



The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism

Walton M. Muyumba

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Though often thought of as rivals, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Amiri Baraka shared a range of interests, especially a passion for music. Jazz, in particular, was a decisive influence on their thinking, and, as *The Shadow and the Act* reveals, they drew on their insights into the creative process of improvisation to analyze race and politics in the civil rights era. In this inspired study, Walton M. Muyumba situates them as a jazz trio, demonstrating how Ellison, Baraka, and Baldwin's individual works form a series of calls and responses with each other.

Muyumba connects their writings on jazz to the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, particularly its support for more freedom for individuals and more democratic societies. He examines the way they responded to and elaborated on that lineage, showing how they significantly broadened it by addressing the African American experience, especially its aesthetics. Ultimately, Muyumba contends, the trio enacted pragmatist principles by effectively communicating the social and political benefits of African Americans fully entering society, thereby compelling America to move closer to its democratic ideals.

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