

CULTURE PAST AND PRESENT IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF ISHMAEL REED

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Abstract:

Ishmael Reed challenges the western hegemonic control over literary productions, providing a nuanced portrayal of the specific social circumstances faced by Black Americans in his works. His incorporation of Hoodoo philosophy into the literary landscape interrogates dominant notions, assumptions, and definitions. Reed argues that Haitian Voodoo serves as the foundation for all religions, asserting that Voodoo aesthetics have evolved into Hoodoo as a vital expression of ancient culture. The plots of his novels traverse a wide temporal spectrum, from African mythology to the eighteenth century and into the present, weaving together historical events such as slavery, cowboy legends, and modern technology. By revitalizing the creativity inherent in African American heritage, his works seek to challenge established beliefs and media-driven narratives about race, religion, and indigenous cultures.

The principal argument of Ishmael Reed's novels revolves around defining a comprehensive Afro-American aesthetic. Through his writings, he advocates for a sensual humanism as a pertinent cultural alternative for non-white Americans, embodying a vision of Dionysian consciousness. His imaginative reinterpretations of the American West are enriched with ancient mythologies, non-European folklore, and conventions from popular culture. His depictions of the American Civil War, the Harlem Renaissance, and contemporary American politics present heresies intended to liberate readers from the intellectual dominance of Judeo-Christian heritage. This research article aims to illustrate how African American culture has evolved over time through select novels by Ishmael Reed.

Keywords: Myth, History, Culture, Neo-Hoodoo, Multiculturalism

Introduction

Ishmael Reed has positioned himself as a critic of the Black Arts Movement while advocating for Multiculturalism. During the 1960s, ideological disagreements arose when black cultural nationalists tended to prioritize culture over politics and economics. Despite these political divergences, most cultural nationalists argued that African American culture possesses unique characteristics and a distinct history. They contended that African American culture could only be

understood and evaluated through a specific aesthetic that reflects its orientation. Consequently, the prevailing view is that authentic black culture is either the folk culture of African Americans or an essentialist representation of African culture.

Reed constructs a narrative that frames history as a conflict between two churches and two communities of consciousness, which he refers to as the "cop religion" of Christianity and the "Osirian rites" of Voodoo. He employs Neo-Hoodoo aesthetics to challenge the Western hegemony in literary production. Neo-Hoodoo serves both as a literary method and a genre rooted in the cultural practices of Voodoo. Reed asserts that Neo-Hoodoo marks a new direction for Black writers, offering an escape from the decadence of Anglo-American literature and reversing the historical path taken by Black writers and intellectuals in the United States.

Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down, by Ishmael Reed, is a satirical reinterpretation of the traditional Western genre and serves as Reed's second novel. The narrative centers around the Loop Garoo Kid, an African-American cowboy who follows the teachings of Neohoodooism, exploring his struggle against established religion and cultural oppression. The title of the novel encapsulates its literary and cultural themes: "Yellow Back" alludes to the distinctive yellow covers of sensational dime Westerns, while "Radio" signifies Reed's approach of employing an oral, broadcast style in his writing. The term "broke-down" indicates a deconstruction of the conventional American Western narrative. Spanning nearly three centuries of history, the novel references various locations across the United States. Through three vibrant protagonists—Chief Showcase, a Native American; Drag Gibson, a white land capitalist; and the Loop Garoo Kid, an African-American cowboy—Reed critiques the hypocrisy of the American Church, the distortion of history that diminishes the representation of African Americans, and the ways in which the "white man" attempts to undermine the "black man".

Mumbo Jumbo, by Ishmael Reed, artfully combines satire, history, and fantasy to critique the cultural appropriation and suppression of African-American culture by Western civilization. Set in the 1920s, the narrative centers around the outbreak of 'Jes Grew,' an epidemic-like phenomenon symbolizing a resurgence of Black cultural expression, particularly through jazz and voodoo. The protagonist, PaPa LaBas, a voodoo priest, embarks on a quest to uncover the origins of Jes Grew and protect it from the Wallflower Order, a secret society intent on preserving Western cultural dominance. Led by figures such as Hinckle Von Vampton, the Wallflower Order perceives Jes Grew as a threat to Western civilization and seeks to suppress it. Throughout the novel, Reed employs a non-linear narrative style, integrating historical references, footnotes, and illustrations to deliver a multi-layered critique of racism, cultural imperialism, and the commercialization of Black culture. By weaving together historical events and speculative fiction, Reed challenges conventional historical narratives and underscores the resilience and vibrancy of African-American culture.

Discussion

Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down is set in a fantastical reimagining of the Wild West found in popular literature. The protagonist, the Loop Garoo Kid, is a champion of artistic freedom and a skilled voodoo houngan who stands in stark contrast to the perpetually victimized Doopeyduk. Armed with supernatural "connaissance" and accompanied by a white python and the cool, helicopter-flying Chief Showcase, the Kid confronts the forces of realistic mimesis and political corruption. His nefarious adversary, Drag Gibson, is a depraved cattle baron notorious for

murdering his wives and is summoned by the citizens of Yellow Back Radio to quash their rebellious children's attempt "to create [their] own fictions."

Although *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* satirizes Americans' readiness to temporarily limit certain civil rights as a measure to address the concerns raised by student protests against the Vietnam War, its primary emphasis is literature, particularly the dialogue between realism and modernism. The character of the Loop Garoo Kid vividly embodies Reed's representation of the Afro-American artist in "*19 Necromancers from Now*. He is portrayed as a master conjurer, wielding JuJu to subdue his oppressors. As a witch doctor, he empowers his fellow victims, liberating them from the haunting psychic assaults unleashed by malevolent demons. His role is a powerful testament to resilience and the transformative strength of art in the face of adversity. Through the Loop Garoo Kid, Reed advocates for imagination, intelligence, and fantasy over rhetoric, violence, and sentimentality. This theme is clearly articulated in a debate with Bo Shmo, a neo-social realist, who argues that it is essential for art to serve the purpose of empowering and uplifting the broader community. In response, the Kid argues that a novel can be anything it desires—like a vaudeville show, the evening news, or the mumblings of wild men burdened by demons.

Reed illustrates his anti-realist theory of fiction in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* through his fluid manipulation of time, characters, and language. The novel spans from the eighteenth century to the present, intertwining historical events and cowboy myths with modern technology and cultural remnants. His main characters are comically exaggerated racial archetypes: Drag Gibson embodies the depraved materialism of whites; Chief Showcase represents the spirituality of Native Americans; and the Loop Garoo Kid symbolizes the artistic spirit of Afro-Americans. Reed clarifies the novel's title by explaining that his work represents the thoughtful exploration and deconstruction of a genre presented in an oral format akin to radio. The term "yellow back" alludes to the vividly colored covers of popular dime novels that captivated readers in earlier times, while "radio" conveys the novel's unique oral and fragmented structure, reminiscent of the disjointed yet engaging nature of radio broadcasts. Meanwhile, "broke-down" signifies a deliberate process of deconstruction, suggesting a methodical dismantling of traditional storytelling conventions to explore deeper themes. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a detective novel that serves as a historical narrative. Its primary aim is to explore a highly paranoid theory, attempting to explain the entirety of history from ancient Egypt to the present day. Traversing from ancient Egypt to the Crusades and into twentieth-century America, Reed illustrates a persistent pattern of the suppression of non-Western cultures by Judeo-Christian ideologies. He depicts the ongoing conflict between the life-affirming forces represented in the novel by HooDoo and the life-denying forces embodied by the Atonists and the Wallflower Order, all presented within a broad historical, cultural, and mythical framework. *Mumbo Jumbo* stages the clash between Euro-centric and Afro-centric thought and culture.

Reed composed this novel partly in response to the comments made by white literary critics who in their perception that Black Americans may not have a long-established literary tradition. This work signifies a departure from Reed's earlier use of Egyptian symbols and myths, moving toward elements of African-American aesthetics, which he refers to as Neo-HooDooism. The novel serves as both a satire of Western culture's emphasis on rationality and an example of how older traditions can be reinterpreted through Reed's Neo-HooDooist lens.

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed endeavors to articulate a spiritual system known as Jes Grew, drawing from the historical experiences of African Americans. His primary objective is to reveal

the limitations of traditional novel forms and to reshape the language to include categories and concepts that reside beyond conventional discourse. Like many Post-Modernist works, and akin to Reed's two earlier novels, "Mumbo Jumbo" intentionally subverts the conventions of realistic fiction by eschewing the creation of believable characters, credible psychological or sociological motivations, and the linear progression of time and causally connected events.

The central dramatic action of the novel centers on the conspiratorial efforts of the Atonists and their military faction, the Wallflower Order, to suppress Jes Grew by locating and destroying its text. In contrast, the Hoodoo defectives La Bas and Black Herman, along with their military wing, the Mutafikah, strive to locate and preserve the text in order to keep Jes Grew alive. Henry Louis Gates interprets the conflict between the Atonists and the carriers of Jes Grew as an allegorical re-enactment of a primal struggle between the forces of darkness and light, the Left Hand and the Right Hand, the descendants of Set and those of Osiris, as well as between the worshippers of Petro loa and the followers of Rada loa. Naomi Jacobs notes that the opposition between Jes Grew and the Atonists is not merely a conflict of Black versus White; rather, it embodies a deeper struggle between exuberance and control, joy and self-righteousness, pluralism and monism, as well as between Judeo-Christian culture and Hoodooism.

Ishmael Reed uses Jes Grew in *Mumbo Jumbo* as a powerful symbol for the revival and spread of African-American culture and spirituality. The concept of Jes Grew, an epidemic-like phenomenon, represents Black culture's vitality, creativity, and resilience, which continuously seeks to illuminate and enliven society.

Reed critiques established religious and cultural institutions, such as Islam and Christianity, for their limitations and their impact on individual expression. The term "Atonism," derived from the worship of the sun-god Aton in ancient Egypt, is used to symbolize the oppressive forces of Western civilization that seek to suppress Jes Grew and maintain their power.

Atonists, representing various conservative and mainstream cultural groups, are depicted as being at war with Jes Grew because it challenges their control and threatens their way of life. Reed's portrayal of Atonism includes critical references to different religious movements in the United States, such as the Mormons and the Nation of Islam, highlighting their role in perpetuating a culture of guilt and control. Through the character of PaPa LaBas, Reed responds to his critics and advocates for the importance of cultural preservation and individual expression. By exposing the failings of dominant religious and cultural systems, Reed emphasizes the need for a more inclusive and vibrant cultural landscape.

Conclusion

Ishmael Reed's use of the subversion of historical narratives in his novels challenges readers to reconsider their understanding of history and its impact on contemporary society. By blending historical events with contemporary elements, employing non-linear structures, and incorporating African American cultural practices, Reed offers alternative perspectives that emphasize the complexities of identity, resistance, and cultural survival. His innovative approach to narrative structure and historical representation underscores his commitment to reclaiming and reimagining African American history. Reed's novels primarily aim to explain an appropriate African-American aesthetic, vividly portraying the specific social conditions of black Americans.

In his foreword to Elizabeth and Thomas Settle's *Ishmael Reed: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography* (1982), Reed articulates his deep frustration with the pervasive racism he encounters. He points out that his personal experiences with racism, which heavily influence his artistic vision, often render his work both inaccessible and threatening to many readers. He states, "I am a member

of a class that has been relegated to the bottom of the American caste system, and from those depths I write a vision that is still strange, often frightening, 'peculiar' and 'odd' to some, and 'ill-considered' and unwelcome to many."

The name Ishmael is ironically apt for this author, who delivers sharp and darkly humorous critiques of American institutions and attitudes. The incisiveness and scope of his satire can create the impression that he stands opposed to all of humanity. His novels portray corrupt power brokers alongside their black and white sycophants, navigating a dehumanized and materialistic society characterized by its prefabricated and ethnocentric culture. Through his writing, Reed seeks to dismantle the cultural structures of America.

Reed argues that his novels constitute an art form with its own laws. However, he does not imply that his work is isolated, instead, these laws stem from a careful and imaginative revisionism of both historical and mythological narratives. This creative process often requires an interlocutor to clarify the story's events through a mythological perspective. Reed's novels portray a vision of Osirian and Dionysian consciousness, embodying a sensuous humanism that he presents as a viable cultural alternative for non-white Americans. His creative reconstructions of the American West, the Harlem Renaissance, the American Civil War, and contemporary American politics—infused with ancient myths, non-European folk traditions, and popular culture tropes—aim to be liberating heresies intended to liberate readers from the intellectual hegemony of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Thus, the paper entitled *Culture Past and Present in the select novels of Ishmael Reed* brings out the intermingling of culture and the transition of culture from period to period.

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