Ralph Ellison as Proletarian Journalist

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ABSTRACT: Despite Ellison's repeated claims, post-\textit{Invisible Man}, that he had never been close to the Communist Party, his journalistic writings from the period 1938–1944 — primarily contributions to the Federal Writers Project and the \textit{New Masses} — indicate a high degree of concurrence with CP approaches to a range of cultural and political issues. Of particular interest are his writings on war and fascism, which reflect agreement with the Communists' shifting positions — from Popular Front to "The Yanks Are Not Coming" to "Win the War." Although the Brotherhood's presumed betrayal of Harlem to the exigencies of international politics precipitates the invisible man's flight underground, the record of Ellison's own writings suggests that the portrayal of the left in the second half of \textit{Invisible Man} bears little correspondence to the author's own experiences and attitudes during the Depression and wartime years.

It has become a critical commonplace that, in his unsympathetic portrayal of the Brotherhood in \textit{Invisible Man}, Ralph Ellison "got it right" about the left, as it were. While Ellison spent some time on the fringes of the Communist Party (CP), the story goes, he was always wary of its motives and, as a black man, skeptical of its class-based politics: he had been close enough to feel the heat, but not close enough to get burned. This view of Ellison as political ingénue has been compounded by the more or less explicitly anticom- munist standards of evaluation that critics over the decades have brought to bear upon \textit{Invisible Man}. Early reviewers and critics, participating in the New Critical backlash against literary proletarianism, praised Ellison for his universalist existential humanism. More recent critics, eager to enlist Ellison in the postmodernist war on totality,
have celebrated his subversive tricksterism, his practice as *bricolleur*, his use of the vernacular presumably to articulate a Bakhtinian resistance to monologic discourses of all kinds — especially, of course, "Stalinist" Marxism. Appreciation of Ellison’s artistry has from the outset been interwoven with praise for his rejection of the left.1

Elsewhere I have argued that anticommunism is indeed central to the rhetoric of *Invisible Man* (Foley, 1997). What I hope to demonstrate here, however, is that during the late 1930s and early 1940s — the period presumably covered in the Harlem portion of the novel — Ellison in fact quite vigorously endorsed and supported the program and outlook of the U. S. Communist left.

*Ellison’s Rewriting of History*

The myth of the political virgin was originally fostered by Ellison’s carefully crafted 1952 media image. Random House’s dustjacket biography of Ellison featured the author’s early 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 NYU 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 1946.2 The biographical sketch accompanying the *Saturday Review* review of *Invisible Man* noted the above information and effaced Richard Wright from Ellison’s background, claiming that T. S. Eliot was the dominant influence on the young novelist (Hazard, 1952, 22). In a *New York Times* profile published soon after the appearance of *Invisible Man*, columnist Harvey Breit 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 — *American Writing* in 1940 and *Cross-Section* in 1944 (Breit, 1952, 26). While sardonic reviews in the left press — notably that by Abner Berry in the *Daily Worker*, John Oliver Killens in *Freedom*, and

1 For instances of Cold War era formalist/existentialist commentary, see Barrett, 1950; West, 1952; and Glicksberg, 1954. For instances of postmodernist commentary, see Byerman, 1983; Callahan, 1988; and Benston, 1984.

2 For a comprehensive — if error-ridden — bibliography of Ellison’s pre-*Invisible Man* publications, see O’Meally, 1980, 185–93. Several previously unpublished proletarian short stories are contained in Ellison, 1996.
Lloyd L. Brown in *Masses and Mainstream*—remarked upon Ellison’s previous participation in the cultural left, 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" venues all along. Ellison’s partisans were clearly willing to expunge a resume indicating high productivity in order to guarantee him acceptable writerly credentials. The “Ralph Ellison” packaged for Cold War public consumption was, to borrow a phrase from William Carlos Williams, a pure product of America.

Ellison’s own retrospective comments on his relations with the Communist Party are somewhat 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, 1964, 7; Ellison, 1986, 59). Moreover, he usually proclaimed his political and literary independence from the left-wing movement. In a 1963 conversation with Wright biographer Michel Fabre, 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” (Fabre, 1996, 6–7). In the preface to *Shadow and Act*, Ellison claims that he “soon rejected... Marxist political theory” (1964, 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 Masses* attempted to impose on writers” (1986, 294). In his 1971 essay “Remembering Richard Wright,” Ellison referred to himself as a “true outsider” in relation to the left (1986, 202). In a 1982 communication with Fabre, Ellison claimed that his outlook had always been “a product of [his] own grappling” and had “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, 1996, 20).³

But why, we might ask, did Ellison, if he was so independent-minded, ever "write propaganda" around a line that he could not accept without "a large dose of salts"? His very invectives against the CP belie his profession of political distance. In a 1967 interview, for example, he admitted to having "gone through the political madness that marked the intellectual experience of the thirties." While repeating his denial that he had been portraying the left in Invisible Man, Ellison articulated a critique that corresponds quite closely with the depiction of Brotherhood perfidy in the novel:

If I were to write an account of the swings and twitches of the U. S. Communist line during the thirties and forties, it would be a very revealing account, but I won't attempt to do this in terms of fiction. It would have to be done in terms of political science, reportage. You would have to look up their positions, chart their moves, look at the directives handed down by the Communist International — whatever the overall body was called. And you would be in a muck and a mire of dead and futile activity — much of which had little to do with their ultimate goals or with American reality. They 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 expedient in the shifting of policy. (1986, 296.)

If we take Ellison at his word, construing his retrospective vantage point as an accurate representation of doubts and suspicions he harbored all along, we are led to conclude that Ellison saw the feet of clay on the god of Communism long before it could begin to fail him.

But the historical record indicates that things may not be so simple. Casual first-name allusions to various CP members in Ellison's letters to Wright suggest a more than passing acquaintance. There exists, moreover, considerable anecdotal evidence showing that Ellison was a more committed fellow-traveler than he subsequently admitted; when the Ellison papers become available at the Library of Congress, fur-

³ Thanks to Michel Fabre for generously allowing me to read and quote from this article.
ther indications of his involvement with the left may well be discovered. At present, however, the best indicator of the nature and extent of Ellison’s left allegiance — both to Marxism in general and to many aspects of the CP line in particular — remains the large body of writings from the years 1937–1944, texts that Ellison himself later dismissed as “propaganda” and that are usually ignored by Ellison critics. While Ellison’s early short fiction displays a quite fascinating portrait of the artist as young proletarian (see Foley, forthcoming), I shall omit consideration of it here and focus on his nonfictional writings: his contributions to the Federal Writers Project and a small selection of his journalistic writings.

The Federal Writers Project Contributions

As an interviewer for the “Living Lore Unit” of the Federal Writers Project, Ellison conducted a number of interviews that exposed him to the speech, folklore, and political outlook of recently migrated Harlem residents. Pullman porter and former Floridian Lloyd Green, for example, continually reverted to the phrase, “I’m in New York, but New York ain’t in me” — words to be echoed by Ellison’s Mary Rambo, who tells the invisible man, “Don’t let this Harlem git you. I’m in New York, but New York ain’t in me, understand what I mean?” (Banks, 1980, 250–52; Ellison, 1952, 249). From storyteller Leo Gurley, who told of a legendary trickster hero named “Sweet-the-Monkey” with the power to “make hisself invisible,” Ellison probably gained a model for Peter Wheatstraw and perhaps even derived the novel’s organizing motif (Banks, 1980, 244).

But several of the FWP interviews highlight the sharp class consciousness of various Harlemites. Musician Jim Barber, reacting against the routine racism of whites frequenting the club where he played, described his rebuff of a patron making clumsy overtures of friendship:

You ain’t got nothing and I sho ain’t got nothing. What’s a poor colored cat and a poor white cat gonna do together? . . . Hell, that skin ain’t no more

4 CP theoretician and leader Herbert Aptheker states bluntly, “Ellison was a Communist when I knew him (whether actually in the Party really is irrelevant)” (personal correspondence). Radical poet Melvin B. Tolson affirmed that he and Ellison had been “in the radical movement” together and referred to Ellison as an “ex-Communist” (Farnsworth, 1984, 299–300). Harlem journalist and non-public Party member Marvel Cooke, however, recalls Ellison as a “shadow,” marginal to CP activity (Cooke, 1996). Berry states that Ellison was “just a hanger-on” of Wright’s (Berry, 1977, tape #1).
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. So what the hell you gon do up to my place?” (Banks, 1980, 256.)

Religious zealot Eli Luster combined a prediction of Biblical apocalypse and a call for communist revolution. Claiming that God “step[ped] in” to sink the Titanic because it carried “all big rich folks: John, Jacob Astor — all the big aristocrats,” Luster prophesizes 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 down 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 suh! . . . Them 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 them. The Lawd’s gonna have his day. (Banks, 1980, 257–60.)

The Ellison who recorded Jim Barber’s and Eli Luster’s words in 1939 chose not to reproduce their consciousness in Invisible Man: Mary Rambo and Peter Wheatstraw may be “down home,” but they are not anti-capitalist. In 1939, however, Ellison clearly discerned vital links between proletarian politics and vernacular speech; he did not see articulating cultural identity as a matter of bricolage.

A number of Ellison’s other writings for the FWP — unpublished, although incorporated into the collective project that would be Leroy Ottley and William Weatherby’s The Negro in New York (1967) — also reveal an allegiance to Marxist categories of analysis. A piece about the abortive black rebellion in 18th-century New York, entitled “The Insurrection of 1741,” draws explicit parallels between the insurgents’ trials and the Scottsboro case and stresses the multiracial character of the rebellion. 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].” If it is indeed true, as Ellison was to claim in 1971, that from the outset he accepted the Communist line on the necessity for black–white unity only reluctantly, it is curious
that his contributions to the FWP Negro History project — which was being directed by the decidedly non- (indeed, anti-) Communist Ottley — should have gone out of their way to stress common black and white class interests extending back into the colonial period.

*Essays and Reviews on Culture*

Ellison's journalistic writings and book reviews for the *New Masses* covered a broad range of topics; he was by no means exclusively concerned with "Negro" issues. A number of early essays and reviews, for example, develop a materialist and internationalist approach to folklore. In "Javanese Folklore" (Ellison, 1939c), a review of Gene Fowler's novel *Illusion in Java*, Ellison criticizes the author's "escapis[m]: "It is difficult to believe that almost forty million people living under the colonial rule of the Dutch find their lives as lyrical as does Fowler. . . . Folklore, even those [sic] most charming, reveals a contradictory, bitter-sweet quality when something is known of the conditions that give it birth" (27). By contrast, his 1941 report on the development of a revolutionary writers' league in the Philippines notes with excitement the "resurgence of Filipino cultural activity" as a result of the "social revolution" accompanying "the growth of industrialization and the activity among workers and farmers." Clearly a literature "expressive of the hopes and ideals of the people" would be developed primarily by writers attuned to proletarianization and class struggle (1941a, 3). In "The Magic of Limping John" (1944), a review of Frank Goodwyn's novel about "the folkways and religious beliefs of a group of Spanish Americans caught at a pre-scientific level of cultural development," Ellison remarks that "Mr. Goodwyn's efforts would have been more effective had his subject matter been less remote; for his universals never quite break through the exotic shell in which they have been couched" (121). Ellison's preoccupation with folklore as a site of resistance, which many critics of *Invisible Man* read as a culturalist tendency antipathetic to Marxist analytical categories, had its roots in these early critiques counterposing realism with exoticism on class-based grounds.

Ellison's enthusiasm for ideological commentary founded in materialist class analysis is apparent in his many reviews of writers, white and black, attempting to depict the complexities of U.S. race relations. In "Negro Prize Fighter," a 1940 review of Len Zinberg's *Walk Hard,*
*Talk Loud* (1940h), Ellison praises the author for “indicat[ing] how far a writer, whose approach to Negro life is uncolored by condescension, stereotyped ideas, and other faults growing out of race prejudice, is able to go with a Marxist understanding of the economic basis of Negro personality” (27). In a 1939 review of Louis Cochran’s *Boss Man*, Ellison rejects Cochran’s proposition that his oppressive protagonist is “ruthless in his exploitation of his tenants, contemptuous of the whites for their degraded condition, and paternal toward his ‘good’ Negroes” out of his “unfulfilled desire for a son.” Ellison declares, “This we cannot accept. The South’s condition is not due to isolated individuals, for no matter how powerful an individual may become, he is dependent upon others with similar interests; it is this group’s consciousness of itself as a class — its links lead to Wall Street — that is responsible” (1939b, 27). The representation of character is clearly inseparable from portraiture of economic conditions.

Ellison’s discussions of black literature, while addressing particularities in the situation of the African–American writer, put authors through an exacting proletarian litmus test. Reviewing the 1940 Negro Playwrights’ performance of Theodore Ward’s *Big White Fog*, Ellison (1940g) 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 (22–23). Ellison pursues a similar line of critique in his 1941 *New Masses* review of William Attaway’s *Blood on the Forge* (1941c) 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 portraiture of the Moss 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" (24). Both Ward and Attaway are thus praised for dialectically representing the opposing forces in contemporaneous 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 espoused the Marxist conception of contradiction with enthusiasm.\(^5\)

In the early 1940s Ellison also wrote several reviews that situated black proletarian writing in the broader context of modern black letters. In "Stormy Weather," a 1940 commentary on Langston Hughes's autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940f), Ellison chastised Hughes for devoting "too much attention . . . to the esthetic aspects of experience at the expense of its deeper meanings" (20). Comparing Wright with his predecessors, Ellison remarked that Harlem Renaissance writing had "perceived no connection between its own efforts and the symbols and images of Negro folk forms; it was oblivious of psychology; it was unconscious of politics. . . . Its protest was racial and narrowly nationalistic" (1941b, 12). The formal and political sterility of the earlier literature could be overcome, Ellison argued, only by a "realism" generated by the "new proletarian consciousness" that was itself the product of "the depression years, the movement for relief, the rise of the CIO with the attending increasing in union activity among the Negroes, the Herndon and Scottsboro cases, the fight against the poll tax." The emergence of "new techniques" and "new themes" was, moreover, inseparable from the cultural desegregation effected by the John Reed Clubs and the League of American Writers, which enabled a writer like Wright to come into "ownership of the means of [literary] production" (1940e, 22–24). Ellison thus linked the revolution in black writing not only to the emergence of proletarian consciousness from heightened class struggle but also to the vanguard role played by writers associated with the Communist movement. While later he would growl about the straitjacketing effect of the *New Masses* aesthetic, in the early 1940s Ellison clearly saw the left

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5 Berry recalls discussing literary symbolism with Ward, Ellison and Wright. Ward’s chosen symbol for representing “the black man’s condition” was fog; Wright’s was the steel enclosure; Ellison’s was “the road” that was “fraught with dangers at every turn” and that “had no end” (Berry, 1977 tape #1). The precise date of the conversation cannot be determined.
as vital to the forward movement of culture in general and African—American writing in particular.

**Articles on Fascism and War**

Commentators surveying Ellison's early journalism have restricted themselves almost exclusively to the pieces addressing cultural issues. Perhaps the predominant topic in this writing, however, is World War II, the struggle against fascism, and what these meant for the fight against racism in the United States. Analyzing this material is crucial, because in *Invisible Man* the most egregious of the Brotherhood’s many nefarious acts is its presumed abandonment of Harlem because of a shift in Party line away from Negro issues toward global concerns—a betrayal which (when seen by critics to have any specific historical referent at all) is routinely read as a commentary on how Communist-led antiracist struggles presumably were put on the back burner during World War II.

Many readers of *Invisible Man* may be surprised at the extent to which Ellison’s wartime journalism displays an apparently untroubled willingness to follow the CP line throughout its various dramatic shifts. In 1939, Ellison heartily espoused Popular Front anti-fascism. In a typical piece from this period 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.” He condemns the “Tory capitalists” who have created a “well organized ... Fascist offensive in Harlem,” such as the Pro-Franco *Concha España*, the Pittsburgh *Courier*, the New York *Amsterdam News*, as well the *Harlem Bulletin*, which carried the program of anti-Semitic black nationalists Sufi [Abdul Hamid] and Arnold [sic] Reid. “The question is not whether or not Negro and Jewish discriminations can be linked,” Ellison concludes; “the question is whether discrimination toward any group can be tolerated in this, the greatest of Democracies” (1939a, 38). Invoking Americanism as a norm being violated only by the reactionary wing of the ruling class—presumably non-“Tory” capitalism escapes his ire—Ellison articulated the class-conciliatory, pro-Roosevelt line of the late 1930s CP, which in fact dubbed Communism “twentieth-century Americanism.”
Between February and November 1940, by contrast — during the period between the Hitler–Stalin Pact and the Nazi invasion of the USSR — Ellison published a series of pieces in which he made a sharp about-face. Now he vigorously attacked the Roosevelt Administration’s pretensions to democracy and flirtation with intervention. In “Camp Lost Colony” (1940a), a description of the deplorable conditions faced by several hundred black and white evicted Missouri sharecroppers encamped along a highway, Ellison clearly targets the alliance of business and government as the campers’ antagonist. Lambasting Roosevelt’s Farm Security Agency for setting up local administrations and commissions consisting of “ginners, merchants, and large landowners with no representation of the agricultural workers,” Ellison shows how the sharecroppers are first evicted by the agricultural capitalists and then fleeced even of their government benefits. Domestic class antagonism is not the sole subject of Ellison’s trenchant commentary, however. As he remarks in closing, “[the sharecroppers] hope that the President will turn his attention from Mannerheim Finland long enough to save the measures which sent these American farming people to the polls for him in 1936” (18–19). Fighting to save the New Deal from the depredations of the ruling class is linked with a politics of left-wing isolationism. In “A Congress Jim Crow Didn’t Attend” (1940d), Ellison places the struggle against U. S. racism in the context of a struggle against anticommunism, ruling-class liberalism, and imperialist war. Rendering Ellison’s response to the 1941 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 anti-patriotic, Ellison presents himself proudly as a “black Yank” who is “not coming.” When he holds up Owen Whitfield (leader of the Missouri highway demonstration featured in “Camp Colony”) and building trades CIO organizer Frank Johnson as indicators that “the age of the Negro hero had returned to American life,” Ellison features these proletarians’ chosen affiliation with the left:

Whitfield and Johnson and the people behind them are the answer to those who wonder why there is such a scramble to raise the Booker T. Washington symbol anew in Negro life. . . . A new pole of leadership has developed
among the Negro people and the National Negro Congress is their organization. . . .

[T]here in the faces of my people I saw strength. There with the whites in the audience I saw the positive forces of civilization 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 (6–8).

Just as revealing as the 1940 articles in which he frontally assaults U. S. government policy, however, are several fiction reviews in which Ellison bends over backwards to remind his readers of class antagonism and imperialist war. In a hostile review of J. B. Priestley’s *Let the People Sing* (1940b), Ellison sharply criticizes class hierarchy in England. In order to offset “rebellion from ‘the people,’” Ellison notes, Priestley “advises the ruling class to take unto itself a bit of wisdom and plenty of the Comic Spirit, to get good and drunk and give the workers, ‘the people,’ as he puts it, an opportunity to enjoy some of the ‘good life’” (27). Not only does Ellison feel under no obligation to treat England as an anti-fascist ally; he also highlights the speciousness of all-class unity and points up the falsity of the term “the people” — that favored Popular Front byword — as a synonym for “the workers.” Stretching the point even more, in a review of Conrad Richter’s historical novel *The Trees* (1940c), Ellison relates the treatment of foreign military incursions in the novel’s frontier world to the present world situation. Citing the words of a character opposed to an invasion of Canada — “God forbid! If our American eagle wants to scream, let it scream over the fields, forests, and workshops of its own white and red peoples for civil equality and justice!” — Ellison comments, “[These are] words which might well be said now to those who would place our frontiers across the Atlantic” (26). Ellison here seize the opportunity to draw an isolationist lesson from a novel set among American pioneers living more than a century earlier.

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 his *New Masses* review of *Native
Land, a documentary about "the struggles of farmers and workers for civil liberties during the 1930's," Ellison stresses the film's international anti-fascist implications and its ability to forge "national unity." The film's "depiction of Black Legion and KKK activities as a grave danger to civil liberties becomes even more meaningful," he declares, "in light of the fact that these forces now join in a conscious, international attack against the allied nations through instigating such acts as the Sojourner Truth Housing riots." Taking a line on the Detroit riot identical to that espoused in the Communist and the Daily Worker, Ellison condemns the riots not only for their racism but also for their role in disrupting war production, now vital to defeating the fascist menace (1942a, 29). In "The Way it Is," an October 1942 New Masses account of Harlemers' 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 — lest irritation and confusion turn into exasperation, and exasperation change to disgust and finally into anti-war sentiment (and there is such a danger)" (1942b, 11). Ellison, in line with CP policy, clearly fears that African–American alienation will impede the war effort.

Some commentators — e.g., Neal, 1984, 32–37 and Sundquist, 1995, 18–20, 233–34 — have argued that Ellison's writings for Negro Quarterly, a journal he co-edited with Angelo Herndon in 1942 and 1943, signal his disaffection with Marxism and his turn toward the cultural nationalism that would emerge full-blown in Invisible Man. In a meditative piece entitled "Editorial Comment" (1943), Ellison did indeed declare that anyone attempting to "lead" the "Negro masses" must "lear[n] the meaning of [their] myths and symbols": "Perhaps the zoot suit conceals profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical frenzy of the Lindy-hop conceals clues to great potential power." Crucially, however, the context of this meditation on "leadership" was an attempt to grapple with the validity of African–American cynicism about the anti-fascist pretensions of a nation practicing Jim Crow. Rejecting both the "uncleтомism" of those who would claim that advocacy of Negro rights disrupts war unity and the "suicidal" implications of an "unqualified rejection of the war," Ellison was in fact work-
ing well within the parameters of CP political analysis when he urged U. S. blacks to adopt an “attitude of critical participation based upon a sharp sense of the Negro group’s personality.” This attitude, itself a “manifestation of Negro nationalism,” is based in the fact that “the historical role of Negroes [is to] integrat[e] the larger American nation and compe[l] it untiringly toward true freedom” (1943, 301, 298, 296). Negro nationalism, judiciously practiced, will both contribute to the war effort and further the struggle for racial equality. Rather than constituting a departure from CP analytical frameworks, this view offers a creative application of the CP’s advocacy of Negro nationalism — American blacks were, after all, held to be a “nation within a nation” — to the historical specificities of the wartime world.

That a significant shift in Ellison’s analysis of African-American participation in the war was taking place in the mid-1940s is indicated in his 1944 review of Gunnar Myrdal’s An America 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 oft-quoted 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, not even revolutionary ones. To question their sincerity makes room for the old idea of paternalism, and the corny notion that these groups have an obligation to “do something for the Negro.” (1964, 310.)

Clearly what Berry was to call Ellison’s “disenchantment with the Left” (Berry, 1952, 7) had begun by the time Ellison wrote these words, where he criticizes for the first time the Communists’ acceptance of
— or at least refusal publicly to criticize — segregation in the armed forces. Moreover, elsewhere in the review Ellison takes other swipes at the U. S. left, remarking that it lacks “that cultural sophistication and social insight springing from Marxist theory, which, backed by passion and courage, has allowed the Left in other countries to deal more creatively with reality than the Right.” The American CP, he concludes, is unwilling 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.” Myrdal, he contends, “has done the Left a service in pointing out that there is a psychological problem which, in this country, requires special attention.” As in his comments about the zoot-suiters in “Editorial Comment” (1943), he argues that economic and political analysis has limited force if it cannot harness psychology as well.

The 1944 Myrdal review is often cited as evidence of Ellison’s antipathy to the Communists and corroboration of the portraiture of Brotherhood manipulation in Invisible Man — in particular, their “switch in emphasis from local issues to those more national and international in scope” (418). In my view, however, this text — which remained unpublished until 1965, for reasons not yet clear — cannot be taken as indicative of a clear break with the CP-led left.6 Despite his criticism of the CP’s “shamefaced support” for the Jim Crow army, Ellison quite explicitly refutes the charge of “‘Red perfidy’” and in fact praises the CP — along with the New Deal Administration, we might note — for having “far more social vision than the average political party.” Moreover, Ellison stresses that the CP’s inadequacies result not from any foreign-based conspiracy to use or abuse African Americans but from their “inheritance of the American dilemma.” Indeed, it is the Communists’ typical Americanness — their unwitting implication in “the moral problem centering upon the Negro” — that “disproves the red-baiters’ charge that left-wingers are alien.” Finally, while criticizing the Communists’ economism and “overcau-

6 While the Ellison papers may clarify why the Myrdal review was not published, we may speculate that Ellison may have been reluctant to criticize the CP publicly in 1944. According to Fabre (1996, 7), Ellison also at this time wrote a review of the original text of Wright’s American Hunger, which contained a version of the highly skeptical portrayal of U. S. Communists that was published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1944 as “I Tried to Be a Communist” (and later reissued in Richard Grossman’s The God That Failed, 103–46). Originally written for Tomorrow, the review never appeared, presumably because Wright decided to withhold the second half of American Hunger and to publish only the childhood portion as Black Boy.
tious socialism," Ellison discerns many problems with Myrdal's approach and clearly remains wedded to a Marxist paradigm. Myrdal's psychologization of the problem of racism, he argues, puts him into a "running battle with Marxism" and leads him to reject the "concept of class struggle and the economic motivation of anti-Negro prejudice which to an increasing number of Negro intellectuals correctly analyses their situation." Myrdal's book "avoids the question of power and the question of who manipulates that power"; it ends up planning "a more efficient and subtle manipulation of black and white relations — especially in the South." Rather than repudiating Marxist analysis, then, Ellison presents himself as aspiring to refine that analysis so that it may be more encompassing and effective. Although he anticipates various arguments that will receive anticomunist inflection in *Invisible Man*, Ellison here remains within the rubric of Marxist political and cultural critique.

**Conclusion**

It is time to summarize and conclude what has necessarily been a partial treatment of a complex subject. Let me point out the limits within which I have been arguing. In the larger study from which this essay is drawn, I do not claim that Ellison "really was" a true-blue leftist and that he had no negative or contradictory attitudes toward the CP. His letters to Wright amply illustrate his growing hostility from the early 1940s onward toward what he felt was CP philistinism on aesthetic matters; they reveal that, by 1948, he had little remaining sympathy with the Party's overall program.7 Nor do I defend the CP's two 180-degree turnabouts during the war. On the one hand, although entering into the 1939 Nonaggression Pact was perhaps a plausible action for the Soviets, given the patent eagerness of the Western capitalist powers to see the Nazis destroy the socialist USSR — newly documented by Leibovitz and Finkel — it was nonetheless inexcusable for Stalin to send birthday greetings to Hitler. On the other hand, although Communists understandably wished to mount an international force to beat back the Nazi invaders of the USSR, the class-collaborationist nationalism of the Popular Front and the

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7 See Ellison's letters to Wright in the Richard Wright Papers, especially May 26, 1940, August 5, 1945, and February 1, 1948. See also Fabre, 1987.
war years was in its way equally problematic. Teheran was a travesty; and while the fight against racism in the United States was not abandoned, as the Ellison of *Invisible Man* and other hostile critics charge, it was, in Maurice Isserman’s delicate formulation, “forced into narrow channels” during the war (Isserman, 1982, 141–42).\(^8\) Arguably, in retrospect we can conclude — although I can only assert, not prove, the point here — that the costs of fighting the war on essentially nationalist grounds — whether Soviet, American, or whatever — were tragic indeed for the world communist movement. To point out that Ellison’s leftism was in alignment with the policies of the 1930s–1940s CP does not necessarily entail approval of those policies: recuperation of a lost (or hidden?) left history need not, and should not, involve uncritical nostalgia.

What I have been arguing, however, is that Ellison, while probably not a card-carrying Party member, to a quite remarkable degree adhered to CP Marxism on a wide range of cultural and political questions in his journalistic writings of 1937–1944. Indeed, this adherence is in a sense all the more noteworthy if, as seems the case, he

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\(^8\) To this day it remains difficult to assess the significance of the CP’s subordination of the fight against racism to the “win-the-war” policy. After the Nazi invasion of the USSR, the official position of the CPUSA was that “to conduct the fight for Negro rights in such a way as to hamper the National Front would endanger the central task of defense of the nation and the special interests of the Negro People” (Ford, 1944, 889). Parallels were routinely drawn between World War II and the Civil War, and Frederick Douglass’ call upon Negroes to fight in the segregated Union Army was frequently cited as precedent. Drawing an analogy between the abolition of Jim Crow and the abolition of slavery, for example, New York CP leader Benjamin J. Davis, Jr., wrote: “We never could before, but we can now, wipe out the jim-crow system. These demands are not demands against the war, but for the war at the same time that they are for the Negro. We demand the wiping out of the ugly stain of ‘racial’ persecution, of Hitlerism in America, as a necessary strengthening of our country so that we can wipe Hitlerism off the face of the whole earth” (Davis, 1942, 637). This policy clearly involved, in many spheres, “soft-pedaling” the struggle for Negro rights (the favored formulation in post-Browderite self-criticism). As Communist novelist and editor Lloyd Brown recalls thinking when German POWs were given service at a post restaurant that denied service to black soldiers, “in Germany, they’d break our bones; here, they break our hearts.” All the same, “the party’s greatest influence among black people was during this period” (Brown, 1998). Moreover, even the most casual scan of the *Daily Worker* throughout the war years reveals that the struggle against Jim Crow continued, inside and outside the military. Young Communist League leader Howard “Stretch” Johnson recalls that, when he joined the army, because “there was a lot of respect for the Russians,” his “being a Communist did not operate against me among the men. I had their respect.” He continues, “I was actively trying to organize the [black] enlisted men in the 92nd Division to struggle against Jim Crow and segregation. . . . White officers were being fraged in the 92nd because they had generated so much hostility in the enlisted men. . . . When we got overseas, where we were dealing with live ammo, a lot of white officers got popped by our side” (Johnson, n.d.).
never was a card-carrier. For then he would have been under no
democratic centralist discipline either to view racial oppression through
the lens of class exploitation or to defend the sudden reversals in CP
policy around the war. In any event, Ellison's own subsequent pub-
lished revisions of his experience — in Shadow and Act and Going to
the Territory as well as Invisible Man — cannot be taken without a large
dose of salts. For a recognition of the steadfast leftist partisanship in
Ellison's writings of the later 1930s and early 1940s suggests that it
was not so much his own experiences during these years as the Cold
War anticommunism saturating the postwar period during which he
composed Invisible Man that influenced his representation of Com-
munism in the novel. That, however, is an argument for another
occasion.

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