which he mistakes for the runway. He zooms upward without crashing, but the plane's wing breaks an electric power line which, whipping like a snake, falls and electrocutes a white woman.

The armed sheriff forces the crowd back to the bonfire, and the lynching is completed. The boy observes that the burning man's back "looks like a barbequed hog" ("Party" 9); he vomits but is reassured by his uncle, who jokes that his nephew, while a "gutless wonder from Cincinnati," will "get used to it in time" ("Party" 10). The story ends with a scene in the town's general store, where two white sharecroppers—who look, the boy says, "hungry as hell," like "most of the croppers"—observe that another "nigger" has been lynched (lynchings are always done in pairs, one says, "to keep the other niggers in place"). Another remarks that "it didn't do no good to kill niggers 'cause things don't get no better"; he is told by the first that "he'd better shut his damn mouth."

The second sharecropper is silenced. "But from the look on his face," the boy surmises, "he won't stay shut long." The story ends with the boy thinking, "It was my first party and my last. God, but that nigger was tough. That Baccot nigger was some nigger!" ("Party" 11).

Besides offering a forceful indictment of the brutality of lynching, the story contains an allegorical commentary on the costs of racist false consciousness to the white working class; its organizing premise is Marxist. The cyclone suggests the cataclysmic coming of fascism, which the whites, organically involved in the ritual murder of the black, do not see approaching. The snake-like whipping power line—which, we are told, leads from the urban industrial center of Birmingham—provocatively signifies the destructive effect of forces of production fettered by capitalist social relations. The electrocution of the white woman—who is even dressed in white—reveals the high price paid by those who, implicated in "100% Americanism" and the lynching violence it entails, align themselves along the same side of the color line as their rulers, embodied here in the armed sheriff and his deputies who compel participation in, or at least acquiescence with, the grotesque public ceremony. But the closing remark by the resolute sharecropper, coupled with the boy's statement that this is to be his first lynching and his last (the boy's descendant is perhaps the white youth who repudiates his racist father at the end of John Singleton's movie Rosewood), indicates that the days of the seamlessly unified "white" body politic of 100% Americanism are numbered. The burning—indeed, barbequing—of
racial scapegoats will not allay the pangs experienced by whites who are "hungry as hell"; class antagonism, kept under wraps by the rituals of racism, may one day soon erupt.

"The Black Ball" is narrated in the first person by John, a young African American father who, while ambitious to return to college, is working as a janitor in an unnamed town in the Southwest. A single parent, he ponders how to introduce the realities of Jim Crow to his four-year-old son; when the child—who plays regularly with Jackie, the white son of a neighboring gardener—asks whether brown is better than white, he replies, "Some people think so. But American is better than both." (Ellison, "The Black Ball" 111). John is continually anxious about his son's vigorous playing with a white ball will disrupt the resident building manager and imperil John's job. Wary of whites, John is at first put off when a white unionist—whose "lean" face has "a redness [that] comes from a long diet of certain foods" ("The Black Ball" 111)—approaches him with an invitation to join a building-service workers' union: all unions, John declares, exclude black workers from membership. The white worker—who, he emerges, initially organized among "croppers," but now concentrates among urban proletarians—proclaims that his union is different. As proof of his sincerity, he displays his badly burned hands, injured, he says, in a fruitless attempt to prevent a black friend of his from being lynched in Macon County, Alabama.

As John reads Andre Malraux's Man's Fate during his lunch break and meditates upon the unionist's message, he sees a nursemaid shepherd her white charges away from Jackie, who disconsolately "drag[s] his toy, some kind of bird that flapped its wings like an eagle." Asked by his son what he is looking at, John replies, "I guess Daddy was just looking out on the world." ("The Black Ball" 118). When an older white boy seizes the white ball from John's son and throws it through the manager's window, the boss angrily warns John that he will find himself "behind the black ball" if the child shows his face again; quipped by the child about why the boss thinks the white ball is black, John ruefully thinks, "My, yes, the old ball game," and tells his son that he will himself play with the black ball "in time" ("The Black Ball" 121). The story ends with John putting iodine on his hand, which he has cut cleaning up the broken glass: "I looked down at the iodine stain, I thought of the fellow's fried hands, and felt in my pocket to make sure I still had the card he had given me. Maybe there was a color other than white on the old ball" ("The Black Ball" 122).

"The Black Ball" primarily seeks to address and overcome black workers' skepticism about multiracial unionism. But the tale's implied readership consists of anyone concerned with building black-white workers' unity and, moreover, familiar with the conventions of and debates within proletarian literature. For the white unionist's mention that he has moved from organizing sharecroppers to urban workers—as well as the fact that he now works in New Mexico—associates him with the CPUSA, which expanded into urban organizing in the Southwest in the late 1930s. The reference to Macon County, Alabama, reinforces the text's allusion to Communist organizing, since it was there, in the heart of the deep South, that the CPUSA conducted its campaign to free the Scottsboro Boys and expose the brutal tyranny of Jim Crow. The white unionist's "fried hands" thus link the possibility for class-based multiracial unity to a specific Communist-led praxis against lynching.

Besides signaling its author's awareness of communist activity, "The Black Ball" refers to well-known works of contemporaneous left-wing literature. The white unionist with the scarred hands is a familiar type of mentor character from the conventions of proletarian fiction; in particular, like the character Hans of Jack Conroy's The Disinherited (1933), he is a class struggle veteran bearing the physical marks of the battles he has fought and seeking to raise the consciousness of a naïve younger man. Ellison's allusion to Man's Fate, moreover, shows that both John and his creator are conversant with the novel that had prompted heated debate in the letters column of the 1934 New Masses about the portrayal of revolutionary choice in works of proletarian literature (Chevalier 27-28; Hicks 28-30; Hirach 43-44). Ellison's nod to Malraux thus signals not only John's cosmopolitanism and sophistication but also—in this tale about the need for workers to make the class-conscious choice to cross the color line—Ellison's own contribution to the debate occasioned by the book which his fictional character reads, and which he can assume many of his readers will have read as well.

Above all, the attitude toward U.S. nationalism conveyed in "The Black Ball" needs to be understood in the context of late-1930s CPUSA politics. That Ellison constructs his protagonist's class-conscious choice as an affirmation of a progressive American nationalism is indicated by John's early remark that "American" is better than either "brown" or "white," as well as by the fact that, when the working-class Jackie is prevented from playing with wealthier children (the family makes enough money to hire a nursemaid), the toy he carries through the dust resembles a cripple eagle. Presumably both racism and elitism violate the principles for which the nation—ideally, at least—stands. Yet "The Black Ball" ends with an affirmation of the necessity for proletarian internationalist leadership in the fight to abolish the distinction between "brown" and "white" in the Jim Crowed United States. The iodine that John puts upon his cut hand implies that the "old ball game" of racial division will end only when the U.S. working class is healed of its bleeding wounds by the red anti-racist of communism. The ball thus takes on larger meaning, suggesting not merely reform-level unity against the boss but the possibility of unifying the entire globe when it is held by red—or reddened—hands. The U.S. nationalism hesitantly expressed in "The Black Ball" is not the celebratory patriotism that would resonate in the final pages of Invisible Man, but the Popular Front patriotism that viewed communism as "twentieth-century Americanism." Ellison
may have sneered at this stance in 1967, but some twenty-five to thirty years before he seems to have embraced it seriously.

We come now to the drafts of Invisible Man. Ellison began writing his novel in the summer of 1945 at the Vermont home of an inter racial fellow-traveling couple who were his and Fanny Ellison's good friends. The novel, which would go through multiple drafts and drastic cutting, took him nearly seven years to complete. While the drafts are quite jumbled, it will require painstaking textual reconstruction to track Ellison's changing intentions, a trajectory of what we might call "anticommunistization" is unmistakable. I shall trace here certain patterns appearing in the Harlem section of the novel, especially the chapters focusing upon the hero's experiences with the Brotherhood.

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 Ham bro, 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." Lincoln-esque in stature and bearing, the avuncular Stein/Hambro observes that "[is]o 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 'yes' or 'no' 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, "swe[er][ing] the developing forces away from the destructive event and transforming it into [a] socially useful one" ("Brotherhood," Folder 1, Box 142, EP). 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 Hambro/Stein 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 (see Cruse).

In the drafts, other Brotherhood leaders lack the robotic traits attributed to them in the published version of the novel. As we work backwards, various puns and wordplays disappear. Brother Wrestrum ("testroom"), in one previous version designated as "Brother Thrillkild," is "Brother Elmo" in a still earlier version. That Ellison was quite aware of the political implications of his changing portrayal of Wrestrum/Thrillkild/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 less repugnant in earlier incarnations. In the original version of the Cthonian 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 ("Brotherhood," Folders 3, 5, 6; "Brotherhood-Arena Speech," Box 143, EP).

Ellison apparently 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-rulled reds. Notes accompanying the novel-in-progress further indicate that Ellison considered various options for the events leading up to what he called the "eye scene." Furthermore, 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 the 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" ("Brotherhood," Folders 2, Box 143). The seamless symbolic structure—and political rhetoric—of the 1952 text was the product of years of stitching and re-stitching.

Indeed, if we move from the portrayal of individual members of the Brotherhood to the more general representation of the organization's relation to Harlem's 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 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 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 mamma bout half past nine,
She said, 'Come back, daddy, early o’clock.'
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 dozers 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 . . . describing scenes of eviction and dispossession 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 sung this song at a quaking 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 decides to take the job previously offered by Brother Jack (“Brotherhood,” Folder 2, Box 143, EP). Ellison’s decision to omit the parade scene from the 1952 novel is critical.

Where in the published text the arid theorizing of the Brotherhood is shown to be out of touch with the pulse of Harlem, here black 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 testifies 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 multiracial unity. By contrast, the closest Ellison gets to voicing the discourse of the Depression-era CPUSA 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,” however, never appear. The hero’s resistance to the unfamiliar scene dissolves, 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 message of the Founding Fathers (560–61).

Another omitted episode depicts the hero overhearing a conversation in a tenement called “The Jungle,” where the Brotherhood has been attempting to organize a rent strike. One man comments upon his having become friends with a white Brotherhood couple, noting that “these here fays don’t act like o’ers, they act like people!” While he was first skeptical of the white man’s offer of friendship, the Harlemite now concludes, “This is something much bigger than I thought. I’m in it for good now. They invite me to their house, I invite them to mine; they serve me sauerkraut and wieners [sic]. I serve em red rice and beans, and we building the movement together.” (“Brotherhood-Fired Tenement,” Box 143, EP). 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.

Indeed, the invisible man’s entire experience as a Brotherhood organizer, viewed retrospectively as sheer hoodwinking and manipulation in the 1952 text, is depicted quite nostalgically in the drafts. In the published text, Ellison restricts his account of the hero’s Brotherhood organizing to a description of the “Rainbow of America’s Future” poster campaign and a brief account of a parade of “fifteen thousand Harlemites . . . down Broadway to City Hall,” in which he features the “People’s Hot Foot Squad,” complete with “the best-looking girls we could find, who pranced and twirled and just plain gilled in the enthusiastic interest of Brotherhood” (“Invisible Man” 371). In what appears to be the earliest draft of this material, the protagonist omits the Hot Foot Squad and offers a fuller description of the demonstrations he helped to organize:

At the time we were stepping up the fight against evictions and unemployment 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 street 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.” (“Brotherhood,” Folder 3, Box 143, EP)
Where the Brotherhood in the 1952 text is shown to engage in only one march upon City Hall, in the earlier draft it does so routinely. Where in the published novel the Brotherhood exploits the nubile bodies 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 somewhat caustically of “throwing the old ideology around,” he looks back on his earlier activism with some fondness.

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

They were like no other people I had ever known. I liked ... there selfless acceptance of human equality, and their willingness to get their heads bent 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 viral and we were revitalized.

Ellison later penciled in a number of telling revisions. “Most of my evenings” was changed to “in many of my evenings.” “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 own salary” the comment that “[money was not so necessary, when we found so much in our group.” (“Brotherhood,” Folder 3, Box 143, EP). Such alterations suggest Ellison’s growing desire to ionize 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 the entire passage was eventually cut from the novel.

Furthermore, the early 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 USSR. 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 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” (Invisible Man 418). We will recall that Ellison would later make the implied charge here explicit when he observed that “[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.”

In the drafts, however, 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. (This incident would seem to have been based on Richard Wright’s experience in securing the freedom of one Clinton Brewer; see Fabre, The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, 236-37). Thus when the hero tries to caution the Brotherhood of the riot brewing in Harlem, they reject his warnings not because their abstract theory cannot admit the possibility of contingency and chaos, but, in large part, because the invisible man has damaged his own credibility. 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 when with election time drawing near we would have to throw our support behind him [sic], 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 relation to Harlem is the attack from the “opposition,” who “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’ handing in of “falsified ... reports,” there is no clear suggestion that the organization has abandoned the fight against racism (“Brotherhood,” Folders 2 and 5, Box 143, EP).

Among the most important 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 1952 text, the hero’s interactions with white women in the movement are confined to his flirtation with Emma, mistress to Brother Jack, and his abortive relationship with Sibyl, who lusted to be taken in violence by a black man. In the published text, 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, however, after he last glimpses “her white face in the dim light of
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 a crucial facet 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 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" ("Brotherhood," Foldes 1 and 4, Box 143, EP). While 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 nuanced—and sympathetic—depiction of the possible appeal of a white woman to a black man in the radical movement. Ellison's eventual elimination of the Louise character entirely from the text suggests, however, his desire to avoid anything resembling a three-dimensional portrayal of interracial sexuality, Emma and Sibyl familiar figures from the discourse of anticommunism, were easier to handle.

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 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—apparently earlier—draft, the man whom the hero encounters handling the dancing Sambo dolls is not Clifton but "one of the younger brothers," who chants,
RADICAL RELEVANCE

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 ("Brotherhood," Folder 4, Box 143, EP). 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" (Invisible Man). 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 dolls.

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 boardinghouse. In the 1952 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 Erer Rabbit and Sweet-themonkey. Mary Rambo is perhaps most memorable for owning the grotesquely racist cash-bank that the invisible man cannot get rid of and for stating that she is not a New Yorker. The early drafts of Invisible Man reveal, however, that Ellison originally had in mind a more politically and sociologically variegated portrayal of Harlem's working-class population. Mary Rambo is worker at Harlem Hospital who takes the invisible man in after he was injured in a brawl with a white racist. Moreover, hardly a folkish isolate, she runs a boardinghouse where, among other things, the Brotherhood is the topic of everyday dinner conversation. The widowed Mrs. Garfield—whose husband "worked with his hands and believed in unions and strikes and things”—comments that "four 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" ("At Mary's," Box 142, EP).

Above all, it is the hovering shadow of Leroy, the former inhabitant of the invisible man's room, that dramatically shapes Ellison's original representation of the philosophy and politics embraced by Harlem's migrants. A young college student who left the South at the age of fifteen after "escaping[ing] from a mob," Leroy lived at Mary's for three years and then, to earn tuition money, went to sea, where he became best friends with a white sailor (also a native of the South) by the name of Treadwell. Visiting the boardinghouse with the news that Leroy has just drowned, Treadwell opines that because Leroy was a union militant, he "might have been pushed off the ship." In early versions of the novel, 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, "I'm must sum up LeRoy in his own mind at different stages of his own development" ("At Mary's," Folders 1 and 2, Box 142, EP).

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, dehumanization, through 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 exploited nor 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. ("Brotherhood," Folder 2, Box 143, EP).

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 means for African Americans to be the "true inheritors of the West, the rightful bearers of the humanist tradition." But Leroy's remarks are inflected by a number of Marxist assumptions wholly alien to his successor. African Americans are the group possessing the greatest capacity to understand social reality because they have been most oppressed by and alienated from it; Leroy's thinking closely parallels Engels's formulation of the dialectical relation of knowledge to class in the Anti-Dühring (Engels 104). 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 proletarian 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 nor 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” enunciates his awareness of the class purposes served by the likes of the KKK, who function as shock troops for elites using racism as a means of social control. Leroy might well be a card-carrying member not just of the Maritime Workers Union—to which Ellison himself belonged for several years—but of the CPUSA.

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 gathered a tradition of militant action around which men could rally today. What method? 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. . . . (“Leroy’s Journal,” Box 145, EP)

Always a CPUSA hero, Douglass occupied an especially important position in the red pantheon during the war years. For 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 all-out antiblack 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 predicts the legacy of John Brown, contrasting the former’s reliance upon rhetoric with the latter’s “tradition of militant action.”

Mary Rambo’s purported lodger also serves to draw out the radical potentialities in others. Noting that Leroy disturbed a number of his deep-seated prejudices, Treadwell describes how their friendship gave him insight into the role 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—was 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 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 its [sic] hard to change anything deeply within us without images of you rushing into our minds.” (“At Mary’s,” Folger 2, Box 142, EP)

Thanks to Leroy, Treadwell has come to realize the extent to which white supremacy functions ideologically to bind white workers to their own oppression. Along the lines advocated in Ellison’s Myrdal essay, Freud is recruited into an alliance with Marx.

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” (“Leroy’s Journal,” Box 145, EP). 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.

When Ellison decided to banish the inhabitants of Mary Rambo’s boardinghouse from the pages of Invisible Man, he was omitting the text’s most concrete demonstration of the openness of the black working class to a politics of class-conscious multicursal unity. Especially by effacing all traces of Leroy, he was denying that 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 kept the radical Leroy as a benchmark in “the different stages in his own development.”

Until the Ellison archive becomes widely available to scholars, we can only speculate about the full reasons for Ellison’s decision to abandon his leftist affiliations and concerns. What a perusal of his early oeuvre reveals, however, is that the young writer was moved to portray revolutionary politics as the route by which working-class people, both white and African American, might become “more fully and deeply human.” The dramatic contrast between the
radical young Ellison and the canonized Cold Warrior suggests, to me, two conclusions—one negative and one positive—relevant to the project of building a "whole left" capable of meeting the challenges of the present.

First, it is not the heritage of twentieth-century communism, but instead that of anticomunism, which has delinked the critique of capitalism from an understanding of other modes of oppression (or, to limit this claim to my discussion here, at least from an understanding of U.S. racism). Although since the demise of the USSR the "red menace" no longer holds the same power to terrify, it is crucial that we be aware of the extent to which anticomunism has gone into the cultural groundswell and reemerged as the abiding distrust of totality and master discourses, especially those focusing on class analysis. Understanding that Ellison only by degrees came to the demonization of Brother Jack, correlating the Brotherhood leader's glass eye with the denial of the protagonist's individuality by Bledsoe, Norton, and Emerson, deconstructs the signifying chain that otherwise automatically leads us to assume that communist rationalism is merely one more means to domination. If we grasp the extent to which the reduction of Marxism to callid scenism has persisted into the present-day suspicion of master discourses of all kinds, as well as the consequent valorization of dispersal and heterogeneity as cardinal organizing principles, we may be freer to think beyond the limits imposed by coalition politics and its various rationales.

My second conclusion is a positive extension of the first. If what the young Ellison's writings reveal about U.S. communism in the 1930s and 1940s possesses validity, those committed to the development of a "whole left" in the new century should perhaps not only adopt a cautionary attitude toward anticomunism but also reconsider whether communism might not remain a desirable goal. To propose such an end is not to deny that, during the course of the past century, the left went far off the path toward the construction of societies based upon principles of egalitarianism; I may not share the analysis of Communist perfidy guiding Ellison's final portrait of the Brotherhood, but this does not mean that I do not acknowledge profound errors and tragic losses. Nonetheless I find myself strangely energized, many decades later, by his depiction of the lantern-lit faces of the demonstrators in frosty Mount Morris Park, as well as by the signifying dozens played by Harlem's youth upon the slogan, "No more dispossession of the dispossessed." The critique of exploitation remains indispensable, indeed (dare I say it) central to any program that would aspire to liberate humanity from inequality; the movement that generated those faces and those words is part of a red line in history that we abandon at our peril. Part of our progress toward a better world should therefore entail a thorough-going critique of the strategies and programs that took our predecessors off course. This should not be a critique designed to delegitimize the goal itself—such as appears in Ellison's 1952 text—but instead one committed to analyzing why it has not yet been achieved, so that perhaps in years to come we may bring into existence a world where people can be "more fully and deeply human."
——. "Reading Redness Redux: Ralph Ellison, Intertextuality, and Biographical Criticism." *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* (Summer 2006), forthcoming.


