



# Shadowing Ralph Ellison (Margaret Walker Alexander Series in African American Studies)

*John S. Wright*

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In 1952, Ralph Ellison (1914-1994) published his novel *Invisible Man*, which transformed the dynamics of American literature. The novel won the National Book Award, extended the themes of his early short stories, and dramatized in fictional form the cultural theories expressed in his later essay collections *Shadow & Act* and *Going to the Territory*.

In *Shadowing Ralph Ellison*, John Wright traces Ellison's intellectual and aesthetic development and the evolution of his cultural philosophy throughout his long career. The book explores Ellison's published fiction, his criticism and correspondence, and his passionate exchanges with—and impact on—other literary intellectuals during the Cold War 1950s and during the culture wars of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

Wright examines Ellison's body of work through the lens of Ellison's cosmopolitan philosophy of art and culture, which the writer began to construct during the late 1930s. Ellison, Wright argues, eschewed orthodoxy in both political and cultural discourse, maintaining that to achieve the highest cultural awareness and the greatest personal integrity, the individual must cultivate forms of thinking and acting that are fluid, improvisational, and vitalistic—like the blues and jazz. Accordingly, Ellison elaborated throughout his body of work the innumerable ways that rigid cultural labels, categories, and concepts—from racial stereotypes and fashionable academic theories to conventional political doctrines—fail to capture the full potential of human consciousness. Instead, Ellison advocated forms of consciousness and culture akin to what the blues and jazz reveal, and he portrayed those musical traditions as the best embodiment of the evolving American spirit.

John Wright is associate professor of African American and African studies and English at the University of Minnesota and is faculty scholar for the Archie Givens, Sr., Collection of African American Literature and Life. He coedited, with Michael S. Harper, *A Ralph Ellison Festival* (a special volume of the Carleton Miscellany).

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