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Review of: Conversations with Ralph Ellison, Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, eds.

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Volume 31, Number 3
Fall 1997

- | | | | |
|-----|---|-----|---|
| 518 | Bill Mullen and Sherry Linkon, eds., <i>Radical Revisions</i> | 539 | Brenda Dixon Gottschild, <i>Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance, Dance and Other Contexts</i> |
| 520 | Robert Elliot Fox, <i>Masters of the Drum</i> | 540 | Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., <i>The Power of Black Music</i> |
| 523 | Tracy Mishkin, ed., <i>Literary Influence and African American Writers</i> | 542 | Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar, <i>Warrior Marks</i> |
| 525 | Adam Potkay and Sandra Burr, eds., <i>Black Atlantic Writers of the 18th Century</i> | 545 | Robert C. Maynard, with Dori J. Maynard, <i>Letters to My Children</i> |
| 526 | Sw. Anand Prahlad, <i>African-American Proverbs in Context</i> | | Sheryl McCarthy, <i>Why Are the Heroes Always White?</i> |
| 528 | Jacquelyn Y. McClendon, <i>The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen</i> | | John Eaves Slade, <i>But I Am Too a Black Cartoonist! ... Really!</i> |
| 529 | Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper, <i>Not So Simple: The "Simple" Stories By Langston Hughes</i> | 548 | Patricia J. Williams, <i>The Rooster's Egg: On the Persistence of Prejudice</i> |
| 531 | Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, eds., <i>Conversations with Ralph Ellison</i> | 550 | Mumia Abu-Jamal, <i>Live from Death Row</i> |
| 533 | Linden Peach, <i>Toni Morrison</i> | 552 | bell hooks, <i>Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood</i> |
| 535 | Anna Grimshaw, ed., <i>Special Delivery: The Letters of C.L.R.. James to Constance Webb</i> | 554 | Lorene Cary, <i>The Price of a Child</i> |
| | Grant Farred, ed. <i>Rethinking C.L.R. James</i> | 556 | Karen English, <i>Neeny Coming, Neeny Going</i> |
| 538 | Kent Anderson Leslie, <i>Woman of Color, Daughter of Privilege: Amanda America Dickson, 1849-1893</i> | 558 | Books Briefly Mentioned |
| | | 559 | Other Works Received |

John F. Callahan
James Coleman
Wanda Coleman
Daryl Dance
Thadious M. Davis
Alice Deck
Manthia Diawara
Arlene A. Elder

Frances Smith Foster
Robert E. Fox
Donald B. Gibson
William J. Harris
James V. Hatch
Karla F. C. Holloway
Dolan Hubbard
Abdul JanMohamed

Ketu Katrak
Phyllis R. Klotman
David Krasner
Missy D. Kubitschek
Pinkie Gordon Lane
Edward Margolies
Deborah E. McDowell
Reginald McKnight

E. Ethelbert Miller
R. Baxter Miller
Charles H. Nichols
Sterling Plumpp
Arnold Rampersad
John M. Reilly
Sandra Richards
Valerie A. Smith

Claudia C. Tate
Cheryl A. Wall
Jerry W. Ward, Jr.
Craig Werner
Gay Wilentz
Margaret B. Wilkerson
Richard Yarborough

As we await the possible publication of that elusive second novel, this collection of interviews arrives as an important contribution to Ralph Ellison's body of work. Like Henry James, Ellison will probably be remembered almost as much for his reflections on literature and culture as for his fiction. The essays collected in *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory* have established Ellison as an important literary and cultural critic. *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* is a kind of companion to this work, showing us Ellison on the higher frequencies, speaking to us rather than for us.

Students of Ellison will find much in these interviews that is very familiar. The complexity of American identity and the rigorous devotion to craft that Ellison elaborated in essays like "Hidden Name and Complex Fate" and "Little Man at the Chehaw Station" show up again and again in these conversations. In a 1954 interview with Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard, Ellison says that

with my decision to devote myself to the novel I took on one of the responsibilities inherited by those who practice the craft in the U.S.: that of describing for all that fragment of the huge diverse American experience which I know best, and which offers me the possibility of contributing not only to the growth of the literature but to the shaping of the culture as I should like it to be.

Ellison remained true to this specific sense of the responsibility of the U.S. novelist throughout his life. Unlike James Baldwin or Amiri Baraka, Ellison rarely

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changed his mind, especially about the relationship between experience and art. Twenty-three years after the Chester-Howard interview, Ellison was still asking the same questions: "How did one get American Negro life, that great, bursting, expressive capacity for life, into writing? Where did one discover ideas and techniques with which one could free one's mind and achieve something of one's possibilities?" In working out his specific answers to these questions, Ellison returns again and again to the same texts and writers: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and, of course, *Invisible Man*.

These interviews show us the familiar consistency of Ellison's thought, but, more importantly, they also complicate the positions of both Ellison's detractors and those who would appropriate him. He skewers any reductive distinctions between art and protest (and the critical orthodoxy that polarizes *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*) when he scolds an interviewer with "Now mind! I recognize no dichotomy between art and protest." In several interviews he dismisses the cartoon versions of his relationship with Richard Wright and shows himself much more generous toward Wright in conversation than he often was in print. And he makes it clear how wrong people like Shelby Steele are to invoke Ellison in support of their right-wing political agenda. When Walter Lowe asks him in 1982 what he thinks of "our current president," Ellison replies, "Reagan is dismantling many of the processes and structures that made it possible for me to go from sleeping on a park bench to becoming a writer. And he is assuring people, in the most cunning way, that this is good for us."

Reading through these conversations also reminds us of Ellison's blind spots, those comments and views that led some to see him as a patrician out of touch with the struggle for black liberation. Certainly Ralph Ellison had plenty of reason to be angry with a variety of younger writers during the 1960s and '70s, but his wholesale dismissal of the Black Arts Movement relies on the kind of easy binaries that he usually avoided ("You see, there is a world of fiction, and there's a world of politics"). In 1982, he makes some rambling remarks yoking conscription, the "corrective force" of war, and an amorphous "sexual discipline" that, in the wake of the Vietnam war, seem naïve at best. It is hard to see how the man who gave us *Invisible Man* and *Shadow and Act* could glibly claim in 1988 that *The Cosby Show* "cuts across race and class." And Ellison's 1977 description of Malcolm X as a "not too sophisticated ex-pimp" incapable of "making insightful analyses of American culture and politics" is simply stupid.

Besides Ellison, warts and all, *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* also gives us a range of other interesting voices. Two of the interviews ("What's Wrong with the American Novel" and "The Uses of History in Fiction") are panel discussions with writers such as Jean Stafford, William Styron, Robert Penn Warren, and C. Vann Woodward. There is a long exchange about Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* that has little to do with Ellison (who admits that he hasn't read the book), but tells us a lot about the controversy surrounding Styron and his book. "Study and Experience" is as interesting for Robert B. Stepto's and Michael S. Harper's questions as it is for Ellison's answers. "The Essential Ellison" treats us to Quincy Troupe's insights into literature and music as well as Ishmael Reed's usual shots at women and Jews. And at the center of the book sits perhaps the most interesting piece, James Alan McPherson's interview/essay "Invisible Man," reprinted from Kimberly Benston's collection *Speaking for You*.

Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh have done an excellent job editing this book. They have chosen the interviews well, giving us several that have not been readily available before now, and making sure to show us Ellison at every point in his career. The chronological arrangement makes sense, and the intro-

duction is elegant and to the point in a way that Ellison probably would have appreciated. *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* is essential for libraries and should prove useful for Ellison specialists and interesting for anyone who has read *Invisible Man*.