A stute readers of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* have routinely evinced dissatisfaction with the novel’s epilogue. Some have noted that the apparent merging of narrator and author in the novel’s final pages too abruptly effaces the reader’s ironic distancing from the narrator, thus loading the epilogue’s political dice (Fabre, “Narrator/Narratee”; McSweeney; Smith). Others have complained of the unproblematic celebration of American democracy in the closing pages of a novel that has yielded scant basis for such loyalty (Brennan; Gayle; Gibson). Still others have criticized the epilogue’s ahistoricism and would-be universalism—its reconceptualization of racism as a metaphor for an abstract human condition, its claim that the black narrator, hitherto rendered invisible primarily because of the color of his skin, now encompasses the invisibility of all alienated humanity (Kaiser; Schaub; Mason; Watts). Whether focusing on form or politics, these critics have argued that the epilogue to *Invisible Man* constitutes a dramatic rupture with what has preceded it, and an attempt to impose a psychological, political, and philosophical solution possessing little organic relation to the rest of the novel.

I share this uneasiness about the ending of Ellison’s novel, but I don’t think the epilogue is disjointed; rather I see it as the culmination of an embedded rhetoric that operates largely on subliminal levels throughout the text. This rhetoric is the rhetoric of anticommunism. (Following Joel Kovel, I use “anti-Communism” to signify opposition to the line and strategy of the Communist Party and “anticommunism” to signify a generalized fear and hatred of the left.) The confident proclamations of democracy and universal humanism in the novel’s final pages are inseparable from the nightmare scenario of a few pages before, when the hero dreams that he is castrated and has his testicles tossed off the George Washington

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Bridge by a lynching party in which Brotherhood leader Brother Jack wields the knife. Ever since I have known something about the history of Communist activity in the US, I have been repelled by this image. Whatever its weaknesses, the Communist Party (CP) forthrightly fought racism, and in 1952—when Ellison was garnering rave reviews for his novel and getting positioned to receive the National Book Award—the CP, itself reeling from the Smith Act trials, was rallying thousands to protest the legal lynching of Willie McGee, a black Mississippian falsely accused of rape (Horne, *Communist Front*; Mitford 160–94; Civil Rights Congress). *Invisible Man’s* closing lynching nightmare, I shall argue, is the culmination of a binary anticomunist logic that, through carefully orchestrated patterns of symbolism that set up uninterrupted chains of signification, draws parallels between the novel’s principal exemplar of communism—Brother Jack—and its principal exemplars of Jim Crow, Wall Street, and black misleadership. And while the novel’s white characters have all been portrayed as manipulative, objectifying, and racist—and the critique of invisibility in fact largely develops out of a white versus black binary opposition—it becomes possible for a white reader nonetheless to identify with the black protagonist in the epilogue because she or he has been positioned *on the same side* as the invisible man in a still more powerful binary logic, a logic that pits communism against humanity, a.k.a. America. After all, the same lynching party that Brother Jack leads against the protagonist also prepares to “ball the jack” of the American eagle, which “rock[s] dangerously” in the treacherous winds of contemporaneous history (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 563). The novel’s final linking of existential humanism with the preeminent icon of US patriotism, while specious, is the product of an insistently political logic.

In this essay I propose to examine the workings of this logic. First I shall trace the novelistic operations—specifically, the uses of symbolism—that allow Ellison to substitute rhetoric for reference, myth for history. Drawing upon the currently available historical archive, I shall then test out some of the generalizing claims about Communists and Communism that this technique enables Ellison to make in *Invisible Man*; I shall argue that he routinely chooses highly anomalous details to perform the work of typification. Next I shall briefly discuss Ellison’s treatment of left-wing politics in his journalism of the years 1938–1943, which suggests that his contacts with Communism may have differed significantly from his portrayal of the CP in the novel. I shall close by considering the possibility that Ellison’s representation of the left in the novel draws less upon any experiences of his own with the Communist Party during the years represented in the novel (1936–1943) than upon the discourse of the early Cold War, which took shape at the time when he was composing *Invisible Man* (1945–1951).

Beyond proposing a radically new reading of *Invisible Man*, this essay raises a number of other, and larger, considerations—critical, political, and methodological. To begin with, Ellison’s intentions in composing the novel are viewed here in
more complex—and, to some, possibly more worrisome—terms than are usually employed to describe his project. For while a number of the issues I raise here will not be resolved until the Ellison papers are made available—and even then resolution may evade us—what I am suggesting is that Ellison may have wittingly engaged in some degree of distortion when he wrote his novel. It is a commonplace that Ellison was bitterly antipathetic to the left when he wrote *Invisible Man*; I suggest that he may have been deliberately ascending—and helping to steer—the anticommunist bandwagon, possibly to advance his own career. Literary creation is of course a highly complex procedure; I am not making the simple claim that Ellison “lied.” But I am pointing out that there are striking resemblances between central tropes and characters in *Invisible Man* and dominant motifs in Cold War discourse, and that Ellison rose to fame in part by exploiting these parallels. *Invisible Man* may thus be a consciously, and not merely a reflexively, anticommunist text.

In addition, I am myself—quite consciously—deploying a reflectionist epistemology when I invoke “the archive” as the basis for querying Ellison’s representation of the left. While I am fully aware of current debates over the recoverability—indeed, the knowability—of history, my principal category of critique is, unapologetically, the notion of typicality, as defined and used by the Marxist theorist Georg Lukács. And typicality clearly presupposes the notion that, however mediated its connections with textual representation may be, there exists a reality prior to textualization, in relation to which a text can be said to be a more or less “accurate” mimesis. My use of “the archive” doubtless can and will be queried for its own necessary procedures of selectivity—and hence possible distortion. Nonetheless, I propose that Ellison’s novel—and, by extension, other texts posing comparable issues about typicality in representation—must be set alongside “the facts” if we are to assess its cognitive—and indeed its moral—value. These are weighty considerations; I can only hope that my awareness of the minefield through which I am treading will in part help me to make my way.

In its focus upon the rhetorical manipulations performed by Ellison’s text, moreover, this essay undertakes a critique not just of Ellison but also of those readers—both scholars and teachers—who have helped to codify and naturalize Ellison’s anticommunism. To be sure, Ellison’s rhetorical strategy invites such complicity. As I shall demonstrate, his symbols are carefully chosen to accumulate successive meanings; as these meanings move from antiracist critique in the Southern section of the novel to anticommunist polemic in the Northern section, the reader who obeys the dictates of formalist polemic by teasing out the deft patterning of Ellison’s text necessarily—and often without realizing it—reproduces Ellison’s ideological paradigm. In much commentary on *Invisible Man*, however, such naïve formalism is routinely accompanied by an almost knee-jerk anticommunism which simply assumes that Ellison “got it right” about the Communist Party: rarely does one encounter a critical discussion that calls into question the validity of Ellison’s
portrayal of the left or the judgments that flow from this portrayal. My essay thus takes to task, as it were, not merely Ellison himself but also those teachers and scholars who have without interrogation reproduced his anticommunist premises.

Clearly what is at stake in this essay, then, is an attempt on my part to de-demonize the US left. As I shall indicate below, I do this not because—though a committed leftist myself—I think that the CP of the later 1930s and 1940s is or should be beyond criticism. Rather, I undertake this project because the social contradictions that generated Communist activity in the past are still very much with us; it behooves us all to give left ideas a fair-minded hearing, and not dismiss them a priori, as the continuing heritage of the Cold War—of which much Ellison criticism remains, unfortunately, a significant literary-critical component—would urge us to do. In particular, I am concerned that we begin to question the well-nigh universally accepted belief that Communists have used African Americans and have, moreover, never (or only very infrequently) been African American themselves. While in its current form this notion takes the form of post-Althusserian arguments for the “relative autonomy” of race and class, its debt to Cold War era myths of red manipulation is profound. If we are to get beyond the narrow limits of “alliance” politics, it is necessary to recuperate, and retell, some of the history that helped give rise to those politics in the first place.

In part the anticommunist rhetoric of *Invisible Man* can be traced to Ellison’s deployment of a high modernist narrative structure that enables him to set up multiple parallels between apparently different characters and situations. Ellison himself was quite explicit about his strategy in the novel, noting that the symbols were worked out in advance of the narrative itself (*Shadow and Act* 176). He was also alert to the rhetoric of fiction, noting that “it is only by appealing to our sense of experience and playing upon our shared assumptions” that the novelist can “persuade[e] us to accept [his] projection of an experience which, on some level or mixtures of levels, we have shared with him” (*Going to the Territory* 242–43). Various critics, building upon Ellison’s own statements, have noted the influence of Faulkner upon Ellison’s use of clustered motifs, of Eliot and Lord Raglan upon his conception of myth and ritual, and of Kenneth Burke upon his notions of symbolic action and repetitive structure (Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 173–78; Forrest; Clipper; Murray 116–19; for a differing view of Ellison’s relation to modernism, see Lyne). It is generally agreed that Ellison’s major symbols function by accreting meaning with their successive appearances (McSweeney; Smith). The scholarship given to the hero after the battle royal reappears as the letter given him by Bledsoe and the slip of paper bearing his Brotherhood name. The blindness of the blindfolded teenagers resurfaces as the blindness of the statue of the slave kneeling before the Founder, of the orator Barbee, of the black boxing champion who lost an eye entertaining white audiences, and, finally, of Brother Jack. The white woman with the American
flag on her belly shows up again in a series of white women in the Communist movement who are fixated on race and used by powerful white men to both tempt and control black men. The novel is nothing if not—to invoke the favored trope of New Critic Cleanth Brooks—a well-wrought urn.

Some readers of Invisible Man have taken the novel’s structural reliance on informing motifs as an indication of its fundamental ahistoricity: Ellison, they argue, is pointing up rituals of manipulation and oppression that transcend (or, if the critic’s take is critical, evade) historical circumstance (Callahan; Schaub). But matters are not so simple. Ellison always refused to be pinned down on the referents of Ras the Exhorter and, especially, the Brotherhood (Shadow and Act 181; Going to the Territory 59). But he also declared that novels are “time-haunted” and acknowledged the mimetic relation of Invisible Man to both broad historical events—such as the Great Migration—and specific ones—such as the Harlem uprising of 1943, on which he had reported for the New York Post (Ellison, Shadow and Act 57; 1982 introduction to Invisible Man xiv; “Eyewitness Story”). Moreover, it is clear that historical referentiality is crucial to infusing meaning into the symbolic discourse in the novel. For example, the symbols of blindness introduced in the novel’s Southern portion would be meaningless if we could not see the blindfolding at the battle royal as in some sense typifying the kinds of fights that were set up among young black men under slavery and Jim Crow, or if we could not interpret the Founder’s ambiguous blinding/enlightening of the freed slave as a commentary on Booker T. Washington-esque educational practices. Similarly, the scholarship and the Bledsoe letter—which the narrator ultimately learns bore more or less the message “Keep this nigger boy running”—allude not only to the historical practice of slaveholders sending slaves on wild-goose chases around the countryside but also, more generally, to the suppression of black advancement in both the Jim Crow South and the presumably emancipated North (Going to the Territory 50, 57; O’Meally, Craft 13–16; Kostelanetz; Murray 122–24; Fischer; Fleming). In order for the symbols of Invisible Man to set in motion recognizable chains of signification—that is, to affirm the “shared assumptions” that Ellison recognized to be so crucial to novelistic rhetoric—they must first be taken as referring to social phenomena in a typifying and generalizing, not an anomalous and idiosyncratic, way.

The novel’s organizing symbols, once set in motion, take on a life of their own: history may start out as history in Invisible Man, but in the process of narration it becomes myth. For as one critic has commented about teaching Invisible Man, once students get to the Brotherhood section they are well enough acquainted with the meanings of the unifying motifs to apply these readily to the task of interpretation themselves, without aid from the instructor: “By this point of the novel, . . . students are usually having fun. They easily recognize the various manipulations of the Brotherhood and can connect them to those of the men at the battle royal and to Bledsoe, Brockway, Kimbro, Emerson, and Norton. This part of Invisible Man can
be taught very quickly” (Savery 72). But this stage of interpretive empowerment via recognition—so plausurable from a pedagogical point of view—is precisely the stage where the rhetoric of anticommunism kicks in; the political dice, as Valerie Smith comments, are “loaded” (52). For—despite the demurrals of Ellison and several of his defenders—the Brotherhood clearly draws largely upon the CP: if it did not, it would have no imaginable historical referent, and the entire last half of the novel would be based on a mimetic contract with the reader wholly different from that guiding the first half. (I have calculated that over three-quarters of the reviews originally greeting the novel—too numerous to list here—associated the Brotherhood with the Communist Party, and many explicitly equated them.) But because Ellison has erected a symbolic structure that can, as it were, be set on “automatic,” and because—this is crucial—he feels that he can rely upon his reader’s anticommunism to invest the specific features of the hero’s negative Brotherhood experience with an aura of typicality and generality, he is in fact under no obligation to continue anchoring his symbols in historical actuality. They can float free in a New Critical limbo, invested with coherence and meaning on the one hand by their mutual interrelations—their functions in patterning the well-wrought urn—and on the other by their confirmation in dominant ideology.

I am aware that it is epistemologically and politically risky these days to claim that *Invisible Man*—or any text, for that matter—is an ideological distortion of a “real” history in some sense exterior, and prior, to the text. But that is precisely the claim I am making, for I am querying the *typicality* of the details by which Ellison characterizes the CP and incorporates it into the novel’s symbolic and moral system. In order to call that typicality into question, however, one must go beyond the text to the archive.

Let us consider the relatively brief segment of the novel in which the hero meets up with the Brotherhood, gains employment, undergoes training, and attends his first social event. From Ellison’s rendering of his hero’s experience, one is led to draw several conclusions: first, that the CP recruited as organizers people with whom it had no prior acquaintance, just as Brother Jack offered the hero a job after hearing him speak for a few minutes at an eviction; second, that it paid them far more than the average Depression-era wage ($60 per week was a royal income during the 1930s); third, that it trained black organizers by sending them “downtown” to be catechized by white theorists like Brother Hambro; and fourth, that white Communists routinely socialized with rich fellow-travelers and were themselves full of racist attitudes—as evidenced by a man’s drunken request that the hero sing a spiritual and the whispered regret of Emma, Brother Jack’s mistress, that the hero was not darker in complexion.

To test the “evidence” in a novel is of course tricky, since what are at issue are not “facts” as such but their felt representative quality and consequent rhetorical impact. Moreover, the “evidence” in these episodes is of different kinds. The $60 a
week Brotherhood salary is perhaps the easiest element of the four to dispute, since research into 1930s Harlem political life readily reveals that CP organizers lived a hand-to-mouth existence. Howard “Stretch” Johnson, leader of the Harlem branch of the Young Communist League, earned a mere $10 per week in the late 1930s (Johnson Tape #2). CP leader Benjamin J. Davis, Jr.—a lawyer who had defended both the Scottsboro boys and Angelo Herndon, was elected to the City Council in the early 1940s, and was jailed under the Smith Act while Ellison was receiving the National Book Award for Invisible Man—apparently dressed shabbily and lived in a kitchenette apartment (Horne, Black Liberation, “The Red and the Black”). The hero’s downtown training by Brother Hambro—another relatively “verifiable” element—also appears anomalous when one hears of the process by which the Harlem organizers who rose to prominence—Johnson, Abner Berry, “Queen Mother” Audley Moore, to name a few—combined education in theory with extensive practice in the streets. (“They didn’t just recruit you,” Moore remarked. “You had to be tested” [Moore Tape #3; Naison].) The CP simply did not opportunistically pick up talented speakers, cram their heads full of Marxist theory, and then use them to stir up the passive masses. The available archive on these points can be said to “correct” the text—or at the very least to challenge its relation to history.

But what of the instances of interpersonal racism that Ellison represents? These are less susceptible to “refutation”: after all, comments like those of the drunken man and the color-obsessed Emma surely could have occurred in left circles, which were not exempt from the influences of the larger society. With regard to these two elements, then, the question is, to what extent could such incidents be said to be typical of interactions within the CP? The relevant “evidence” here is of course anecdotal. And the anecdote with which many of us are most familiar is Richard Wright’s embittered portrayal of Communists and Communism in American Hunger. But a wider survey of memoirs and oral histories from members of the left in the 1930s and 1940s, both white and black, reveals that, despite various criticisms veterans may have had of the CP line and organizing strategy, most of them concluded that personal relationships within the CP of the late 1930s and early 1940s were largely free of the racism pervading the rest of US society (Berry; Johnson; Frank Marshall Davis; Healey; Cooke; Scales and Nickson). Moreover, The Communist and Political Affairs, theoretical organs of the CP, reveal that, as a matter of policy, the Party confronted racism on many fronts and actively strove for sharp internal criticism of individual members’ white chauvinism—and black nationalism, for that matter (Franklin; Perry). CP criticism of white supremacist ideology is presumably portrayed in Invisible Man when Brother Jack harshly chastises the drunkard for his “unconscious racial chauvinism”—so harshly, in fact, that the invisible man takes the side of the offender, wondering whether a person “should have the right to make a mistake without his motives being considered consciously or unconsciously malicious” (307). Even opposition to white chauvinism is
thus depicted in the novel not as a creditable attempt to fight racism but as a hypocritical and inhumane obsession with political correctness: Brother Jack—who, we ultimately learn, has a glass eye and writes the note reminding the hero that the Brotherhood is a white man’s organization, thus “keeping him running”—is concerned not with equality but with control. In the episode with the drunkard, then, the anomalous detail becomes typical, and typicality then becomes generality through the episode’s incorporation into the novel’s organizing symbolic motifs of blindness, invisibility, and authoritarian message-writing.

Emma’s comment about the invisible man’s being too light-skinned poses still more complex and interesting issues about the politics of typification and representation. Ellison may just have made the episode up, or it may be based in some experience of his own: even when the Ellison papers become available we may never know. It bears noting, however, that in The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom (1949), Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., supports his rather sketchy contention that Communists viewed the race question primarily as a “valuable source of propaganda” by highlighting Angelo Herndon’s supposed allegation that, when he first arrived in New York after his release from prison in 1937, CP leader Anna Damon remarked that, from the standpoint of CP propaganda, it was a pity that Herndon did not have darker skin (Schlesinger 121). Schlesinger’s footnoted source for this report is an article in the New York World-Telegram of 22 March 1944. This article, it turns out, was one in a series attacking the CP in the midst of an American Labor Party primary election in which CP-supported candidates were battling candidates editorially favored by the World-Telegram. Veteran anti-Communist staff writer Frederick Woltman claims that Herndon reported Damon’s remark to a former Communist turned informer, one Timothy Holmes (Woltman 22 March 1944; see also 23 March 1944 and 24 March 1944). Although the next day’s Daily Worker carried a story lashing Holmes’s “fantastic tales” as “beneath contempt,” this protest did not problematize the story’s status for Woltman or, indeed, prevent it from subsequently becoming part of Cold War lore (“C.P. Exposes Timothy Holmes”; see also “Angelo Herndon . . .” and “Dubinsky . . .”). Schlesinger also reported this anecdote in a 1946 Life magazine article on US Communism: millions thus “learned” that, beneath their veneer of egalitarianism, Communists were no different than Jim Crow racists. At the same time that he treated the Herndon episode as exemplary, however, Schlesinger dismissed the entire Scottsboro campaign—the most intensive and mass antiracist CP activity of the early 1930s—as simply exemplifying “commendable individual acts against discrimination” (Vital Center 121). (For the CP’s response to The Vital Center, see Aptheker. For CP self-criticism on the excesses of the anti-white chauvinism campaign of the late 1940s, see Brown; Haywood; Healey 125–32. For negative views of the CP, see Record and Hutchinson.)

For all we know, perhaps Anna Damon did make the remark about Herndon: Ellison worked closely with Herndon on Negro Quarterly in 1942–1943 and may
have heard such a story from him. Interestingly, however, even though he left the Party shortly before the Wolman series, Herndon never “went public” with this—or any comparable—story of CP racism (“Angelo Herndon”). If the anecdote was true, then, it apparently did not have synecdochic status for him: presumably he had had enough experiences of a different kind to discourage him from generalizing from it. (Radical journalist and poet Frank Marshall Davis, who never forgave Wright for publishing “I Tried to Be a Communist” in the Atlantic Monthly in 1944, commended Herndon for “turn[ing] down an opportunity to ‘tell all’ to the Hearst press for substantial financial gain” [243–44].) For Schlesinger, however, this incident clearly functioned as such overwhelming—and presumably typifying—“evidence” of Communist bad faith that it warranted extensive showcasing. By contrast, the efforts of thousands of CP members to free the Scottsboro defendants (efforts that, according to Berry, cost some Party members their lives [Berry Tape #1 29 July 1974]) could be readily marginalized as a kind of collective idiosyncrasy. Again, Ellison may not have based the incident with the colorstruck Emma on any “external” experience; he and Schlesinger may have come up with the same incident to characterize Communist racism with or without the mediation of Angelo Herndon, and with or without Ellison’s having read Schlesinger’s writings. But, given the widespread influence of both Life magazine and The Vital Center, and given Ellison’s habit of keeping up with current debates (as attested by Albert Murray, Interview), it is certainly possible—and in my view quite probable—that Ellison’s Emma “is” the Anna of Schlesinger’s narrative. She is, in any event, a character familiar in the discourse of anticommunism. And for scores of critics subsequently commenting on Invisible Man—and teachers teaching it, no doubt—this incident, along with the others with which it is thematically grouped in the novel, has led to the conclusion that Ellison “got it right” about Communism. As Eric Sundquist remarks in his recent anthology of documents providing cultural contexts for Invisible Man, Ellison “effectively mimic[ked]” Communist rhetoric, ably demonstrating that, “although the Communist party went so far as to hold trials to purge itself of ‘white chauvinism,’ prejudice remained commonplace” (19, 193). That even so knowledgeable a scholar as Sundquist should feel no obligation to substantiate this generalization reveals the extent to which the novel is routinely taken to constitute its own corroboration of the “truths”—the “commonplaces”—it contains. The Cold War may—at least for now—be over, but its inherited paradigms remain largely uninterrogated and hence unchanged.

To argue that Invisible Man is an anticommunist text is not to defend the CP from any and all criticism. Indeed, viewed from the standpoint of a critique from the left—which I am aware all readers of this essay may not share—the CP was class collaborationist, and in many ways a sorry excuse for an organization having the franchise on the name “communist.” When the Harlem uprising broke out, leading CP members—far from inciting rebellion—went around in police
squad cars with Mayor LaGuardia and NAACP leader Walter White to cool down the crowd (Capeci 103). During World War II, the CP called for a no-strike pledge. While it by no means abandoned the fight against racism altogether, it did indeed “soft-pedal” (its own later term of post-Browderite self-criticism) its earlier struggles against “jimcrowism” in order to throw all possible weight behind the war against fascism (Wilkerson; Isserman 141–43; Foner 278–80; Lee; Hutchinson 182–85). Indeed, it could be argued that the CP at this time effectively abandoned a politics of class struggle, substituting “the people” for the proletariat and promoting US nationalism and patriotism—policies that it failed to reverse even during the “left turn” in the postwar period. By a curious turn of the political wheel, then, Ellison’s celebration of American diversity and democracy in the closing pages of Invisible Man, while aimed at stigmatizing the treacherous Brotherhood as unAmerican, is the CP’s own Popular Front rhetoric come home to haunt it. What is currently needed is a rectification of the historical record, of which both Invisible Man and the commentaries on it have become part. That the novel affords no room for a critique of the CP from the left should not propel those unsympathetic to anticommunism toward a sentimental nostalgia precluding consideration of US Communism’s signal shortcomings in the late 1930s and the 1940s.

The proposition that Invisible Man should be read as part of Cold War discourse is only reinforced if we contrast its representation of the left with what we can surmise about Ellison’s actual experiences around the CP during the years covered in the Harlem section of the novel. The nature and extent of Ellison’s relationship with the CP has been one of the best-kept secrets in US literary history. In part this obfuscation is the result of Ellison’s own efforts: he and his publishers took pains to expunge all evidence of his many early publications in the Communist press when Invisible Man appeared in 1952—reducing quite an impressive CV, in fact, in order to sanitize him for McCarthy-era reviewers and readers. He also made many subsequent statements in the 1960s and 1970s not only suggesting antipathy to all things Communist but also strongly implying that his own relationship with the left had been not only brief, but ambivalent and suspicious. In 1967 and 1971 interviews subsequently published in Going to the Territory, for example, he referred to the “political madness” of the 1930s and admitted that he had written “what might be called propaganda—having to do with the Negro struggle.” He maintained that he had always been a “true outsider” in relation to the left, however, and charged that, in the Communists’ eyes, “[Y]ou had to be more Russian than American and less Negro than either . . . 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” (Going to the Territory 292, 294, 202, 296). Frequently cited by critics, these and similar statements leave the impression that Ellison was always
marginal to the CP, and that his presumably long-held suspicions are what qualified him to bear witness against Communist perfidy.

I am not arguing that the Ellison of the years 1938–1944 was in all respects a "party-line" man. As Michel Fabre has pointed out, Ellison's letters to Wright indicate that he was very disturbed by the inner-party debate over Native Son in 1940 and 1941 and came to view certain CP leaders—interestingly, primarily black functionaries like Berry—as dogmatic philistines (Richard Wright Papers; Fabre, "From Native Son"). And, as Robert O'Meally has argued, in his early New Masses writings Ellison evinced some of the interest in folklore and black vernacular culture, as well as some of the skepticism about naturalism, that would signal his distance from the dominant modes of proletarian fiction and profoundly shape the 1952 novel (O'Meally, Craft 56–77). But these concerns and interests do not amount to an argument that Ellison to any significant degree departed from CP Marxism before the mid-forties. His interest in folklore and vernacular forms was integral to the Popular Front CP's sponsorship of all kinds of "people's culture"; repudiating cultural nationalism, he continually asserted the primacy of a class analysis of capitalism as the source of racism and the paramount necessity for arousing proletarian consciousness in all "folk" populations ("Javanese Folklore"; "The Great Migration"). Moreover, he warmly praised the John Reed Clubs and the League of American Writers—Communist organs in the proletarian cultural movement—for enabling the "revolution" in both the form and the content of contemporary black writing ("Recent Negro Fiction"). Furthermore, Ellison's extensive writings on nonliterary issues reveal him to have been a loyal, indeed passionate, defender of the CP line on the war itself—with all this line's twists and turns. During the Popular Front, he praised Roosevelt and LaGuardia, proclaimed the US a great democracy, and fulminated against Hitler and Father Coughlin ("Judge Lynch"). In 1940, after the Nonaggression Pact, he attacked Roosevelt, stressed class conflict, and proudly announced that "the Yanks are not coming" ("A Congress"). In 1942 and 1943, after the Nazi invasion of the USSR, he sang the praises of national unity and took an aggressive win-the-war stance ("The Way It Is"). Although Larry Neal and Eric Sundquist portray Ellison and Herndon as attempting to define a non-CP black leftist position in Negro Quarterly, the editors' call for a "critical participation" by African Americans in World War II on the grounds that "Negroes have their own stake in the defeat of fascism" was well within the parameters of Communist debate over the contradictions and complexities of the "Double V" campaign (Ellison, "Editorial Comment" 297; Benjamin Davis). Whatever reservations Ellison may have had about CP policy he kept to himself; if, as he later claimed, he "wrote what might be called propaganda" for the left, there is no sign that he did not do so willingly.

The jury is still out on the question of whether Ellison was at some time a Party member. While he himself disclaimed membership and such Harlem CP
members as Berry and Marvel Cooke speak of him as having been only on the margins of Party activity, Melvin B. Tolson implies the contrary: “Both of us were in [the] radical movement years ago. He and I understood Negro society as no other writers do. . . . The ideological battle is the most bitter and devastating battle there is. Ex-Communist turns on Communist. Ellison knows that I know; but he knows I cannot be bought. I haven’t changed; he has” (cited in Watts 2). Even if Ellison’s claim never to have been a Party member is valid, however, this highlights his willingness all the more, since he would then have been under no democratic centralist discipline to support changing positions to which any number of card-carrying Party members were in fact having trouble adhering. Up to the end of the war, in short, Ellison hewed to the CP line, including that of the Comintern, in all his published works—a very significant fact, since it is the presumed sacrifice of Harlem to the Brotherhood’s altered international priorities that constitutes the principal ground for Ellison’s charge, in *Invisible Man*, of Communist racism and treachery.

If Ellison’s own experience with the left during the years represented in the Harlem section of *Invisible Man* was not one of unremitting bitterness and betrayal, what then might have been the source of the novel’s overwhelmingly negative portrayal of the Brotherhood? Ellison spent all of 1944 and part of 1945 in the merchant marine, after which he began his long hibernation for writing *Invisible Man*; it is impossible to cite any published texts from the period 1945–1951 that document with any clarity his changing political views. (His only publications between 1946 and the 1952 appearance of *Invisible Man* were two versions of “The Battle Royal,” a review of Era Bell Thompson’s *American Daughter*, a commentary on *Intruder in the Dust*, and a review of J. Saunders Redding’s novel, *Stranger and Alone.*) The letters to Wright—until the Ellison papers become available, the only substantial source of information—register a growing cynicism with the CP, if not with all leftist values. In August 1945 Ellison sardonically noted that Earl Browder, CP Chairman during the wartime period, had “transformed a locomotive of history into a prairie schooner.” Interestingly, however, in the same letter Ellison averred that, despite “the C.P. sell-out of our people . . . and I mean by this, both Negroes and labor, . . . there is no answer for Negroes certainly except some sort of classless society” (Richard Wright Papers 5 August 1945). In 1948, Ellison applauded Chester Himes—presumably in *Lonely Crusade* (1947)—for “showing the communists what a Negro writer might do if he really started striking back at them.” Yet, looking out on the bleak post-war landscape, he also noted that “reality is becoming stern enough to make people reject anti-communist propaganda,” predicting that the Communists “stand a good chance to survive and become a force again” (1 February 1948). Noting Ellison’s own spelling and reinvoking Kovel’s useful distinction, we may surmise that at this point Ellison was anti-Communist but not yet anticommunist.

My earlier comments on *The Vital Center* suggest how we might fruitfully investigate the sources of Ellison’s acerbic portrayal of the Brotherhood—namely,
by considering the possible effect upon Ellison of the discourse of anticommunism that developed rapidly in the late 1940s and came to full articulation in the early 1950s. Until we can see the various drafts of *Invisible Man*—and learn, in particular, whether Ellison kept revising his depiction of the Brotherhood up through 1951—we can only speculate whether Ellison was influenced by specific texts in this discourse or simply created his Brotherhood out of the same ideological crucible. There are some suggestive links, however, between *Invisible Man*’s portrayal of Communists and certain well-known red-baiting texts of the time. Ellison’s clear implication that the invisible man is being entrapped by white women with the knowledge—indeed the blessing—of their red male partners, for example, recalls not only Himes’s *Lonely Crusade* but also the 1951 memoir of confirmed anticommunist J. Saunders Redding, *On Being Negro in America*, which portrays the CP using white women as bait to draw black men into the Party (62–70). Similarly, Ellison’s charge that the Brotherhood engineered the 1943 Harlem Rebellion echoes the claim made in the 1951 Warner Brothers movie, *I Was a Communist for the FBI*—subsequently made into both a radio and a TV series—that the CP arranged the 1943 rebellions in both Harlem and Detroit. (“To bring Communism in America we must incite riots,” states a red organizer in the movie, continually referring to blacks as “the niggers” [Douglas; Whitfield 21–22, 133–35; Belfrage 150–52].)

Above all, any student of Cold War discourse will be struck by the almost eerie correspondence between Ellison’s depiction of Brother Jack and the notorious Elizabeth Bentley’s portrayal of her former lover Timmy—a.k.a. Yasha, a.k.a. Golos—in her memoir *Out of Bondage* (1951). Bentley, along with the still more notorious Whittaker Chambers, was an ex-Communist who served as a key prosecution witness in the famous Alger Hiss trials of 1949—trials which, along with the Rosenberg case a couple of years later, were highly instrumental in arousing mass paranoia about Communists infiltrating the government and its security apparatus, and which served to equate Communism with treason in the national imagination. In *Out of Bondage*, the iron-disciplined Timmy is said to be red-headed, short, wearing nondescript clothing, and—here is the clincher—not a US Communist, as he originally claims, but a Russian-born Soviet spy. In *Invisible Man*, Brother Jack is also short, red-headed, and dumpily dressed, and, in the scene where his eye pops out, he “lapses into . . . another language”—probably Russian, since the hero sarcastically describes it as the “language of the future” (465). Although his portrait is not as detailed as Bentley’s, Louis Budenz, in one of the first ex-Communist recantations—*This Is My Story* (1947)—also depicts Jacob Golos, whom he includes among the “Russian born . . . mystery men” leading the CPUSA, as “little” and “red-headed” (238–42). The physical resemblance between Ellison’s fictional Jack and the historical Golos is, shall we say, noteworthy.

We may speculate that Ellison even created subliminal associations between Golos/Jack and Hiss through the novel’s message-writing motif—in particular, the invisible man’s crowning discovery that Jack’s handwriting on the paper assigning
him his Brotherhood name matches the handwriting on the anonymous note reminding him that the CP is a white man's organization. For, in the widely publicized Hiss trials, it was the identification of Hiss's handwriting (along with the distinctive imprint of his typewriter) that turned out to be the main circumstantial "proof" yielded by Chambers's pumpkin papers to build the federal government's case (de Toledano 169–86). The Brotherhood's betrayal of the invisible man thus not only reflects back on CP policy on the "Negro question" during the war but also looks ahead to the red treason said to be threatening the foundations of democracy in the US of 1952. Constructing quasi-autonomous chains of signification, the novel's symbolic patterning insinuates a kind of literary "guilt by association" structurally analogous to the mechanisms of the actual red scare (Steinberg).

The would-be castrators of the old American eagle are alive and well and dwelling in our midst, Ellison tells his readers of 1952. Situating Invisible Man in the context of Cold War discourse suggests that it may in fact be a luxury to read the novel as responding to its time by fleeing to the realms of high modernism and myth. For the "socially responsible role" (568) that the invisible man discovers for himself at the novel's end entails participating with considerable historical specificity, and existential gusto, in the principal battle-royal of his day—the exorcism of redness from the American body politic. As readers we allow the novel to speak for all of us on the lower frequencies, and to affirm "America" as the site of human possibility, only if we accede to its demonization of the left.

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