Red Myth, Black Hero: Frederick Douglass, the Communist Party, and the Aesthetics of History, 1935-1945

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In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), the narrator joins a group called the Brotherhood, commonly thought to represent the Communist Party in America. In one scene, as the narrator begins working enthusiastically at his Brotherhood office, Brother Tarp, an older, more experienced black member of the Brotherhood, enters the Invisible Man's office to hang a portrait of Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) on the wall. "He was a great man," Brother Tarp says, "You just take a look at him once in a while." Brother Tarp refuses to accept the Invisible Man's gratitude for the portrait, telling him that Douglass "belongs to all of us."[1] But Brother Tarp's "us" is ambiguous. He could be referring to the entire working class, to all the members of the Brotherhood, or simply to the black Brothers who see in Douglass a model for their own role in the Brotherhood. Readers of *Invisible Man* know that Brother Tarp eventually leaves the Brotherhood, taking his portrait of Frederick Douglass with him, and his removal of the Douglass portrait invites the question once more: to whom does Douglass belong, and how is his image, both literally in the portrait and figuratively as a hero, being used?

Initially, the Invisible Man sits "facing the portrait of Frederick Douglass, feeling a sudden piety" that motivates him to continue his work with a renewed sense of purpose, but the Invisible Man eventually leaves the Brotherhood as well, and his discussion with Brother Tarp about Douglass plays a part in his departure.[2] Although direct connections between the Invisible Man's experience and Ellison's own are often tenuous, sometimes there are remarkable similarities between them, and if the tension between the Invisible Man's identification with Douglass and his identity as a Brother had anything to do with his leaving the Brotherhood,

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then it is worth investigating if Ellison too, as well as other black Communists during the 30s and 40s, might have left the Communist Party for reasons related to the Communist appropriation of black symbols and stories, particularly that of Frederick Douglass.

An examination of Communist sources from the Popular Front to the Second World War suggests that the Communist retelling of the story of Douglass influenced many black Communists in their decision to leave the Communist Party. For the purposes of this essay, I will look at three authors in particular: Claude McKay, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. Two things, however, need to be clarified before examining the Douglass narrative in Communist discourse. First, although the Communist Party's appropriation of black history negatively affected some its members, I do not mean to suggest that McKay, Wright, and Ellison somehow represent a mass exodus from the Communist Left. As William Maxwell rightly observes, "African-American literary communists…exited the Old Left much as they entered it, for compound reasons and at numerous moments but with a common obligation to the promise of interracial struggle and disclosure and their own and their racial community's self-direction."[3] Maxwell's statement is a helpful reminder of the great diversity within black Communist experience during the Popular Front and the Second World War. My purpose, therefore, is not to make generalizations about black Communists but rather to call attention to a frequently overlooked element of Communist discourse. Whereas scholarship has often focused on Communist politics or activism, I want to draw attention to Communist storytelling. Second, by focusing on Communist narratives—their aesthetic representations of abolitionist history in particular—I do not mean to imply that the Douglass narrative was the sole cause of these writers' departure from the Party. It was simply one cause among many, but it was a significant enough cause to appear in their aesthetic representations of the Party, such as in *Invisible Man*.

In other words, this examination of Communist depictions of Douglass sheds light on the ways Communist Popular Front narratives affected the Party's black membership. Representations of Douglass were a part of what Michael Denning calls an "extraordinary flowering of the historical imagination" during the Popular Front, but Denning, as well as other scholars of the Popular Front, have only briefly identified the "Americanized" myths of the Communist Party.[4] This essay expands upon this work by providing an in-depth analysis of one such instance of Americanization by looking at the Douglass narrative in Communist discourse. As such, this essay takes an interdisciplinary approach to the subject by examining both the historical development of Party's reception of the Douglass narrative and its subsequent influence upon the literary tradition of black modernism. First, I examine James Ford's 1936 election campaign, arguing that the Douglass narrative was essential to his imagined political identity. Then I argue that the Party's changing political commitments during the Second World War were accompanied by a reimagining of the historical narrative of Douglass. Finally, I consider the legacy of the Party's historical representations in the writings of McKay, Wright, and Ellison.

James Ford: "The Frederick Douglass of 1936"

The history of the reception of Frederick Douglass in the American imagination is a long one, but for the imagination of American communists the story begins in 1936 when James Ford ran alongside Earl Browder for the office of vice president on the ticket of the Communist Party. Ford was the only black candidate on the ballot that year, but he carried the banner that had been raised in 1872 by the first black vice presidential candidate, Frederick Douglass. In fact, Ford soon became known on the campaign trail as "the Frederick Douglass of 1936."[5] Ford and Browder were "nominated as Communist Standard Bearers," seeking to promote workers' rights in the tradition of Marx and Lenin, but Ford's campaign also drew upon the tradition of Douglass and the abolitionists as distinctively American predecessors. In his speech accepting the nomination of the Communist Party, Ford set the tone for his campaign by invoking the Civil War: "In these elections the American people face their greatest crisis since the Civil War." Ford's promise as vice presidential candidate was to continue the legacy of the abolitionists by remaining committed "to the liberation not only of the Negro people but of all oppressed races and nationalities." In order to gain his audience's confidence, Ford presented himself as the heir of the legacy of abolitionist heroes Frederick Douglass and John Brown: "Earl Browder and the Communist Party," Ford said, "are the inheritors of Frederick Douglass and John Brown. We Communists, Negro and white together, will carry out what they dreamed of."[6] Figures such as Douglass and Brown, as well as the larger history of the Civil War, allowed Ford to conceptualize his own identity as both a black American and as a Communist. Ford here was participating in the process of historical mythmaking. As a new Frederick Douglass, Ford could promise revolutionary social change in the manner of the real Douglass's accomplishments. Douglass inspired the efforts of the Communist Party, and the Communist Party saw their forerunner in the figure of Douglass.

Figure 1: James Ford and Earl Browder on Communist Election Campaign Pamphlet, 1940, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Browder-Ford-40.jpg

In a column beside Ford's acceptance speech, *The Daily Worker* printed the text of the platform of the Communist Party that was adopted at the nominating convention. The platform clarified the crisis that Ford described as being the greatest the

nation has faced since the Civil War: "Extreme reaction threatens the country, driving towards fascism and a new World War."[7] Working conditions, women's rights, social security, and nationalized banking, among other things, were certainly major concerns in the Communist platform, but the rise of Hitler had made the defeat of fascism exigent to Communist politics. No other aspects of their political program were considered safe or achievable so long as global fascism—either in Hitler's Germany or domestically in the United States—survived. The platform text summarizes the crisis as a battle between "democracy or fascism, progress or reaction—this is the central issue of 1936." At this point, however, their strategy for the defeat of fascism was a peaceable one. The platform commends "collaboration with the Soviet Union" and the establishment of a socialist economy that would bring "abundance and security for all," thereby ending poverty and unemployment. Fascism would be defeated, it seems, not by direct conflict but by making fascism undesirable in contrast to a system that could satisfy the basic needs of the working class. Their policy toward war, in short, was to "keep America out of war by keeping war out of the world."

Notably, the platform's suggested program, like Ford's speech, appeals to the popular imagination through references to history and myth. The platform opens by saying that fascism must be faced "in the spirit of 1776" and closes by saying that Americans must fulfill their heritage as one of the "most revolutionary peoples of the world." "Communism," the text said, "is 20th Century Americanism," but this Americanism, patriotic as it seems, had much in common with the Soviet Union.[8] These appeals to popular sentiment and the commitment to defeat fascism were very similar to the global Communist strategy of the Popular Front set forth at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International. "The Soviets called on Communists everywhere," Mark Naison summarizes, "to abandon temporarily their goal of a revolutionary conquest of power and join with Socialists, trade unionists, and liberals in a 'Broad People's Front' to stop the rise of fascism and prevent a new world war."[9] Georgi Dimitrov, leader of the Communist International, outlined this strategy in "The Fascist Offensive" in 1935, in which he defined fascism as the efforts of the ruling class to find salvation from the crumbling system of capitalism. Dimitrov's program consisted in "refusal to support one's own bourgeoisie in an imperialist war," collaboration with non-Communists to create "a mass party of the working people," and finally the use of "a common language with the broadest masses" in order to expand their popular base.[10]

The Party's use of the Douglass myth, the Civil War narrative, and the abolitionist legacy, by the time of Ford's political campaign, was a part of this common language intended to appeal to a broad audience, reject the imperialist war, and forestall the growth of fascism. Yet, as Robert Paxton observes, the term fascism is a slippery one. "Everyone is sure they know what fascism is," Paxton says, yet many use the term to refer to a loose collection of political images—a "chauvinist demagogue," "surprise invasions," "disciplined ranks of marching youths," etc.—which convey brutality without naming a precise historical referent.[11] James Ford and the Communist Party were no exception. Their campaign against fascism was often imprecise, and the term fascism was flexible enough to be used to refer to

anti-blackness, anti-Americanness, or anti-Marxist depending on the context. Fascism, as Foucault observes, can be "a floating signifier, whose function is essentially that of denunciation," an observation true of the Communist Party at this time, whose goal in appealing to a black hero like Frederick Douglass was often to denounce the political Other, whether that be the domestic fascism of American racism or the international fascism of Germany's anti-Communism.[12] The Douglass narrative developed organically for Ford, Davis, and others as they sought to find a rhetoric that was both distinctively black and distinctively American and that could be used to construct a black Communist identity opposed to fascism, and the story of Douglass, whose life involved numerous conflicts with slaveholders, politicians, or the Confederacy, was also flexible enough to adapt to the changing faces of fascism.

The clearest evidence of this flexibility is that the legend of Douglass repeatedly changed among black Communists before the Seventh Congress, during the Popular Front, and into the Second World War. Just as Communist foreign policy frequently changed in the years leading up to the Second World War according to the "shifting exigencies" of the Party, to use Maurice Isserman's words, so also did Communist historical narratives change.[13] Cathy Bergin helpfully points out that *The Negro Liberator*, a paper whose tone was characteristic of the more revolutionary and radical tradition of the Communist Party before the Popular Front, regularly spoke of Douglass as a model revolutionary.[14] *The Negro Liberator* presents a radical Douglass who criticized Lincoln for his compromising attitude toward black rights in America: "Those who seek to link the name of Douglass with the open lily-white policies of the Republican Party are degrading the militant tradition of the Abolitionists." This column went on to urge Communists to "Save the militant traditions of the Abolitionists from the snare-net of reformism!"[15] Later that month the paper issued the "Fred Douglass Anniversary Edition," which featured a number of articles on the legacy of Douglass. This issue consistently denounced Lincoln as a compromiser and applauded Douglass for his commitment to revolutionary principles. Americans, one author asserted, should not hold "Lincoln-Douglass celebrations together" because "Lincoln and Douglass represent two vastly different policies." Another wrote that "the Negro people should honor Douglass only." This issue also featured cartoons of Douglass wrestling with white slaveholders, surrounded by Douglass's proverbial quotations, such as "If there is no struggle, there is no progress" and "Men are whipped oftenest who are whipped easiest," the point being that the life of Douglass should act as a warning to those black leaders "who seek to compromise with the system of oppression."[16] Fascism was still presented as an enemy in this pre-Popular Front paper, but the emphasis was not yet on encouraging unity and cooperation among many organizations in a collective effort to stop international fascism. Instead, *The Negro Liberator* condemned a domestic fascism in America, the growth of which would lead to "a thousand fold increase" of "lynch-terror, discrimination, misery and oppression," and Douglass, the archetypal revolutionary hero, was a fitting model of how to wage that war without compromise.[17]

The Negro Liberator was discontinued in 1935 because Popular Front strategies required a more conciliatory tone than was characteristic of the radical paper, but the convention of the National Negro Congress in 1936 shows how the mythology of Douglass continued to develop into the Popular Front. The National Negro Congress, which Ford thought should be convened on the birthday of Frederick Douglass in 1936,[18] shows the ethos of Douglass shifting from that of a revolutionary to that of a reformer and a peace-maker. Before the congress even began, participants considered it necessary to address the problem of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia a few months prior. Ford said that one of the demands on their agenda was "To oppose war and fascism, the attempted subjugation of Negro people in Ethiopia."[19] The consistent theme of Ford's reflections on the congress, perhaps even more frequent than his calls for anti-lynching laws, women's rights, and worker enfranchisement, was his call "for aiding in forestalling the growth of fascism and the outbreak of war." Others at the convention agreed with Ford's analysis. W.E.B. DuBois, for example, saw "fascism armed to the teeth" as "the chief aggressor and threatener of violence" (DuBois, however, also saw Communism as a violent threat at this point, warning that "One of the worst things that Negroes could do today would be to join the American Communist Party"). A. Philip Randolph also spoke in behalf of unity against fascism, urging the formation of "an independent working class political party" "for the protection against economic exploitation, war and fascism."[20] Yet the Congress's call to arms was figurative, not literal, asking for "liberty- and peace-loving forces." Those in the congress were not urging a military intervention in Ethiopia or against Hitler, nor were they invoking Douglass as Lincoln's military advisor but rather as abolitionist, statesman, and diplomat. Furthermore, members of the Congress also stressed the importance of supporting black rights in America, calling for members "to struggle in defense of the smallest civil liberty and for free citizenship on an equal footing with their white brothers." Like the Seventh Congress, then, the National Negro Congress worked to create a "people's front against fascism and war," a "united front" with the equally desirable goals of peace abroad and human rights at home.[21] These features of their rhetoric are important to note because they underwent a great change when the United States entered World War II a few years later.

Although Browder and Ford did not win the presidential election, the legend of Douglass continued to be a powerful narrative for the next few years of the Popular Front as a means of negotiating and defining black Communist identity. A towering figure like Douglass enabled a greater sense of empowerment among the Communists in their quest for social reform. The prolonged legal defense of Angelo Herndon and the Scottsboro Boys, for example, was called "the living embodiment of the fighting spirit of Frederick Douglass."[22] Louise Mitchell, writing an article on the continued struggle for women's rights, commended Douglass for being "the only man who consented to appear on the platform" of the first convention for women's rights in 1848.[23] Periodically, especially in the month of February, articles appeared in *The Daily Worker* celebrating the life of Douglass or reprinting excerpts from his writings.[24] Ford even wrote a book in the years fol-

lowing the election campaign entitled *The Negro and the Democratic Front*, which William Patterson said "picks up the thread of the conflict of the Negro people where 'The Life and Words of Frederick Douglass,' that great Negro revolutionist of the period of the Civil War, laid it down."[25] Although it appeared less frequently than it did during the 1936 campaign, the story of Douglass was still being used as a symbol intended to discourage the growth of fascism, abroad and at home, by encouraging the social reform promoted by the Communist platform.[26]

Changing Policy, Changing History

World War II dramatically changed the use of the Douglass myth. His story transitioned from one of black liberation in American politics to one of militant support of the Allied powers, a process that began with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, which raised many questions about the Communist anti-fascist narrative. Thus far, the Communist Party had taken a vehement stance against Hitler's Germany, but Stalin's treaty with the chancellor cast doubt on the Party's commitment to fighting fascism abroad, which, in turn, cast doubt on the Party's domestic policy as well. Naison writes that the Nazi-Soviet Pact "deeply disillusioned most of its important Harlem allies and undermined the Party's ability to serve as a catalyst of community protest," leaving them ostracized from many of the allies they had made through the National Negro Congress.[27] This decision, jarring as it seemed, was consistent with the Party's longstanding policy against the war. Many wrote to *The Daily Worker* to express their admiration for the non-aggression pact. Hailing the treaty as "the firmest possible stand for peace at the present critical moment," for example, the coincidentally named Frederick Douglass Branch of the Young Communist League spoke the thoughts of many Communists toward the war.[28] For a long time the war had not been seen as a workers' war but as an imperialist war, and the best policy seemed to be non-participation.

One reason for the Communists' committed anti-war stance was the continued reality of racial injustice in the United States. To fight a war on behalf of a nation that practiced what they saw as a domestic version of fascism would be purposeless. In February, 1941 a delegation from the NAACP, the Communist Party, the National Negro Congress, and other organizations met to dedicate a statue of Frederick Douglass. They protested lynching, poll taxes, and Jim Crow as they expressed their desire "to preserve the principles of Douglass for unity of all peoples against oppression and war." As a part of their ceremony, the youth chanted the "Douglass Pledge of Youth," which reveals their frustration with the increasingly pro-war stance of the United States government: "We re-dedicate ourselves to continue the work which [Douglass] courageously initiated to liberate the Negro people from slavery…We are aware of the conditions which prevail throughout our nation"—conditions which included a segregated military and "government contracts for weapons of war." The pledge continued by saying, "We cannot agree with those who would have us give our lives in the conflict of war, when, right here at home, the evils of lynching, discrimination and poll taxes and Jim Crow in the army and navy are officially sanctioned by them."[29] Such

commemorations were not uncommon—Angelo Herndon wrote about another one later that year—and black Communists consistently protested the "fascism" of racism in America, which was exemplified by the policy of segregation in the military. Ben Davis reinforced their anti-war stance on the same grounds: "Douglass refused to recruit Negro soldiers—the Union's 'powerful black arm'—until crass abuses of the Negro in the armed forces were curtailed."[30] For the first two years of the war, the Communist Party remained consistent with the program laid out in the Popular Front, and the Douglass myth fit into this program in its use as a symbol of protest against domestic injustice.

Only a few months later Ben Davis dramatically altered this message. When Hitler broke the anti-aggression pact and invaded the Soviet Union in June, 1941, the Communist Party reconsidered its stance on the war, coming to realize that militant opposition to Hitler was the only remaining option in the fight against fascism. During an all-day conference of Communist Party leaders, Robert Minor, general secretary of the Party, stressed "the changed character of the war," calling it "now a patriotic war" for the defense of national independence, a notable comment since it occurred *before* the attack on Pearl Harbor but *after* the German invasion of the Soviet Union, making Minor's use of the word "patriotism" highly unusual. In his speech Minor emphasized the urgent need for black communities to support the war effort, saying that "No one has a greater stake than the Negro people in defeating Hitler." Davis's editorial commentary on the speech says Minor invoked the Douglass myth in direct contrast to Davis's earlier anti-war interpretation of Douglass: the situation of black Americans during the war

> is similar to that in which Frederick Douglass found himself during the Civil War…He did not make the abolition of jim-crowism a prerequisite to support of the Negro people for Lincoln, for the annihilation of slavery was the main issue for the Negro people. Instead, Douglass called upon Lincoln to use the Union's 'powerful black arm' to crush the slaveholders' empire. Today the Negro people call upon President Roosevelt to use the nation's 'powerful black arm' in every phase of national defense to crush Hitler.[31]

This is not to say that the Communist Party abandoned its mission to de-segregate the military; it continued to criticize segregation regularly in *The Daily Worker*. It does mean, however, that the issue became secondary to the defeat of Hitler. The Party could put up with what it now saw as a minor issue at home in contrast to a major threat abroad. Fascism, to invoke Foucault again, shifted in signification from the American adversary of racism to the geopolitical and military entity of Hitler's Germany.[32]

This change in policy toward the war was contemporaneous with a change in rhetoric toward black rights in America. In 1942 Ford republished Douglass's speech "Negroes and the National War Effort" and included his own foreword to the text. This was the speech Douglass gave to encourage black enlistment in

the Union Army. The preface, however, reads more like an anti-Nazi tract than an introduction to the life of Douglass. Ford self-consciously applied the story of the Douglass to his present moment, urging black participation in the war. "Unless all unite *effectively* to defeat Hitler," Ford wrote, "white and black will become the chattel slaves of fascism" [emphasis original]. Ford's emphasis on *effectively* uniting reveals that Ford, and by extension the Communist Party, still protested the segregation of the military, which Ford said "militates against their fullest mobilization for the war effort," but desegregation became negotiable, a desire but not a necessity.[33] Furthermore, Ford framed the issue as a means to an end—an equitable military is an efficient and effective military—rather than as an end in itself.

These changes to the Communist narrative were sometimes subtle. Douglass, commonly called the "great emancipator" in earlier issues, became the "liberator." Instead of John Brown and Frederick Douglass, the heroes shifted to Douglass and Lincoln. [34] Lincoln, who has previously been presented in the paper as the ally of capitalist industry, was now presented as having formed an "alliance with labor" in his military efforts.[35] Earlier Communist denunciations of the "imperialist war" became the repeated chant to "win the war and Negro rights."[36] The narrative that "Frederick Douglass Fights Fascism" came to mean beating Hitler abroad and "doing something for Frederick Douglass' people—Negro and white" at home.[37] Angelo Herndon, in a lecture on Douglass, seemed to soften his presentation of domestic problems, calling upon black Americans "to support the war effort as the only way they can move towards progress even though the Administration at times tends to capitulate to reactionary pressure."[38] But such reprioritizations did not go unnoticed. While Herndon accused the administration of capitulating, others saw his emphasis on the necessity of war as a form of capitulation in its own right. The shifting policies of the Communist Party towards the war were attended by a similar change in historical narratives.

The Communist response to the Double V campaign—the idea of achieving victory over both Hitler and Jim Crow—illustrates the influence of shifting Communist politics on their historical narratives. Cathy Bergin summarizes the Party's position on the Double V campaign: "While the major black organisations and the black press rallied behind the slogan of the 'Double V' (victory over both Hitler and Jim Crow)," Bergin says, "the Party consistently refused to consider such a campaign to be anything other than a deviation from the war effort."[39] Their position, in other words, was one of unqualified and total support of the war. It required unity at all costs, even going so far as to suspend their efforts at achieving racial equality. Win the war first; then end segregation. This view, however, is not unanimously held. Referring to the "Double V" and "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns, for example, Mary Helen Washington says "it was the CP and the black labor Left that supplied the armor for those slogans."[40] Washington goes too far by failing to acknowledge the Communist Party's sometimes serious conflict of interests between domestic and international policy, but her statement helpfully nuances the Party's relationship to the Double V campaign by pointing out that the Party continued to promote black rights during the war.

A special issue of *New Masses* devoted to "The Negro and Victory" illustrates the Party's fraught relationship with the Double V campaign. The opening editorial in the issue attempted to link black wellbeing in America to the success of American military efforts: "Today we must give jobs to Negroes, provide them with decent housing, abolish the poll tax, outlaw lynching, jail inciters of race hatred, and make at least a start toward ending Jim Crowism in the armed forces by organizing a mixed Negro and white brigade—measures likewise necessary to win the war."[41] The editorial blames the legacy of American racial injustice for setbacks in the war, and it claims that what is best for the African Americans would be best for the American military. In the same issue, Doxey Wilkerson examined the destructive effects of workplace discrimination on wartime industrial production, making it seem as if the issue was promoting the Double V, but other portions of the issue read like political propaganda promoting black enlistment. James Ford repeated his usual call for black Americans to enlist against the fascists, and many of the graphics communicate the idea that joining the war effort was not a debatable question, as if refusing to support the war was anti-communist. In one, a gaunt, sorrowful Soviet woman stands over a starving child surrounded by rubble, smoke, and corpses. The caption reads "Stalingrad: 'But Mother, Don't We Have Allies?'" A few pages later there is an image of a strong, shirtless, black male standing with arms upraised, broken shackles on his wrists, the falling pieces of which spell "poll tax," over a cowering Hitler and a hooded clansman. This image is especially revealing: the black male towering over Hitler is foregrounded, but the clansman and the reference to the poll tax are less conspicuous. In other words, the image, although promoting an idea similar to the Double V, gives visual priority to the black man and Hitler. Lastly, printed beside excerpts from Union General John Ames' letters, is an image of black soldiers fighting the Confederacy in the Civil War. The lesson of this issue seems to be that the Communist Party's rejection of Double V was not total. Rather, it was a subtle reprioritization of the war effort over domestic reforms that left little room for serious protest or debate.

Robert Minor's comments are even more explicit in this regard. He wrote to commend the Negro Freedom Meeting in New York for its vital display of national unity and strength, what he called "a great movement in support of a people's war." Notably, Minor commended the meeting by contrasting it with other groups of black leaders who opposed black participation in the war unless certain conditions were met. Minor did not specify which groups he was referring to; instead, he challenged all groups that demanded black liberation through boycotting the war. Minor went on to explain that the cost of such demands was too high to pay, and that the black community could not afford to hold the position expressed in phrases like "We oppose the war unless…" or "We will support the war if…." He finished his attack on these groups by recruiting "the great Frederick Douglass" to his cause because Douglass believed that "those who fight for Negro rights must fight with all their fury on the 'Lincoln side.'" To Minor, no difference in political opinion, racial identity, or religious affiliation could equal the difference between the Axis and the Allies. Defeating the Axis powers, therefore, required putting

aside all other differences in the attempt to achieve national unity. Success in the war required "the wholehearted belligerent spirit of all our people, of all races and religious faiths and shapes of patriotic political opinion and party alignment."[42]

Minor's article, as well as its editorial companion, continued to tell and retell the Douglass narrative as a part of the Communist strategy to support the war effort. "Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass would have loved it," the editor affirmed, referring to the rally at which Minor spoke. The editorial expanded upon Minor's argument by denouncing the position that this was a "white man's war," a position similar to the Party's own rejection of the imperialist war a few years earlier. The "Nazi-inspired idea that this is 'a white man's war,'" the article continued, was pernicious because "the Negro people have a great stake—their all—in this war."[43] The article also compared Hitler's tyranny to a kind of slavery. However true this may have been in a general sense, in the context of references to Lincoln and Douglass, the article could not have failed to cause the reader to associate the reign of Hitler with antebellum America. Continuing what started in the Civil War, therefore, World War II was another battle in the campaign against racial inequality. Although the official position of the Communist Party on race in America had changed little, the stories they told about race, fascism, and American history had shifted dramatically. Constant adaptations in wartime policy were attended by alterations to the historical narrative, changes that those attuned to the significance of these narratives took note of and criticized.

"Myths, Symbols, and Wartime Folklore" in McKay, Wright, and Ellison

By the midpoint of the war, many black writers had begun to accuse the Communist Party of betrayal. Claude McKay famously denounced the work the Communist Party was doing in Harlem, writing as early as 1940 that the Communists "were actually doing nothing to help alleviate the social misery of Negroes."[44] McKay's account is full of anger and disillusionment. He called black politicians such as Ford and Davis "Bolshevik propagandists," condemned white Communists "who promoted themselves as the only leaders of the Negroes," and challenged the entire philosophy of the Communists as being premised on "the abnegation of all individuality, collective servitude and strict discipline in every domain of life with one man as supreme dictator."[45] McKay, in short, urged a complete and total rejection of Communist involvement in the political life of black Americans, even critiquing the Party's appropriation of black heroes. He claimed, for example, that the Communist Party appropriated black heroes to establish the National Negro Congress. "They chose," McKay said, "instead [of Marx or Lenin] the vibrant romantic figure of the great Negro leader of the Abolitionist period, Frederick Douglass," to which he then added his perspective on their use of the story. "Frederick Douglass," McKay writes, "was so opposed to Communism that he became estranged from those white abolitionists who were partisans of Communist theories."[46] McKay's contempt reaches its climax in the final paragraph of the book: "Russia has a great lesson to teach. And Negroes might learn from it

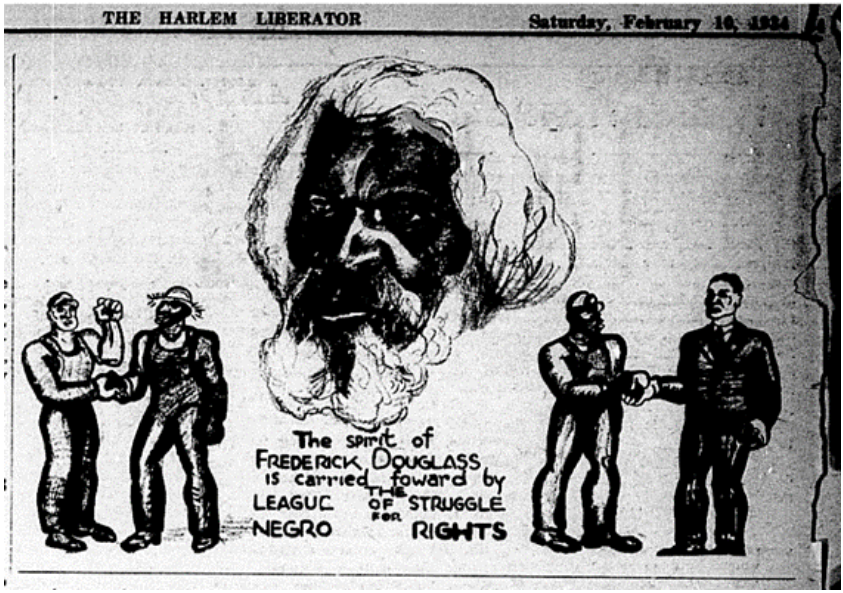

Figure 2: Frederick Douglass and Class Solidarity, *Harlem Liberator*, February 10, 1934, 4.

just what they should not do. They can learn enough at least to save themselves from becoming the black butt of Communism."[47] McKay obviously had very strong objections to both the tactics and the goals of the Communist Party, and it is not without significance that in the midst of his extended critique of the Communist Party, McKay thought it worthwhile to mention what he saw as a destructive form of historical misappropriation.

McKay's account comes surprisingly early. Writing in 1940, he points out his objections to Communist rhetoric even *before* the major shift that occurred after Hitler invaded the USSR. This suggests that the narrative shift after 1941 only exacerbated a problem already present in earlier Communist mythmaking. Nevertheless, McKay was an outlier among those who left the Party around this time. It was more common for black intellectuals to leave the Party during the last few years of the war, some even going so far as to denounce the Party publicly. Richard Wright is probably the most famous black ex-communist because of the publication of the story of his departure from the Communist Party in his well-known 1944 essay "I Tried to be a Communist." Although Wright's account does not examine Frederick Douglass's story specifically, his account still stresses the importance of Communist narratives, aesthetics, and rhetoric over policies or economics. What drew Wright into the Party, he says, "was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics…my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers." Wright then explains his interest in the stories of fellow workers from around the world. Similarly, when he leaves the Party, he describes his departure in

terms of books. "He talks like a book," a fellow Communist said of Wright, a statement that forever branded Wright as "bourgeois" in the Party, and Wright repeatedly stresses that his self-motivation, creativity, and independence of thought caused friction between him and the Party.[48]

But Wright and McKay spoke little of the influence of Communist wartime policy on their departures from the Party (they both left the party early enough that it could not have influenced their decisions). The implication is that it was not only the Party's stance toward the war that contributed to their disillusionment with the Party; their aesthetic commitments and historical myths were also a large factor in black-Communist relations. Certainly, the Party's controversial war measures had an effect on many black radicals. Dayo Gore, describing these Party policies, such as their no-strike pledge, support of the Smith Act, and disregard for the internment of Japanese Americans, acknowledges the backlash the Party faced as a result, but she also claims that these policies were intended as a compromise that would yield among radicals "a stronger postwar coalition in the United States."[49] While Gore convincingly argues that black radicalism, prominent throughout the Cold War, did not subside after the end World War II, she fails to acknowledge how Communist Party narratives, and not simply postwar American anticommunism, created obstacles to radical black resistance. Robin D. G. Kelley makes an argument similar to Gore's by pointing out that the Popular Front had "singed," without completely burning, bridges among radicals. His reason is that the Party had compromised its values during the Popular Front: the Party was not radical enough in its commitment to Left politics.[50] The works of Gore, Washington, and Kelley helpfully reveal the continuity of black radicalism before and after the War, but for those black writers who did leave the Party—Wright, McKay, and Ellison, among others—it is worthwhile to explain why in terms other than political compromise.

More so than either McKay's or Wright's decisions to leave the Party, Ralph Ellison's departure reveals the significant influence of the Communist historical imagination during the Popular Front and Second World War. Ellison wrote an article late in 1943 that shows a deep concern for the Party's wartime rhetoric. Ellison had been enamored with the Communist Party for roughly half a decade, but, according to his biographer Arnold Rampersad, he seems to have been transitioning out of the Party by 1942.[51] Ellison began by describing three general attitudes among black Americans toward the war: "unqualified acceptance," "unqualified rejection," and "critical participation." Ellison commended critical participation in the war effort, which simultaneously required the recognition that "Negroes have their own stake in the defeat of fascism" and the imagination to reject the "slavishness" and "blind acceptance" of military segregation. Ellison situates his position between acceptance and rejection in the following way:

> The only honorable course for Negroes to take is first to protest and then to fight against [policies of segregation]. And while willing to give and take in the interest of national unity, [this attitude] rejects that old pattern of American thought that regards any

> Negro demand for justice as treasonable, or any Negro act of self-defense as an assault against the state. It believes that to fail to protest the wrongs done Negroes as we fight this war is to participate in a crime, not only against Negroes, but against all true anti-Fascists.[52]

Although not an explicit reference to Communist policy, Ellison's description of "critical participation" comes very close to criticizing Communist actions in 1943. Although the Communist Party claimed to promote something similar to critical participation, Ellison's emphasis on *true* anti-fascism, once again reminding of Foucault's floating signifier, suggests his awareness of the changing enemy of fascism, and Ellison, even while supporting the war effort, was less compromising in his approach to desegregation than the Communist Party.

Ellison's "Editorial Comment" did not explore the Douglass narrative's connection to contemporary politics explicitly, but it did comment on the importance of narrative in understanding black identity in the midst of the war against fascism. Ellison appealed to the Civil War to situate black agency in the midst of World War II: "they have the Civil War to teach them that no revolutionary situation in the United States will be carried any farther toward fulfilling the needs of Negroes than Negroes themselves are able, through a strategic application of their own power to make it go."[53] Like the Communist Party, therefore, Ellison used the example of black participation in the Civil War to encourage black participation in World War II. Unlike the Communist Party, however, Ellison here added sufficient nuance to that mythology by reconfiguring the story to be one about black agency in the quest for freedom and self-definition rather than a simple precedent for black enlistment in the military. Ellison was explicit on this point. He said that black leadership must learn "the meaning of the myths and symbols which abound among the Negro masses" in order to overcome black resistance to the war. This is because the problem of black resistance

> is psychological; it will be solved only by a Negro leadership that is aware of the psychological attitudes and incipient forms of action which the black masses reveal in their emotion-charged myths, symbols and wartime folklore. Only through a skillful and wise manipulation of these centers of repressed social energy will Negro resentment, self-pity and indignation be channelized to cut through temporary issues and become transformed into positive action. This is not to make the problem simply one of words, but to recognize…that words have their own vital importance.[54]

In this editorial Ellison had not yet reached the conclusion that he would in *Invisible Man*, where the poster of Frederick Douglass is misappropriated by the Brotherhood and then removed when Brother Tarp leaves, but Ellison was clearly

moving closer to his position in *Invisible Man* by attending to the significance of cultural symbols, pointing out how their use (or misuse) was a key factor in black participation in or rejection of the war.

By 1944 the Communist Party's credibility as a defender of black rights was tenuous enough that the *Negro Digest* published an article called "Have Communists Quit Fighting for Negro Rights?" Five authors contributed an answer to this question. William Patterson, Ben Davis, and James Ford all answered a resounding "no," appealing to the Communist legacy of defending black rights in the Scottsboro and Herndon cases, but George Schuyler and Horace Cayton both answered "yes," Schuyler going so far as to say that the Communist Party had never fought for black rights in the first place. That the article was published at all suggests that suspicion of the Communist Party was widespread enough to merit such a discussion. Each author took a different approach to the question, but a common concern to all of them was the Communist perspective toward the war. In every case, the answer to the relationship between the Communist Party and black dignity seemed to be determined by the war. Patterson, for example, argued that the war's influence on the world had made the welfare of the black community inextricable from global politics:

> The war has changed America. It has changed the world. The Negro now need not, indeed he can not, fight alone. He is a part of a great democratic coalition. His problems are merged with the problems of the colonial peoples, the nations enslaved by Nazism, those who at home are menaced by unemployment in the postwar period…Fascism in all its forms must be rooted out everywhere or nowhere is democracy safe. Democracy is indivisible. The first task before mankind seeking freedom from tyranny and want is the destruction of the base of fascism.[55]

Likewise, Ben Davis argued that "The greatest service that can be contributed to Negro rights is unconditional support of the war" (Davis once again cited Douglass as his predecessor in order to support his case).[56] Moreover, James Ford added that "all other considerations would have to be subordinated to this central objective" of destroying fascism in the war.[57] Common to their approach was the subordination of black rights within the broader destiny of international labor. Racial discrimination was wrong, they affirmed, but racial discrimination would best be fought by addressing the global spread of fascism.

George Schuyler and Horace Cayton, however, believed that the Communists had unjustly taken advantage of racial activism by redirecting these efforts toward the Communist agenda. On these grounds, Schuyler condemned the Communist support of the war after the invasion of Russia, saying that the Communists believed that "Everything must be done to save Russia even if Negro rights have to go by the board." Schuyler went even further in his accusation by calling Stalinism itself a form of fascism. The Communist Party vehemently opposed fascism,

Schuyler said, "except the Stalinist brand."[58] And here Cayton continued the attack, pointing out that it was exactly this policy that undermined Communist credibility: "Most damaging to Communist prestige is their failure to formulate any program against Jim Crowism in the armed forces and their tacit acceptance of the Jim Crow practices of the Red Cross."[59] Cayton had apparently picked up on the fact that the Communist Party had paid lip service to ending segregation in the military without taking any active steps toward that goal. To create such a plan, as Minor's earlier comments suggested, would have threatened the total, national unity required to win the war.

The pressures of the historical moment created a situation in which crafting an appropriate historical narrative was almost impossible for the Communist Party. Their actions failed to become, as Isserman writes, a "'usable past,' in the sense of providing models to emulate or political blueprints to follow."[60] They found themselves in a difficult, complex situation with no clear answers, and they made what seemed to be the best choice for them at the time by appropriating the myths and symbols of the Civil War and Frederick Douglass to rally their supporters against the various forms of fascism. However, the Communist discussion of anti-fascism, as well as their appropriation of black heroes, was inconsistent, and these inconsistencies damaged their credibility among black Party members such as Ellison, planting the seed for what would become a central image in *Invisible Man:* Brother Tarp's portrait of Frederick Douglass.

This examination of the Douglass narrative in Communist discourse has two important consequences for understanding this scene in *Invisible Man.* First, Ellison has often been criticized for presenting the Brotherhood as an unfair caricature of the Communist Party. Barbara Foley, for example, accuses Ellison of profiting from Cold War anticommunism rather than staying true to his art: "I suggest that he may have been deliberately ascending—and helping to steer-the anti-communist bandwagon, possibly to advance his own career."[61] Such criticisms, however, fail to consider the real historical referents embedded within *Invisible Man*. What may appear to some to be an insignificant detail or a mere flourish in the novel—Brother Tarp's Douglass portrait—reveals that Ellison's "caricature" often had historical precedent. Second, this analysis contributes to our understanding of the role of Douglass in *Invisible Man* as a whole. David Messmer has helpfully pointed out that Douglass acts as a rhetorical model for the Invisible Man, creating a "call and response" between the two figures.[62] Whereas Messmer considers the role of the historical Douglass in the novel, however, I have considered the story of Douglass as it relates to the novel's historical timeline. The novel's references to Douglass must be understood in terms of both the narrator's relationship to the historical Douglass and his relationship with the Brotherhood. In other words, this history of the Douglass narrative in Communist discourse functions as an extended footnote to these lines in *Invisible Man*.

This history, however, has broader consequences as well. The Communist Party's historical narratives had a large influence on many black intellectuals' decisions to leave the Party, yet the coming and going of black intellectuals has

commonly been examined in terms of Communist policies rather than Communist narratives. Although the significance of Communist Popular Front and wartime policies cannot be underestimated, the significance of the Communist Party's imaginative constructions of American identity should not be overlooked. This analysis expands our understanding of the Americanization of the Communist Party by providing a detailed account of one such historical narrative in the figure of Frederick Douglass. Long after finishing *Invisible Man*, Ellison reflected upon his experience with the Communist Party underlying his fiction, summarizing once again his reason for leaving in terms of the Party's identity-forming myths and stories: "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

Figure 3: Political Cartoon Protesting Hitler, the KKK, and the Poll Tax, *New Masses*, October, 20, 1942, 15.

they lost the Negroes."[63] Ellison's comment suggests that the Party's politics were always intertwined with its narratives, that its political commitments and historical representations cannot be disentangled. Ellison suggests, in other words, that a thorough understanding of the American Communist Party requires a sensitivity to the narratives used to construct their identity.

Notes

1. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 378.

2. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 378-379.

3. William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 201.

4. Denning identifies a pattern in the Popular Front imagination to retell "American mythologies" with a "radical edge." These stories, he writes, "were attempts to imagine a new culture, a new way of life, a revolution," while simultaneously appealing to the American national consciousness and to American history. Denning names Abraham Lincoln and John Brown as examples of Americanization, but he does not provide an extended analysis of either. Likewise, Mark Solomon points to Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and Frederick Douglass as Party symbols of "militant Negro manhood" used as a "response to national oppression and a legitimate manifestation of the struggle for national identity," yet they are only mentioned in passing. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 131-135. Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-36* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 184.

5. Without his knowledge, Douglass had been nominated alongside Victoria Woodhull on the Equal Rights Party ticket. Ben Davis, the prominent Harlem-based Communist eventually elected to the New York City Council, gave Ford this name. Ben Davis, "James W. Ford: 'Frederick Douglass of 1936,'" *Daily Worker*, 29 Sept. 1936.

6. James W. Ford, "C.P. Champions Negro Struggle, Declares Ford," *Daily Worker*, 29 June 1936.

7. "Text of Communist Platform Adopted at Ninth Convention," *Daily Worker*, 29 June 1936.

8. "Text of Communist Platform Adopted at Ninth Convention," *Daily Worker*, 29 June 1936. Despite its many failings as a slogan, Maurice Isserman writes, "Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism" was met with "genuine enthusiasm" during the Popular Front as a part of the strategy of Americanization. The slogan was a significant change from William Foster's earlier exhortation "Toward Soviet America." Nevertheless, even this effort to Americanize the Communist Party was in many ways an international, collaborative effort on the part of the communists. Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 9-11.

9. Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1983), 169.

10. Georgi Dimitrov, "The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International in the Struggle of the Working Class against Fascism." In Georgi Dimitrov, *Selected Works Volume 2* (Sofia: Sofia Press, 1972). For general discussions of African Americans and the Popular Front that emphasize a bottom up history of ordinary Communists instead of the top down story of the Comintern elite, see Mark Solomon, *The*

Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 258-284; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 185-189; and Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 159-175.

11. Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Afred A. Knopf, 2004), 9.

12. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 139.

13. Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, 16.

14. Cathy Bergin, *"Bitter with the past but sweet with the dream": Communism in the African American Imaginary: Representations of the Communist Party, 1940-1952* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 60-61.

15. A.W. Berry, "Renew Fighting Traditions on Douglas Day!" *Negro Liberator*, 1 Feb. 1935.

16. "Fred Douglass Anniversary Edition," *Negro Liberator*, 15 Feb. 1935.

17. "Fascism in America," *Negro Liberator*, 15 June 1935.

18. Ben Davis also thought the date of the convention was significant. On the eve of the congress, Davis commemorated Douglass in an article about Douglass's participation in a convention on black suffrage in 1866. Davis contrasted Douglass's demand for the "immediate enfranchisement of the rfeed [sic] Negroes" with the compromising position of William Lloyd Garrison. "It is in the spirit of these traditions," Davis said, "that the National Negro Congress will memorialize the birthday anniversary of Frederick Douglass." Ben Davis, "Negro Congress a Fit Tribute to Douglass," *Daily Worker,* 13 Feb. 1936.

19. James W. Ford and A.W. Berry, "The Coming National Negro Congress," *Communist* Volume 15, No 2 (February 1936), 141.

20. James W. Ford, "The National Negro Congress," *Communist* 15, no. 4 (April 1936), 317-324.

21. James W. Ford, "Political Highlights of the National Negro Congress," *Communist* 15, no. 5 (May 1936), 457-462.

22. "Frederick Douglass—A Great American," *Daily Worker*, 13 Feb. 1937.

23. Mitchell's article is an unusual instance of the Douglass narrative being used in service of women's rights. Usually, Douglass, as well as other black male historical figures, are enlisted in the cause of what Mark Solomon calls "militant Negro manhood," a revealing observation considering the three primary writers in this essay, as well as James Ford, were male. Louise Mitchell, "Ninety Years of Women's Rights," *Daily Worker*, 19 July 1938. Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity*, 184.

24. Ben Davis, "Progress of America and the Revolutionary Role of the Negro People," *Daily Worker*, 12 Feb. 1938. "'Too Thoughtful to Be Happy': Knowledge From Books Deepened Fred Douglass' Hatred of Slavery," *Daily Worker*, 16 Sept. 1938.

25. William L. Patterson, "Ford's Book Vital to Fight for Negro Rights, Advance of American Progress," *Daily Worker*, 26 Nov. 1938.

26. Two other events that occurred during the Popular Front, unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay, deserve a brief mention here. The first is the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, and the second is the Spanish Civil War. Put briefly, Ford responded to the Ethiopian crisis by exhorting his audience to uphold the "best traditions of Douglass and Lincoln" by rejecting "fascism and war in the United States." The Spanish Civil War is relevant to this discussion for two reasons. First, the general trend of invoking the history of abolitionism against fascism continued during the war. The volunteer armies of the Comintern's International Brigades were sometimes named after American Civil War heroes: the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the Lincoln Battalion, and the John Brown Battery. Langston Hughes' even connected Harpers Ferry with the Siege of Oviedo in the poem "October 16th." Second, the Spanish Civil War reveals the Communist Party's complex and sometimes contradictory stance toward war. Ford's calls for peace at the National Negro

Congress, for example, were not unanimously supported by those black Communists who soon afterward volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Party members sometimes protested "imperialist" wars between capitalist powers while at other times supporting wars against colonialism. For Ford's response to the Ethiopian crisis, see James W. Ford, "Fascism Would Mean Terrible Treatment Of the Negro Masses," *Daily Worker*, 10 July 1936. For the Spanish Civil War, see David Featherstone, "Black Internationalism, International Communism and Anti-Fascist Political Trajectories: African American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War," *Twentieth-Century Communism* 7 (2014): 9-40; Robin D. G. Kelley, "This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do," in *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Danny Duncan Collum (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1992), 5-57; and Langston Hughes, "October 16th," in *African Americans in the Spanish Civil War,* 109-110.

27. Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 287.

28. "Letters From Our Readers Express Views on Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact," *Daily Worker,* 28 Aug. 1939.

29. "Negro and White Youth Lay Wreath At Statue of Frederick Douglass," *Daily Worker*, 21 Feb. 1941.

30. Ben Davis, "New 'Life of Frederick Douglass' Is Monument to Great Liberator," *Daily Worker*, 6 Apr. 1941.

31. Ben Davis, "Negro Communist Parley Stresses Need For Anti-Hitler Front; Ford, Minor Speak," *Daily Worker*, 16 Sept. 1941. Minor here conflates the discriminatory Jim Crow laws, a postbellum phenomenon, with antebellum forms of discrimination. In context, Minor is suggesting that Douglass could have prioritized ending segregation in the Union Army but chose not to in order to achieve a faster Union victory.

32. In some ways the domestic and foreign concerns are connected, but the nuance reveals the subtle prioritizations of blackness, Americanness, and Marxism within the multi-faceted construction of Communist identity. Ben Davis compared these two adversaries in his explanation for the need to enter the war. Black Americans should support the war because "they are daily recognizing that the world victory of Nazism would throw back a hundred years their struggles to end the slave-market stench still in America." Ben Davis, "Browder's Contributions to Negro Rights Aid Anti-Fascist Unity of the Nation," *Daily Worker*, 1 Dec. 1941. Likewise, Angelo Herndon called for full black support of the war. Just as Frederick Douglass urged Lincoln to "let the weight of twenty millions crush and destroy [slavery] forever!" so also should black Americans support the war effort. Herndon continued, "For the love of God, tear away, and fling from you the hideous and deadly poison of Jim Crow and race hatred, and let the weight of fifteen millions help to crush the common enemy of Nazism and Fascism!", Angelo Herndon, "Frederick Douglass: Negro Leadership and War", *Negro Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1943).

33. James W. Ford, Foreword to "Negroes and the National War Effort" by Frederick Douglass (1942), 5-6.

34. "Boston Celebrates Month of Liberation," *Daily Worker*, 31 Jan. 1943. Michael Denning sees Popular Front Americanisms as invoking the more radical figures of American history, such as John Brown, but he overlooks the ways in which Popular Front Americanisms softened at the outset of World War II. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 131.

35. Elizabeth Lawson, "Lincoln's Alliance with Labor," *Daily Worker*, 12 Feb. 1943.

36. James W. Ford, "New Opportunity for Negro Unity," *Daily Worker*, 30 Jan. 1943.

37. This column, responding to the naming of a U.S. naval vessel *The Frederick Douglass*, called for the support of an Anti-Poll Tax petition in the South. "Frederick Douglass Fights Fascism," *Daily Worker*, 30 Apr. 1943.

38. "Foster Brands Hoover at Capital Rally," *Daily Worker*, 17 Feb. 1943.

39. Barbara Foley and Robin D.G. Kelley have made similar arguments about the Double V campaign. See Bergin, *"Bitter with the past but sweet with the dream,"* 134; Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 39; and Kelley, "This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do," 40.

40. Mary Helen Washington, *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 6.

41. "Let this People Fight: Full Citizenship Rights for the Negro—a Crucial Issue in Winning the War. An Editorial," *New Masses* 45, no. 3 (20 Oct. 1942), 2.

42. Robert Minor, "The Negro Freedom Meeting, A Discovery of Strength," *Daily Worker,* 9 June 1943.

43. "This is the New Negro!" *Daily Worker*, 9 June 1943.

44. Claude McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1940), 188.

45. McKay, *Harlem*, 188, 48.

46. McKay, *Harlem*, 260. Although McKay's account is impassioned, it demonstrates that Communist narratives during the period had tremendous significance in mediating the relationship between the Party and the black residents in Harlem. The Communists' use of Frederick Douglass was apparently so prevalent that their critics noticed. McKay goes on to admit at least one similarity between Frederick Douglass and some black Communists in Harlem: they both married white women, something which McKay uses as an example to show Douglass', and therefore the Communists', "forfeiting his enormous influence among Negroes." These themes appear again in McKay's recently discovered manuscript *Amiable with Big Teeth*, whose subtitle summarizes well McKay's view of the Communist Party, *A Novel of the Love Affair between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem*. In the novel, McKay connects Communist activity with the history of abolitionism by calling the Popular Front "the second emancipation," which McKay then challenges throughout the book. Claude McKay, *Amiable with Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair between the Communist and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 197, 235.

47. McKay, *Harlem*, 262.

48. Richard Wright, "I Tried to be a Communist," *Atlantic Monthly* 174 (1944), 62, 66. Notably, Wright includes similar themes in his novel *The Outsider* (1953), a fuller discussion of which, while relevant, cannot be included here. Put briefly, *The Outsider*, whose major themes include false identities, forgotten/remembered histories, and a black man's involvement with the Communist Party, portrays the Communist Party as a duplicitous manipulator of history. In the novel, the Party frequently tries to reconstruct personal and communal histories to its own advantage, such as with its involvement in a crime scene or with its control over members' identities. At one point the narrator says the Communists were known to "establish new identities" for themselves by stealing the names of the dead. Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York: Signet, 1953), 129.

49. Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 37.

50. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 218.

51. Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 162.

52. Ralph Ellison, "Editorial Comment," *Negro Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (1943), 297-299.

53. Ellison, "Editorial Comment," 300.

54. Ellison, "Editorial Comment," 301-302.

55. "Have the Communists Quit Fighting for Negro Rights?" *Negro Digest* 3, no. 2 (1944) 59-60.

56. "Have the Communists Quit Fighting for Negro Rights?" 65.

57. "Have the Communists Quit Fighting for Negro Rights?" 69.

58. "Have the Communists Quit Fighting for Negro Rights?" 63-64.

59. "Have the Communists Quit Fighting for Negro Rights?" 67.

60. Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, 17.

61. Barbara Foley, "The Rhetoric of Anticommunism in *Invisible Man*," *College English* 59, no. 5 (1997): 532. Others have criticized Ellison's depiction of the Party on aesthetic grounds. See Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison,* 255; Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Dissent* 10, no. 4 (1963): 363; and Saul Bellow, "Man Underground," *Commentary*, June 1952, 609.

62. David Messmer, "Trumpets, Horns, and Typewriters: A Call and Response between Ralph Ellison and Frederick Douglass," *African American Review* 43, no. 4 (2009): 589.

63. Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 748.