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Reading Redness: Politics and Audience in Ralph Ellison’s Early Short Fiction

Barbara Foley

With the death of Ralph Ellison in April 1994 and the recent publication of his posthumous—and long-awaited—second novel, Juneteenth, the curve of the career of the author of Invisible Man would now appear to be complete. Although the version of Juneteenth produced by John Callahan, Ellison’s literary executor, promises to be the topic of continuing controversy—particularly when the entire Ellison archive becomes available to the public—the novelist’s oeuvre now exists in its totality, ready to provide grist for many a critical mill.1 Much of the coming wave of revisionary scholarship will no doubt consider Juneteenth as the endpoint of a lifelong trajectory. What should not be overlooked, however, is the new light that the opening archive sheds on the early stages of Ellison’s writerly—and, I shall argue, political—experience. Most of those who have written on Ellison have assumed that the novelist’s apprenticeship occurred within the seven years during which he was working on Invisible Man. Among those relatively few critics who have bothered to read any of Ellison’s early fiction, the near-unanimous opinion has been that, even though the quasi-surrealist tales “King of the Bingo Game” and “Flying Home” and some of the early Buster and Riley stories manifested Ellison’s predilec-
tion for riffing in the vernacular, the novelist of the pre-*Invisible Man*
years was for the most part patiently awaiting emergence from the
chrysalis of his own genius. Such overtly leftist tales as "Slick Gonna
Learn," published in *Direction* in 1939, and "The Birthmark," published in
the *New Masses* in 1940, have generally been passed over in silence or
treated as embarrassing testaments to Ellison’s youthful—but, thankfully,
short-lived—flirtation with leftist politics. With the exception of a few
pieces on Richard Wright and other black writers, moreover, Ellison’s
journalism of the late 1930s and early 1940s—much of it expressly pro-
Communist—has been, again, either ignored or explained away as "propa-
ganda" that Ellison wrote largely for money. Ellison’s own comments on
his early work did little to dispel these notions (1).

Callahan’s discovery beneath the deceased writer’s dining room table
of a folder marked "Early Stories," however, and his subsequent 1996
publication of several of these stories, require that we reimagine the early
Ellison, as both writer and political being. In addition, several letters re-
leased by Callahan for publication in the April 1999 *New Republic*, espe-
cially when coupled with some of Ellison’s late 1930 letters to Wright, re-
veal that the young Ellison was quite forthright in his advocacy of
communism. He was "disgusted . . . with the whole system [that] offers a
poor person practically nothing but work for a low wage from birth to
death," Ellison wrote to his mother in August 1937. "I wish we could live
[in Russia]," where the people "got tired of seeing the rich have every-
thing and the poor nothing and are building a new system" (Callahan
“American” 36). Moreover, the drafts of *Invisible Man*—currently the
only part of the Ellison archive open without restriction to the public—
suggest that Ellison’s original conception of the Brotherhood (unmistake-
ably the Communist Party of the United States [CPUSA], despite Ellison’s
later demurrals) was considerably less hostile than the portrait of red per-
fidy appearing in the published version of the novel. The Brotherhood
characters are much less stereotypical; the hero has a love affair with a
young white woman in the brotherhood; and Mary Rambo’s kitchen,
rather than figuring as a zone of migrant consciousness unreachable by the
presumably arid theorizing of of the Brotherhood, is a site of discussion
and debate over the politics of multiracial proletarian unity (and even Pi-
casso-esque cubism) (see especially “Brotherhood,” “Louise,” and
“Leroy’s Journal,” Box 49, Ellison Papers). Although Ellison himself was
apparently complicit in the McCarthy-era project of portraying the author of *Invisible Man* as a largely self-generated being, with few prior publications, it is impossible at century’s end to perpetuate the myth of the literary—or political—tyro. Ellison clearly had strong left sympathies for a significant period of time and—crucial to our purposes here—cut his teeth as a proletarian writer. In this essay I propose to examine three early short stories—"A Party Down at the Square" and "The Black Ball," both published for the first time in *Flying Home and Other Stories*—and "In a Strange Country," which appeared in *Tomorrow* in 1944 and is republished in Callahan’s collection—that demonstrate the centrality of leftist politics to the young Ellison’s project (2).

As scholars familiar with the processes of canon revision are aware, however, simply adding new works to an established group of old ones does not in itself produce a new Gestalt: the paradigms within which readers read must be altered as well. This truism is well demonstrated in the case of Ellison’s fiction. As of this writing, those commentators who are beginning to fashion the arc of Ellison’s entire career—here I take as exemplary Callahan, as well as Shelby Steele, who wrote an appreciation of the “content of [Ellison’s] character” accompanying the March 1999 *New Republic* letters—have viewed the early short stories primarily as prefigurations of *Invisible Man*. But by reading the early tales as proclamations of a democratic humanism only incidentally linked with leftist politics, these critics are offering not so much a revisionary reading of Ellison as an amplified one: the Ellison who broadcast existentialist universalism and celebratory patriotism over the lower frequences at the end of *Invisible Man* was, it seems, always already murmuring in the tales that Ellison either tucked away under his dining room table or published in the left press but then eliminated from his curriculum vitae. Callahan thus writes that, even in his 1937 anticapitalist letters to his mother, the young Ellison’s “earnest, unguarded sense of the injustice of poverty and racism in the new universe of New York releases a lyricism that leavens and deepens his protest”; the stories gathered in *Flying Home and Other Stories*, rather than demonstrating Ellison’s detestation of capitalism, “chronicl[e] Ellison’s discovery of his American theme” (Callahan “American” 35; Introduction xxiv). Steele, along similarly retrospective lines, reads the stories as precursors to the 1952 novel in their portrayal of characters in quest for “democratic possibility” amidst the “absurd contingencies” of American
racism (31–32). By contrast, I argue here that the early stories are more significant for their break with the 1952 novel than for their continuity. Although "The Black Ball" and "In a Strange Country" in particular contain symbolic and thematic elements in some ways anticipating parallel features in Invisible Man, the uses to which the early stories put these elements are qualitatively different; even tropes apparently articulating the young Ellison's reluctant love for his country turn out, on closer scrutiny, to be part of a far more left-wing argument for proletarian internationalism. But we can hear the young Ellison's radical messages, I shall suggest, only if we place ourselves in the political shoes of the readers for whom these stories were initially intended—that is, regular readers of the New Masses and other publications strongly influenced by the doctrines of the contemporaneous left. For Ellison's method entails not so much persuading his audience to embrace a leftist politics as presupposing that they already share his stance; his rhetorical goal is, largely, to explore what it feels like to view the world through red lenses—or, at least, the dark pink lenses of the Popular Front era. As speech-act theorists have reminded us, any given locution is situated—indeed, defined—by the illocutionary aims of its utterer, as well as by its perlocutionary effect on its recipients (see Ohmann). If we are to grasp the purposes, both aesthetic and political, guiding Ellison's early short stories, we cannot take it as given that their effect on certain readers in the 1990s either reproduces the effect these stories produced—or, if published, would have produced—in the late 1930s or early 1940s, or reflects Ellison's intentions when he composed them. Invoking the categories of "assertion" and "assumption" developed by reader-response critic Peter Rabinowitz, I suggest that Ellison's politics are, in their most meaningful register, embedded in the premises—and the knowledge—that he expects his readers will bring to the act of reading. That many readers at the cusp of the millennium may lack access to both these premises and this knowledge only makes the task of historically reconstructing Ellison's intended reader—a member of the revolutionary "new masses" presumably in formation—all the more urgent (3).

"A Party Down at the Square" is a riveting story about a lynching, told from the point of view of a young white boy from Cincinnati visiting relatives in Alabama. The anonymous boy witnesses the ritual burning alive of an anonymous African-American man—whom he continually refers to as
“that Bacote nigger”—one evening on a town square where men and women throng to get a closer look as 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” (*Flying*, 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” (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” (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 Bacote nigger was some nigger!” (11)

Most likely written for publication in a venue such as the *New Masses*, “A Party Down at the Square” assumes an audience familiar with at least the rudiments of a class analysis of the role played by racism in U.S. society—namely, that racism, besides inflicting gruesome brutality upon blacks, produces a pro-capitalist false consciousness among white workers and divides the proletariat, leaving it vulnerable to complicity with fascism. For, besides offering a highly persuasive indictment of the horrors of lynching, the story contains an allegorical commentary on the costs of racist false consciousness to the white working class. The cyclone suggests the cataclysmic coming of fascism, which the whites, orgiastically involved in the ritual murder of the black, do not see approaching. The
snakelike 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 lynch 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 restive 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, barbequeing—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 Ellison who authored “A Party Down at the Square” positions his readers as part of an audience collectively possessing the capacity to grasp his critique of ideology and his revolutionary dialectics of negation. The universalism to which his tale appeals is a class-consciousness committed to revealing the fascism being practiced right in the American South and, implicitly, premised upon the need for an egalitarian world, one without violent deaths, hunger, cruelty, and authoritarian control. Yet the readership—the “new masses”—for and to whom Ellison speaks here is not all-inclusive, for it expressly excludes big landowners and their henchmen in the state apparatus; the unity for which he issues his implicit call has much to do with class and little to do with nation, which is figured here as the “100% Americanism” of white supremacy. In his introduction to Flying Home and Other Stories, Callahan remarks that “A Party Down at the Square” is told “from the perspective of someone without a moral point of view,” thereby “compel[ling] readers to experience the human condition in extremis”; in the story’s closing sentence, “[t]he repetition of nigger denies, affirms, and again denies the mystery and equality of the human condition” (xxvi). In my view, the tale makes more sense, and gains in richness both literary and political, when it is read as a commentary not on some transhistorical “human condition” but on the role of white suprema-
cist ideology in objectifying the "other," deadening the self, and in the process keeping not just African Americans like the tale's nameless victim "in their place," but white workers and farmers as well. The reason why the sheriff and his deputies have little trouble with crowd control is not that the ritualistic behavior portrayed here is "in extremis," but that it is shaped and constrained by the historically specific—and, while horrific, unmysterious—ethics of living Jim Crow. There is a "moral perspective" in the story; but it derives from the critique of ideology as false consciousness and is ineluctably political in its ironic operations. While some readers in the late 1990s may not "get" the relationship between the white sharecropper who looks "hungry as hell" and the "barbequed" back of the burning black man, Ellison could feel fairly confident that his implied reader would not miss his point.

In reading "The Black Ball," a story built around the relationship of black to white to red, it is equally crucial to re-imagine the original audience Ellison had in mind. The tale 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 gardiner—asks whether brown is better than white, he replies, "Some people think so. But American is better than both" (111). John is continually anxious that 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" (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, it 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 watches a flock of free-wheeling pigeons swoop down over the driveway and 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” (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; queried 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 himself will play with the black ball “in time” (121). The story ends with John putting iodine on his hand, which he has cut cleaning up the broken glass: “[L]ooking 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” (122).

“The Black Ball” clearly seeks to address and overcome black workers’ skepticism about multiracial unionism; as in “Slick Gonna Learn,” the core of the tale’s targeted audience is the non-class-conscious sector of the African-American proletariat. 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 here, 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 symbolize more than “relief from racist contingencies in America’s idea of democratic brotherhood,” as Steele opines (32); they link the possibility for class-based multiracial unity to a specific Communist-led campaign against lynching, which was integral to a plan for ruling-class hegemony that was anything but “contegent” in motivation. Besides signalling 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 naive 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 (see Hirsch, Chevalier, and Hicks). 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 that his fictional character reads—and that 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 construes 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 drags through the dust resembles a crippled eagle. The pigeons that swoop down over the scene, while anticipating the flocks of pigeons whirring through the skies above the dying Todd Clifton in *Invisible Man*, signify a freedom from tyranny very different from the freedom from Communist authoritarianism suggested in the 1952 novel. What Callahan calls Ellison’s “American theme” in “The Black Ball” is not in opposition to Communism but instead well within the limits of standard CPUSA Popular Front-era patriotism. Indeed, the tale—which Callahan considers “perhaps the most subtly crafted and realized of the unpublished stories” (xxxiv)—is about a good deal more than the “common—not identical but common—democratic identity” (xxxviii) of black and white. For “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 “nuanced” quality for which Callahan justly praises the story derives not principally from its narrator’s “sensitivity to differences between the South and the Southwest,” but from its politically charged symbolism. The iodine that John puts upon his cut hand would, for his left-oriented readers, imply that the “old ball game” of racial division will end
only when the US working class is healed of its bleeding wounds by the red antibiotic 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. While Callahan and Steele seem to have missed this crucial point in their comments on the story, it would most likely have been grasped by Ellison’s projected Popular Front-era 1930s readers, since the troping of red to signify at once the violence of class struggle and the necessity for communism was another common convention in proletarian literature (see, for example, Hughes). Although “The Black Ball” obviously calls for black-white labor fellowship, then, it seeks for its readers far more than what Steele refers to as “relief from racist contingencies in American’s idea of democratic brotherhood” (32): the tale invokes a new way of “looking out on the world,” one that envisions an anti-racist and democratic “people’s” nationalism as not a goal in itself but a necessary way-station on the road to proletarian internationalism. The full dimensions of the tale’s radical appeal to the global class-consciousness of its readers are visible, however, only when its allusiveness and symbology are read through the grid of Ellison’s explicitly pro-Communist partisanship.

“In a Strange Country,” while positing a less radical analysis of race and class than either “A Party Down at the Square” or “The Black Ball,” is if anything still more embedded in the discourse of CPUSA politics. The story—loosely based upon Ellison’s own experiences in the merchant marine during World War II—takes place in a seaside town in Wales, where the protagonist, a black merchant marineman named Parker, has come ashore on leave. Having just been assaulted by some white American sailors, Parker, as he enters a pub, is full of cynicism about white people. But he is treated with great warmth and kindness by some Welshmen, for whom music is clearly the food of internationalist love. A group bridging class differences—containing both “the leading mine owner” and a miners’ union official—the Welsh choir evince familiarity the Negro spirituals and fondly call Parker a “black Yank.” Parker thinks to himself that these Welsh are “a different breed; even from the English” (139); while white, they are not white. As he listens to them sing, there arises in his mind’s eye the image of “a Russian peasant kneeling to kiss the earth and rising wet-eyed to enter into battle with cries of fierce exultation” (142). And as he wrestles inwardly, there come to his mind various lines from Othello, ending with
the semi-ironic reflection, “Do the state some service, Parker” (143–44). The story ends with a nationalist-internationalist songfest. The Welshmen sing their national anthem with gusto; they next strike up “God Save the King,” which, Parker notes, is “not nearly so stirring” (145). Then they sing the “Internationale”—which, a bit oddly, makes Parker recall “when he was a small boy marching in the streets behind the bands that came to his southern town” (145). Finally, the choir takes up “The Star-Spangled Banner.” First feeling “as though he had been pushed into the horrible foreboding country of dreams,” Parker changes his mind. Now “the melody seemed charged with some vast new meaning. . . . For the first time in your whole life, he thought, the words are not ironic” (146).

The implied audience of “In a Strange Country” embraces political values and assumptions quite different from those held by the readers of “A Party Down at the Square” and “The Black Ball.” In the 1944 story, animated by the revived Popular Front politics of the post-June 1941 “Win the War” CPUSA, the Yanks are coming—indeed they have come—black Yanks and all. Now a nationalism that transcends class divisions—signified by the common participation of union leader and boss in the choir—is held up as the ideal. To be sure, the story especially valorizes the self-determinationist nationalism of oppressed peoples such as the Welsh, who have spent hundreds of years under British colonial rule. Moreover, the tale implicitly renders a highly sympathetic—and somewhat romantic—portrait of the USSR: the Welsh singers call to Parker’s mind the image of a Russian peasant passionately kissing the ground and then going to war for the fatherland. But “In a Strange Country” ends up affirming all the nationalisms of the Allied forces: hence the Welsh choir’s singing, if half-heartedly, the anthem of the British empire. And hence too Parker’s embrace—at first grudging and reluctant, later almost celebratory and epiphanic—of U.S. nationalism. To me, the point of Parker’s misty eyes at the story’s end is not so much that he has, like his descendant in the epilogue to *Invisible Man*, suddenly discovered his repressed love for his country as that it is the politics of the wartime Third International which have provided him with the means for this discovery. For, crucially, it is when the “Internationale” is sung that Parker finds himself transported back to the streets of the southern town of his youth. Ellison does not reproduce the text of the workers’ anthem because he does not have to: he knows that in the background of “O say can you see” his readers will sup-
ply: “The earth shall rise on new foundations, / A better world’s in birth. / ‘Tis the final conflict, / Let each stand in his place, / The Internationale / Shall be the human race.” The linchpin connecting the Welsh national anthem to the “Star-Spangled Banner” is thus the anthem of the international communist movement, the appeal to “prisoners of starvation” in all countries to become “the human race” by building “on new foundations” a world without classes and private property. The unheard music in “In a Strange Country” is more crucial than any that is heard.

In this strangely internationalist pean to nationalism, Ellison presupposes in his readers not only a familiarity with the “Win the War” politics of the Third International after the Nazi invasion of the U.S.S.R. but also an acquaintance with the cultural expression of those politics. For a presence informing this 1944 tale is that of Paul Robeson, the CPUSA's most prominent antifascist publicist, whose highly popular performance of Othello had broken the Broadway color line and whose “Ballad for Americans” had become a staple of leftist songfests from the late 1930s onward. That Ellison had Robeson on his mind in the early 1940s is evidenced by his twice mentioning the famous singer-actor in “A Hard Time Keeping Up,” another story contained in the folder of “Early Stories” and reproduced in *Flying Home and Other Stories* (101, 106). Ellison’s assumption that his readers also would have Robeson on the mind is indicated by his choice to show scattered lines from Othello running through Parker’s mind as he contemplates the irony of his situation as a Jim-Crowed participant in an antifascist war. In particular, the line “Do the state some service” comes from Othello’s closing soliloquy, which was a standard item in many of Robeson’s concert performances. Robeson’s inimitable bass voice resounds in the political subconscious—if not the unconscious—of Parker and the reader alike, reminding them that “doing the state some service” is, in the era of World War II, the best way to serve national, international, and indeed universal humanity.

Callahan, discussing the “riddle of identity” posed in this 1944 tale, remarks that “[i]n the subconscious, the ‘strange country’ stands less for Wales than for America, and like many Americans, Parker discovers his Americanness overseas” (Introduction xxxvi). Callahan further quotes Ellison scholar Robert O’Meally to the effect that “‘the answer to the complicated question of identity is a musical one... . [M]usic is the metaphor for democracy and love” (Introduction xxxv). Steele—pursuing his hob-
Reading Redness

byhorse of "contingency" into "In a Strange Country"—opines that "[Parker's] American identity is contingent on his racial identity," but that "this same American identity is strong enough for him to shed a tear at the sound of his national anthem" (32). Focusing solely on the ironies and ultimate affirmations of patriotism posed by the tale, all these comments miss the distinctly Communist inflection Ellison is giving to both his musical and his national themes. For it is vitally important that the musical voice haunting the Welsh pub is that of an American black man who entertained leftist, antifascist and labor rallies around the world with songs from Wales, Russia, China and many other countries. And it is equally important that the song enabling the transition from the Welsh to the American national anthem—gesturing toward the belief system enabling these Welshmen to see in Parker simultaneously a "Yank" and a kindred spirit—is the Communist Internationale.

Although there is a logic to the nationalist/internationalist dialectic displayed in "In a Strange Country," it is not an untroubled logic. It is significant that, as he listens to the Welsh choir, Parker first imagines a Russian peasant kissing the ground before going off to war—a picture of exemplary patriotism that could have made its way into the American imaginary only during those few years of wartime alliance between the United States and the U. S. S. R. when Uncle Joe made it as Time magazine's Man of the Year. But it is more significant still that, when he hears the Internationale, Parker finds himself remembering—of all places!—the South of his youth, which somehow is supposed to signify—as an American analogy to the soil beloved by the Russian peasant—what the anthem of international communism is all about. The towns on whose squares the "Bacote niggers" of the South have been lynched by "100% Americans" now serve as local sites—kissable soils—embodiment an American nationalism that is itself an embodiment of proletarian internationalism. Through a series of metonymic displacements, the body politic-rending categories of race and class—so central to the understanding of the implied audience of "A Party Down at the Square"—are, in "In a Strange Country," acknowledged only to be occluded. In the epilogue to Invisible Man, the hero's discovery of his patriotism—as well has his protomulticulturalist celebration of American diversity—are based upon a nationalistic universalism into which all in the U.S. who will listen and see are included—all, that is, except Communists, who apparently want to de-ball the American eagle (359–68). The "you" for
whom, and to whom, the hero speaks comprises only loyal Americans. The 1944 story thus tells us a good deal about roads taken and not taken—not so much by Ellison the man as by the left-wing movement with which during his formative years he identified—in the journey from the no-holds-barred revolutionary antiracism of “A Party Down at the Square” to the 1952 novel.

That said, however, it is crucial that we not read back into the fellow-traveling Ellison of the late 1930s to mid-1940s the anticommunist Ellison of *Invisible Man* and after. However etiolated it may have been by the class-collaborationism fostered through the Popular Front, proletarian internationalism remained a powerful force in the global conflict that, paradoxically, named itself the “Great Patriotic War” in the U.S.S.R. and was fought on a nationalist-cum-internationalist basis by all the Communist forces involved. The 1944 readers of “In a Strange Country,” accustomed to this paradox, would have been able to hold the tale’s simultaneous claims to both nationalism and internationalism in contradictory suspension. To find in the younger Ellison evidences of the patriotism that would reach full flower in the epilogue to *Invisible Man*, and then retrospectively to view him as always already a democratic humanist—whose youthful attraction to the left should be read as moral rather than political, naïvely “unguarded, and “leavened” by “lyricism”—is to misconstrue not only the seriousness of the young Ellison’s affiliation with the CPUSA but also the complexities of Third International politics in the late 1930s and 1940s. As it becomes possible, with the opening up of the entire Ellison archive at the Library of Congress, to chart what is no doubt the complicated trajectory of Ellison’s political development during the years when *Invisible Man* was being gestated and composed, it is critically important that scholars bring to bear a nuanced understanding of the politics of the left—as well as of the ruling-class assault on the left—during those years, and not simply dust off and trot out the old cliches about Communist mechanism and manipulation that await unpacking and deconstructing to this day. If we wish to experience the full rhetorical impact of Ellison’s early writings, we must learn to hear voices and recognize anthems drowned out (at least in the United States) since the 1950s, but audible on the lower—or were they higher?—frequencies where the young Ellison once broadcast his messages.

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Notes

1. For the controversial reception of *Juneteenth*, see Anderson, Feeley, Menand, Pinsker, and Wood. Negative assessments of Ellison's early published leftist fiction are offered by O'Meally [1980], Busby, and Schor. For Ellison's own comments on his early writing, see the various interviews gathered in *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*. I discuss Ellison's quite extensive journalistic œuvre in Foley (1998). Callahan claims that "Slick Gonna Learn" was part of a novel that was never completed (Callahan [1996] xxi). For a sampling of relatively recent commentary largely replicating the anticommunism voiced in the novel's initial reception, see O'Meally [1988], Benston, and Parr and Savery.

2. Two of the tales from the "Early Stories" folder—"Boy on a Train" and "I Never Knew Their Names"—were published in *The New Yorker* in the issue of April 29/May 6, 1996. Interestingly, Callahan excluded both "The Birthmark" and "Slick Gonna Learn" from *Flying Home and Other Stories*. Ellison's early letters to Wright manifest strong enthusiasm for the CPUSA; the letters after are profoundly contradictory, articulating at once a growing antipathy to those Communists who had disliked Native Son and, up through 1948, a continuing allegiance to important aspects of the Communists' project. See especially Ellison to Wright 26 May 1940, 5 August 1945, and 1 February 1948 (Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University). See also Fabre. I discuss the drafts of *Invisible Man* in Foley (forthcoming).

3. For varying perspectives on the politics and culture of the Popular Front, see Foley [1993] and Denning.

Works Cited


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