

“Fighting Words”: Ralph Ellison and Len Zinberg

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On December 17, 1940, the *New Masses* published Ralph Ellison’s review of *Walk Hard–Talk Loud*, a first novel by Len Zinberg, a working-class Jewish Communist from Manhattan who was also, at the time, a “friend” of Ellison.¹ Zinberg published only three novels under his own name, and none of them are much read today, but after his death in 1968, the *New York Times* reported that the detective fiction he wrote under the name Ed Lacy had sold 28 million copies.² The first Ed Lacy novel, *The Woman Aroused*, appeared in 1951, the year before Ellison staked his claim to a place in the American canon with *Invisible Man*. Two very different career trajectories, then, and ones that could not have been predicted back in 1940 when Ellison and Zinberg moved in the same literary and political circles, attending meetings of the League of American Writers and publishing reviews and stories in the likes of *New Masses* and *Cross Section*.³ Today, Ellison’s review, “Negro Prize Fighter,” is read much more often than Zinberg’s novel, mostly to demonstrate his “enthusiasm for ideological commentary founded in material class analysis” during the late 1930s and early 1940s.⁴ But *Walk Hard–Talk Loud* may have provided Ellison with more than an excuse for pointing out the importance of “a Marxist understanding of the economic basis of Negro personality.”⁵ The following essay makes a case for the novel’s place among the plethora of *Invisible Man*’s intertexts, and indeed as a book worth reading in its own right.

In addition to their common political interests during that period, Ellison and Zinberg both “learned much” from Hemingway, whom Ellison later described as “the true father-as-artist of many of us who came to writing during the late thirties.”⁶ What Hemingway offered was a distinctive style, which during the 1930s had become codified as the “hard-boiled,” and a distinctive philosophy, which during that period and beyond was often rejected as “social cynicism.”⁷ But Hemingway also suggested ways in which attention to the rituals of modern life—in particular those involving sport—might allow a writer to explore larger themes and ways in which the writer himself (and the pronoun is definitely male) could be thought of as a kind of fighter.

I

“She’ll have to learn the symbolism of the revolution,” somebody said.

“But why can’t Communism speak a language she understands?” I asked.⁸

By the mid-1930s, as part of a wider Popular Front attempt to widen its appeal, the American Communist Party (CPUSA) began to rethink its approach to sport. The accepted orthodoxy was that “American workers are greatly interested in professional sports, too much, in fact, for their own class interest,” but it became clear that simply repeating this point would achieve little.⁹ “What are we going to do,” Mike Gold asked the readers of the *Daily Worker* in 1935, “insist that they give up this taste?”: “Are we going to maintain our isolation and make Americans stop their baseball before we will condescend to explain Communism to them? When you run the news of a strike alongside the news of a baseball game, you are making American workers feel at home. . . . Let’s loosen up.”¹⁰ Six months later, on January 12, 1936, the *Daily Worker* launched a new Sunday edition that included two pages of sports coverage, and nine months after that, the paper began to publish a daily sports section. Sport was not, however, simply a way of making readers feel at home, of providing some sugar with the political pill; the paper’s coverage insisted that sport was itself an arena in which political change could be enacted. And so, in 1936, the CPUSA’s “Negro Commission” announced its intention to campaign against “‘discrimination in all fields of sports, especially big league baseball’ and the *Daily Worker*’s sports page . . . defined this as its central concern.”¹¹ In the years that followed, the Party “devoted increasing attention to sports-related issues,” sponsoring basketball teams, staging sports benefits for the Scottsboro Boys, and campaigning for recreational space in Harlem.¹²

But boxing posed particular challenges, as the *Daily Worker*’s founding sports editor Lester Rodney later recalled: “The downside, of course, was the sheer brutality and the corruption surrounding it. At the same time, as the *Daily Worker*, we had to consider the very meaningful significance of Joe Louis and Harry Armstrong as champions.”¹³ The significance of Louis in particular was the subject of much commentary.¹⁴ For example, Richard Wright’s first pub-

lished article, in the *New Masses*, was a report of Louis’s fight with Max Baer; Wright noted the “feeling of unity, of oneness” that Louis’s victory produced but also argued that the feeling should be politically “harnessed and directed.”¹⁵ Three years later, Wright covered Louis’s second fight with the German Max Schmeling for both the *Daily Worker* and the *New Masses*.¹⁶ The *New Masses* piece presents the boxers as “puppets,” a metaphor that Ellison also used in *Invisible Man*.¹⁷ In making this comparison, neither writer, I would argue, is writing “disparagingly”¹⁸ about fighters or simply demonstrating how they are “manipulated”;¹⁹ what interests both writers is the way in which sports stars function as what Wright here calls “configurations of social images” and, elsewhere, “myths and symbols.”²⁰

The vocabulary of myths, symbols, and social images evokes Kenneth Burke’s critical writing from this period. Burke’s importance for Ellison has been widely acknowledged²¹—not least by Ellison himself—but he was also a key figure for Wright and, I would suggest, for Zinberg, too.²² Ellison acknowledges as much in his review of *Walk Hard–Talk Loud*, when he describes the character of the racist gangster as the “object” that “symbolized” the fate of the boxer protagonist.²³ Moreover, that boxer’s Communist girlfriend is always talking about “the people”—the phrase that Burke famously insisted upon as preferable to “the workers” or “the masses” because it contained “connotations of both oppression and of unity,” thus inspiring wider “allegiance.” The romantic pairing of Party member and boxer in *Walk Hard–Talk Loud* provides an ideal dramatic situation in which the Communist character can, as Burke urged, “plead with the unconvinced” (rather than “convince the convinced”), and in which the Communist novelist, Zinberg, can use “*their* vocabulary, *their* values, *their* symbols.”²⁴

But the vocabulary of boxing, and of fighting more generally, was appealing to writers not only because it was popular, a gesture toward “the entire range of our interests” (in Burke’s phrase) or “the unintellectualized areas of our experience” (in Ellison’s).²⁵ The language of the fight also provided writers with a way of conceiving their own words not merely as “social tools” but as social *weapons*.²⁶ In 1940, Donald Ogden Stewart published a selection of proceedings of the Third Congress of the League of American Writers under the title *Fighting Words*. Picking up a pencil to write, he argued, was a form of “enlistment.”²⁷ The following year, after reading *12 Million Black Voices*, Ellison praised Richard Wright for turning the “experience [of Negro suffering]” into a “weapon more subtle than a machine gun, more effective than a fighter-plane. It’s like Joe Louis knocking their best men in his precise, impassive, alert Negro way.”²⁸ Burke, meanwhile, was fond of demonstrating how “a ‘dyslogistic’ adjective” could be “the equivalent of a blow—and enough of them can lead to one.”²⁹ Sitting down at one’s writing desk could, it seemed, be an act as powerful as entering the boxing ring or the battle field.

II

*"Full of fight, ain'tcha?"*³⁰

Invisible Man, as has often been noted, is carefully structured through a series of fights, which Ellison himself described as "symbolic substitutes" for the "bouts with circumstance" undergone by African Americans since the Civil War and for the rituals "in preservation of caste lines" still operating in Jim Crow America.³¹ Those rituals reveal fault lines in any simple conception of fighting or of "fighting with words." How, Ellison asks, can the fight be understood as the means to genuine resistance when those one is trying to resist interpret it as another form of entertainment? In other words, might fighting turn out to be simply another form of escapism, a flight (or run or shuffle) from the real?

These are questions that also preoccupied Zinberg. Set in Manhattan during the 1930s, *Walk Hard—Talk Loud* is about a black shoeshine-boy-turned-boxer called Andy Whitman (I'll return to his name) and parallels a naturalist tale of his rise and fall as a boxer with the more hopeful story of his political awakening.³² The novel opens, starkly, in the final stages of a "pretty good fight": "Then the colored kid hit the white kid on the mouth and he began to bleed."³³ This scuffle will prove to be the fairest fight the novel stages, but a "loud-mouthed" cop, with a reputation for racism, shows up and tells Andy to "get going" back to Harlem, "where you belong."³⁴ The two boys reconvene around the corner, and Andy declares defiantly that he won't be chased off the pitch "because [he's] black": "you know how you feel," he tells his erstwhile rival, "when you run and you know you ought to stay."³⁵ A few moments later, Andy is approached by a boxing manager, Max Stringer, who offers to train him as fighter. Andy accepts, reasoning, first, that he's got to "learn something, and no reason why this isn't it," and second, that if he got "real money" like Joe Louis, he could "get the hell of here, out of the country" to "places you can forget about jim-crow."³⁶

In a few short pages, Zinberg has introduced his protagonist and the themes that his novel will develop. In deciding to fight the rival shoeshine boy, Andy is refusing to be "chased" away; his decision to fight for money as a boxer, however, is quite different. Indeed, preparing to fight—by running three miles every morning—is also preparing for flight: "each step taking him nearer the big dough and away from Harlem."³⁷ For all that Andy challenges the popular "rags to riches" story of the boxer James Braddock as "the great old American pep talk," it's the same pep talk that he gives himself for most of the novel.³⁸ Like Wright's Bigger Thomas, Andy inhabits a cultural milieu in which "pictures of Jack Johnson, Joe, Jack Dempsey, and Henry Armstrong" taunt him on a daily basis; more specifically, like the young Malcolm X, and "every Negro boy old enough to walk" in the late 1930s, Andy has ambitions to "be the Brown Bomber."³⁹ For all these writers there was something invidious in what Ellison described as ritual identification with "the successes of Negro celebrities":

“by reciting their exploits and enumerating their dollars, and by recounting the swiftness with which they spiral from humble birth to headline fame,” he argued, black Americans bolstered a dream whose “blasting” was inevitable.⁴⁰ Like Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Andy is “naïve,” and like *Invisible Man*, he receives a political education (while he’s learning his “trade”) through a series of fights both in and outside the boxing ring.⁴¹

Throughout the novel, what Ellison, in his review, calls Andy’s “romanticism” is questioned by Communist women—a white girl called Kate Grath, in whose company he is forced to confront attitudes to interracial couples, and a black girl called Ruth Lawson, who becomes his girlfriend and political instructor.⁴² Unlike *Invisible Man*, however, Andy never joins the Party, and even on the novel’s final page, he remains—just about—one of Burke’s “unconvinced” to be pleaded with. The convincing takes the form of many conversations with Ruth and a picaresque journey around, and beyond, Manhattan: we follow Andy as he travels from his “little flat” to the gymnasium, from the library to a night club, and so on.⁴³ In each place, and on the streets and subway that connect them, Andy has encounters that teach him what it means “to live as a Negro” in Jim Crow America.⁴⁴ Many of those encounters are with bartenders, counter men, and hotel managers who make him feel unwelcome. That’s nothing new to Andy; what surprises him is how little changes when he acquires the supposedly liberating skills of a successful boxer. After his first professional fight, during which members of the crowd yell out “kill the black bastard!” Andy asks his manager, “I did the job right, what more did they want?” The crowd’s response, he concludes, “let me learn something.”⁴⁵

III

*“I despise concreteness in writing.”*⁴⁶

The closest thing in *Walk Hard* to the Battle Royal that opens *Invisible Man* is a scene describing Andy’s fight with a West Indian boxer called Clarke. The first round is presented in Zinberg’s usual terse style, but during the second, after Andy is knocked down and nearly out, the prose shifts into a kind of surrealism intended to reflect Andy’s groggy consciousness. The white canvas and the white lights above combine into a “fierce golden-white brightness”—“just two colored boys in all this whiteness”—and Andy thinks he might be in Egypt “running along the desert” (a joke on Garvey’s utopia of a black Egypt that’s worthy of Ellison).⁴⁷ Then the bell rings again, and we’re back in the sixth, and final, round. Now Andy becomes aware that his opponent is bleeding, and Andy remembers “a picture he had seen of five husky Negroes fighting a battle royal and they were all bleeding just like Clarke and a laughing crowd of whites watching them.”⁴⁸

In Ellison’s Battle Royal scene, *Invisible Man* suggests to the last of his nine opponents, Tatlock, “Fake it like I knocked you out, you can have the

prize,” to which Tatlock replies, “I’ll break your behind.” “For *them?*,” the narrator asks. “For *me*, sonofabitch!” The tone is one of bitter comedy, as Invisible Man is unable to grasp the incompatibility between his participation in the blindfolded Battle Royal and his conviction that the watching crowd (the town’s “leading white citizens”) are those best suited to “judge truly [his] ability.”⁴⁹ Zinberg’s mode, however, is not ironic, and he uses the scene as a straightforward demonstration of the next stage in Andy’s “gradual awakening” into political consciousness.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the questions he asks himself are not very different from those that Ellison would later pose:

[Andy] jabbed again and again, lightly, keeping Clarke off balance, and he could hear the dull roar of the mob. He thought, what am I cutting up this poor slob for? To make these damn whites yell? To hell with you bastards, you like to see two black boys kicking the hell out of each other. You love to see any man cut up and bleeding, as long as it isn’t you. The more he takes it, the more his blood spills out, the better you like it. . . . I ain’t going to paste this guy no more, and those crumbs out there know what they can do. They got their money’s worth already.⁵¹

While Ellison presents the Battle Royal and his protagonist’s subsequent real and metaphorical fights as repeating the same “initiation ritual” again and again, with “insight” only emerging in “the final section,” Zinberg has Andy learn something new with every fight.⁵² The novel’s final disillusioning bout takes place in Pennsylvania: Andy comes out on top, as everyone accepts; nevertheless, victory is awarded to his white, “home-town” opponent. This is the moment at which he finally accepts that professional boxing is a “lousy racket” and decides to forget “this championship bunk and phoney glory.” From now on, he resolves to concentrate on making money. But even that reduced dream soon collapses following a longtime-coming “showdown” with a racist racketeer called Lou Ross.⁵³ This fight, out of the ring, is his Douglass v. Covey moment (“I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection . . . to the heaven of freedom”), and his Bigger Thomas moment (“What I killed for, I *am*”).⁵⁴ “You hit Lou,” explains Ruth, “because you had to hit him, Andy.”⁵⁵ What more is there to fight for?

The novel presents two conclusions, each representing a different side of Andy’s education. The fight with Lou means the end of Andy’s fledging career as a boxer; due to Lou’s influence, he’ll never fight again. There is no real answer to the stark fact that “the one thing [he] trained for” he can no longer “work at”;⁵⁶ his trade apprenticeship has come to nothing. And yet consolation is offered in Ruth’s emphasis on Andy’s achievement of what Ellison would call “perception.”⁵⁷ Ruth assures Andy that it’s a good thing that his “special little rose-colored bubble has busted,” for only now he will accept that he is “part of

the people” and “can’t rise by himself.”⁵⁸ “If you’ve learned that,” she tells him, “and you have—then you’ve come a long way.” The novel ends with Andy crying “for the first time he could remember”—“and he didn’t like it.”⁵⁹

Although Ellison praised *Walk Hard—Talk Loud* as “hard-boiled,” Andy’s cathartic tears can be read as at least a momentary rejection of what another of Ellison’s friends, Saul Bellow, called “the code of the athlete, of the tough boy.”⁶⁰ It also offers a clue to how, in other hands, “the neatly understated forms” of the hard-boiled novel might be “burst asunder.”⁶¹ But in fact, even before he cries, Andy is rarely understated. “What you steamed up about now, son?,” his father asks him, “You always worried about something.”⁶² “What the hell you steamed for all the time?,” echoes his manager.⁶³ From the very start, we’re told that he won’t stand for “no bull”—“don’t call me *boy*. Andy is the name”—and is often on the edge of “making a speech.” Andy is particularly alert to stereotypes and challenges anyone who makes assumptions about his desire for “women and fancy suits,” his dancing ability, his capacity for drink, or his sense of humor: “these colored folks—always supposed to laugh and smile.”⁶⁴ And, in terms that anticipate Ellison’s own remarks on stereotypes, Ruth teaches Andy about the symbolism of blackness (“used for evil things—dirt, death”) and whiteness (“purity and all that”) and about the role played by “the papers, the movies, the radio, the comics” in keeping “the sore festering.”⁶⁵ Ellison praised Zinberg for writing a novel “uncolored by condescension” and “stereotyped ideas,” but *Walk Hard—Talk Loud* is also a novel *about* condescension and stereotyped ideas.⁶⁶ Ollie Stewart, in the Baltimore *Afro-American*, described it as “the most understanding piece of fiction that any American white man has ever done with a non-white subject.”⁶⁷

The biggest difference between the two novelists is that, for the most part, Zinberg relies on his characters themselves to “talk loud” enough to convey the novel’s Popular Front messages and to make the connections that Ellison makes metaphorically, in “a language full of imagery and gesture and rhetorical can-niness.”⁶⁸ Consider, for example, the place of blind boxers in the two novels. In *Walk Hard*, Andy’s encounter with a blind prizefighter begging on the street simply provides an occasion for him to question whether his manager, Max, is more of a racist than he’d previously thought. Max dismissed the blind man as a “punk,” but Andy wonders, did he really want to say “nigger punk?”⁶⁹ In *Invisible Man*, it is the reader who must recognize “subtle symbolic connections.”⁷⁰ By the time we reach chapter sixteen, in which the protagonist delivers a speech in an auditorium where a prizefighter had lost his sight, we know that we’re supposed to connect the scene to the novel’s larger pattern of images of partial sight, blindness, and invisibility. “Let’s reclaim our sight; let’s combine and spread our vision,” urges *Invisible Man* in his new role as Brotherhood orator, but, as he finishes speaking, “red spots” dance before his eyes.⁷¹ He is, Ellison suggests, as blind as before; “insight” is still some way off.

The difference—as well as the overlap—between the two writers is also apparent if we consider Zinberg’s close equivalents to two of *Invisible Man*’s

most notable characters: Tod Clifton and Ras the Exhorter. Ellison gives Ras, the representative of Garveyite nationalism, an important speech about the craziness of black men fighting each other—a speech that makes Invisible Man recall “the horror of the battle royal,” and that contributes to the novel’s sustained meditation on “the nature of Negro leadership in the United States.”⁷² In *Walk Hard—Talk Loud*, we don’t hear the voice of the “street-corner speaker” at all; he is simply described as “talking loudly . . . with a clipped West Indian accent.”⁷³ Instead, as Andy walks past, we are given access to his proto-Marxist musings on nationalism: “What the hell has Africa to do with me? I worry about rent, money, food. . . .”⁷⁴ A little later, in another of the novel’s Manhattan encounters, Andy is embarrassed to observe a drunk “tap-dancing fool” on the subway; he cringes as the man gets down on his knees and sings “Mammy,” segueing into “Ole Man River.”⁷⁵ Andy repeatedly tries to shut the man up—“What are you doing, proving that we’re Stepin Fetchit?”—and eventually punches him hard in the stomach.⁷⁶ Again this anticipates, but also differs significantly from, a key scene in *Invisible Man*, when “rage well[s] behind” Invisible Man’s “phlegm” and he spits on Tod Clifton’s Sambo doll. In Ellison’s novel, this moment of protest is immediately undercut by a spectator’s laughing response and Tod’s announcement of “a great show coming up.” “Why had he picked that way to earn a quarter?” Invisible Man wonders, “why not sell apples or song sheets, or shine shoes?”⁷⁷ Ellison’s bitter humor is at the expense of his still-naive protagonist. (Is shining white men’s shoes really such a step up from selling them dancing dolls? And is there nothing a black man can do that can’t be co-opted as entertainment?) Zinberg, however, opts for pathos as the drunk recounts a familiar tale of prejudice and discrimination: he is a highly qualified chemist whose promised job fell through when his employers realized he was black. “The poor bastard,” thinks Andy, newly chastened.⁷⁸

IV

*“A war of words, a clash of styles”*⁷⁹

In 1985, Burke wrote to Ellison to say that he thought of *Invisible Man* “primarily as an example of what the Germans would call a *Bildungsroman*,” since it followed the young narrator’s progress from “apprenticeship” to “journey-manship,” a personal “transitional” period appropriate for the dramatization of a particular “epoch” (if not exactly the “revolutionary era” Burke had described fifty years earlier).⁸⁰ I’ve suggested that *Walk Tall* might also be thought of as a *Bildungsroman* since it presents the parallel tracks of Andy’s failed “trade” apprenticeship—he ends up “a black boy out of a job”—and his burgeoning political education.⁸¹ The novel celebrates that education, which it presents in the form of two deeply “serious” young people engaged in an ongoing dialectic: love means “sparring like a couple of pugs.”⁸² *Invisible Man* is not a romance, and the protagonist ends up alone. And yet he too never stops sparring; it is simply that the ongoing education of “conflict” he describes is “within.”⁸³

Ellison made a point of distinguishing his fiction (“ceremonial and ritualistic”) from that of Richard Wright who, he said, “believed in the much abused idea that novels are ‘weapons’.”⁸⁴ In some ways, as I’ve suggested, the distinction doesn’t really hold. An appreciation of the ways in which the ceremonies and rituals of fighting could be used in fiction was something that Wright and Zinberg, as much as Ellison, retained from their reading of Hemingway, long after Papa’s hard-boiled style and social cynicism had been discarded. Nor did Ellison himself ever completely distance himself from the Popular Front rhetoric of the “warfare of words and symbolic actions.”⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the “drama of democracy” staged by *Invisible Man* in 1952 is quite different from that at play in *Native Son* or *Walk Hard–Talk Loud*, published twelve years earlier.⁸⁶ In accepting that his fate is bound up with that of “the people,” Andy Whitman lives up to the name he shares with the writer whom many identified as “America’s first proletarian poet.”⁸⁷ Andy’s talk is “loud,” but it’s also “fierce and tough and honest,” as the language of such a poet was meant to be.⁸⁸ *Invisible Man* is “a talker” too, but “the very act of trying to put it all down,” he says, has “confused” rather than clarified his views. No single position or tone, it seems, is ever more than “partially true”⁸⁹—a “near-tragic, near-comic” conclusion that, in the very different political climate of the 1950s, was welcomed as indicating a true liberal humanism.⁹⁰

In making a case for *Walk Hard–Talk Loud* as a possible precursor to *Invisible Man*, my intention has not been simply to offer it as a naive foil to the later novel’s self-evidently worthwhile modernist complexity. Rather, reading these two works together highlights the radical changes, as well as the continuities, in American literary modes and tastes on either side of the Second World War. Both novels end by asking, “what is the next phase?,” but each prepares for a different future.⁹¹ Ellison’s rhetorical blows, his fighting words, would now be oblique, while Zinberg, unfashionably, would continue to “lead with [his] left.”⁹²

Notes

1. Ralph Ellison, “Negro Prize Fighter,” *New Masses*, December 17, 1940: 26–27; Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2007), 140.

2. The only substantial critical discussions of Zinberg are the following: Robert Niemi, “Ed Lacey 1911–1968,” in *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies*, ed. Jay Parini (Detroit: Gale, 2006), 193–96; Alan Wald, “Introduction: The Strange Career of Len Zinberg,” in *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1–11; Joseph G. Ramsey, “Red Pulp: Repression and Radicalism in Mid-Twentieth Century US ‘Genre’ Fiction” (PhD dissertation, Tufts University, 2007).

3. A few months before *Walk Hard* was published, Zinberg asked Ellison to write a pamphlet for the League’s “Keep America Out of the War Committee” (other members included Lillian Hellmann and Dashiell Hammett). The League adopted an antiwar position following the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, which it abandoned after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Franklin Folsom recalls that Ellison “worked diligently to help prepare the [Fourth, 1941] congress. His special contribution had been developing plans for a national League magazine,” but that “never appeared.” *Days of Anger; Days of Hope: A Memoir of the League of American Writers* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1994), 201, 209. See also Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 129–30; Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 69, 109, 192. *Cross Section* was an annual anthology edited from 1944 to

1948 by Edwin Seaver, former executive secretary of the League of American Writers. Ellison's "Flying Home" appeared in the 1944 volume and Zinberg's "Immigrant" in the 1945 volume.

4. Barbara Foley, "Ralph Ellison as Proletarian Journalist," *Science and Society* 62, no. 4 (Winter 1998/1999), 537–56. See also Foley, *Wrestling with the Left*, 72; Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 93–94.

5. Ellison, "Negro Prize Fighter," 27.

6. Ellison, "Negro Prize Fighter," 26; Ellison, "The World and the Jug" (1963–64), in *Collected Essays* (1994; New York: Modern Library, 2003), 155–88, 186.

7. Ellison, "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion" (1957), in *Collected Essays*, 151–54, 152.

8. Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (1944; New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 66.

9. Simon Gerson, *Daily Worker*, January 2, 1934, quoted in Irwin Silber, *Press Box Red: The Story of Lester Rodney, The Communist Who Helped Break the Color Line in American Sports* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 3.

10. Mike Gold, *Daily Worker*, August 31, 1935, quoted in Silber, *Press Box Red*, 5.

11. Mark Naison, *Communism in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 213.

12. Naison, *Communism in Harlem*, 214; Silber, *Press Box Red*, 166.

13. Rodney, quoted in Silber, *Press Box Red*, 174.

14. I discuss this elsewhere. Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 280–315.

15. Richard Wright, "Joe Louis Uncovers Dynamite," *New Masses*, October 8, 1935: 18–19.

16. Richard Wright, "How He Did It – And Oh! – Where Were Hitler's Pagan Gods?," *Daily Worker*, June 24, 1938: 1, 8; Richard Wright, "High Tide in Harlem," *New Masses*, July 5, 1938: 18–20.

17. Wright, "High Tide in Harlem," 18–20. On Tod Clifton and "Sambo, the dancing doll," see Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 431.

18. Chris Vials, *Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism and US Culture, 1935–1947* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 12.

19. Gerald Early, "The Black Intellectual and the Sport of Prizefighting," in *The Culture of Bruising* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1994), 5–45, 23.

20. Wright, "High Tide in Harlem," 18; Richard Wright, "A Blueprint for Negro Writing," *New Challenge* 2, no. 1 (Fall, 1937): 53–65, reprinted in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 97–106, 102.

21. Most recently, Bryan Crable, *Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke at the Roots of the Racial Divide* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

22. The fullest discussion of Burke and Wright is by Eugene E. Miller in *Voice of a Native Son* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), chapter 7.

23. Ellison, "Negro Prize Fighter," 26.

24. Kenneth Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," a speech given at the first American Writers Congress on April 26, 1935, Appendix to *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke*, eds. Herbert W. Simons and Trevor Melia (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 267–73, ; emphasis in the original.

25. Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism," 272; Ellison, "Remembering Richard Wright" (1971), in *Collected Essays*, 661–79, 678.

26. Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism," 267. Wright famously described H.L. Mencken's *Prefaces* as teaching him that "words could be weapons" and writing could be "fighting with words." Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (1945; London: Vintage Books, 2000), 250.

27. David Odgen Stewart, *Fighting Words* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1940). The Third Congress took place on June 2–5, 1939. The book's epigraph is a remark by Edward Bernays, public relations guru and author of *Propaganda* (1928): "In the next war, words will be as important as bullets."

28. Ellison, Letter to Wright, November 3, 1941, quoted in Timothy Parrish, *Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 101–2. Ellison later described Wright, saying "for the first time a Negro American writer as randy, as courageous, and irrepressible as Jack Johnson." "Remembering Richard Wright," 678.

29. Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (1935; Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 320. Literary criticism, meanwhile, worked best when the critic "confines himself to the single unit and reports on its movements like a radio commentator broadcasting the blow-by-blow description of a prizefight." Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (1946) (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 451.

30. Len Zinberg, *Walk Hard—Talk Loud* (1940) (New York: Lion Books, 1950), 9.

31. Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter," *Collected Essays*, 617–62, 644; Ellison, Introduction, *Invisible Man*, p. xxi; Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," *Collected Essays*, 210–24, 216.

32. Ellison's first job, at the age of twelve, was as a shoeshine boy—a job also held, in their youth, by James Baldwin and Malcolm X. The shoeshine boy, famously photographed by Lewis Hine for the National Child Labor Committee, was a popular subject for photographers involved in the New York Photo League. Sid Grossman's *Shoeshine Boys, Harlem* (1939) and Morris Engel's *Shoeshine Boy with Cop, 14th Street* (1947) are reproduced in Mason Klein and Catherine Evans, *The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League 1936–1951* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 13, 193. On Hine, see Russell Freedman, *Kids at Work: Lewis Hine and the Crusade Against Child Labor* (New York: Clarion Books, 1994).
33. Zinberg, *Walk Hard—Talk Loud*, 5.
34. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
35. *Ibid.*, 8.
36. *Ibid.*, 11–13.
37. *Ibid.*, 40. On the motif of the black runner in *Native Son*, *Invisible Man*, and elsewhere, see Phyllis Rauch Klotman, *Another Man Gone: The Black Runner in Contemporary Afro-American Literature* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1977).
38. Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 83.
39. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940; London: Vintage, 2000), 90; Malcolm X, with the assistance of Alex Hailey, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965; London: Hutchinson, 1966), 97.
40. Ellison, “Harlem in Nowhere,” *Collected Essays*, 324.
41. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 15; Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 22.
42. Ellison, “Negro Prize Fighter,” 26.
43. Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 12.
44. Richard Wright, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch,” in *Uncle Tom's Children* (1940; New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 1–15, 1.
45. Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 10, 113.
46. Ellison, “The Art of Fiction,” 222.
47. *Ibid.*, 155, 156, 157.
48. *Ibid.*, 161.
49. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 24.
50. Ellison “Negro Prize Fighter,” 26.
51. Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 161.
52. Ellison, “The Art of Fiction,” 216.
53. Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 238, 224, 230.
54. Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 68; Wright, *Native Son*, 453.
55. Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 245.
56. *Ibid.*, 245. After “years of work,” a similar fate meets the singer in Zinberg's sketch “Sweet Land of Liberty,” *The Afro-American* (August 19, 1939), 14.
57. Ellison described the structure of *Invisible Man*, “using Kenneth Burke's terms” as a movement from “purpose to passion to perception.” Ellison, “The Art of Fiction,” 218.
58. Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 255. Ruth reworks Eugene Debs's famous pronouncement: “When I rise it will be with the ranks, and not from the ranks.” Speech delivered on June 16, 1918, reproduced in *We Who Dared to Say No to War: American Antiwar Writing from 1812 to Now*, eds. Murray Polner and Thomas Woods, Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 149–55, 150.
59. Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 255–56. This is not the first time that a woman instructs a man about realism in a Zinberg story. For example, in his sketch “Flying High,” the lesson that “we can't live in dreams. We have to come down to earth” is literalized when the couple's plane crashes. *The Afro-American*, January 2, 1937, 24. The image of the “boxing bubble” that bursts also appears in a later essay on the light heavyweight contender Danny Cox. Len Zinberg, “The World of the Pug,” *The American Mercury* (November 1951): 71–79, 77.
60. Ellison, “Negro Prize Fighter,” 26–27; Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man* (1944; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 7.
61. Ellison, “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion,” 152. Ramsey describes the novel's end as hitting “a kind of genre-limit; politics and form collide” “Red Pulp,” 355. Hemingway's protagonists come close to crying in the night (when it's not so “awfully easy to be hard-boiled”), but hold back. *The Sun Also Rises* (1926; New York: Scribner's, 2003), 42. Wald argues that Zinberg's second Ed Lacy novel, *Sin in their Blood* (1952) “rewrites” *The Sun Also Rises* “for a new age.” *Trinity of Passion*, 10–11.
62. Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 12.
63. *Ibid.*, 18.
64. *Ibid.*, 15, 18, 17, 191, 89. Ramsey points out that the name Andy evokes the racial stereotypes of “Amos and Andy.” “Red Pulp,” 316.
65. Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 202. For Ellison, “the negative images constitute justifications of all these acts, legal, emotion, economic and political, which we label Jim Crow. The anti-Negro image is thus a ritual object.” “The Shadow and the Act” (1949), *Collected Essays*, 302–309, 305.

Zinberg's sketch "Unity" is about the role of stereotypes in dividing the races. *The Afro-American*, January 16, 1937, 24.

66. Ellison, "Negro Prize Fighter," 27. George Schuyler praised Zinberg for avoiding the "caricatures" that Wright had reproduced in *Native Son*. *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 28, 1940, 11; quoted in Wald, *Trinity of Passion*, 7.

67. Ollie Stewart's review of *Walk Hard—Talk Loud* appeared on the front page of *The Afro-American* and noted that Zinberg had been publishing stories there for the past five years. *The Afro-American*, November 30, 1940, 1–2.

68. "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion," 152.

69. Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 123.

70. Ellison, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" (1977), in *Collected Essays*, 493–523, 502.

71. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 334, 344–45. The motif of the blind prizefighter may also have been inspired by Sam Langford, who was destitute and living in Harlem when Al Laney wrote about him for the New York *Herald Tribune*. See *The Fireside Book of Boxing*, ed. W.C. Heinz (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), 226–8.

72. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 372; Ellison, "The Art of Fiction," 218.

73. Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 128.

74. *Ibid.*, 128.

75. *Ibid.*, 177.

76. *Ibid.*, 179.

77. *Invisible Man*, 433–35.

78. *Walk Hard*, 180. Ramsey also reads the shooting of Tod Clifton as a "recasting" of this scene in Zinberg's novel. "Red Pulp," 338–39.

79. Ellison, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," 505.

80. Kenneth Burke, "Ralph Ellison's Trueblooded *Bildungsroman*," in *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Casebook*, ed. John F. Callahan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 65–80, 66–67. I discuss *Invisible Man* further in this context, alongside some of Ellison's early unpublished stories and Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March*, in "'He certainly was a fighter': Boxing as *Bildungsroman* in Ellison and Bellow," in *Cultures of Boxing*, ed. David Scott (Amsterdam: Peter Lang, forthcoming).

81. Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 254.

82. *Ibid.*, 90, 135, 133.

83. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 579, 581.

84. Ellison, "The World and the Jug" (1963), *Collected Essays*, 161–62.

85. Ellison, "Going to the Territory" (1980), *Collected Essays*, 599.

86. *Ibid.* Zinberg's novel was adapted by Abram Hill for the American Negro Theatre in 1944. It was revived in 1946, and in London in 2005. See Miles M. Jefferson, "The Negro on Broadway, 1945–1946," *Phylon* 7, no.2 (1946): 185–96.

87. Zinberg, *Walk Hard* 255; Michael Gold, "Fremont Older," *New Masses*, March 26, 1935, quoted in Robert Tuerk, "Michael Gold on Walt Whitman," *Walt Whitman Quarterly* 3, no.4 (1986): 16–23, 17. Others too argued that Whitman's individualism and transcendentalism could be "discarded" in order to concentrate on his inspiration "in the work of building a just society," "a new and better civilisation." Newton Arvin, *Whitman* (1938; New York: Russell & Russell, 1969), 289–90; Granville Hicks, *The Great Tradition* (1933; Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 25.

88. Zinberg, *Walk Hard*, 254.

89. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 581.

90. "Richard Wright's Blues," 129. For a recent discussion of these readings, see Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933–1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), chapter 6.

91. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 576.

92. *Lead with Your Left* is the title of a 1957 Ed Lacy novel.