

# 1 INTRODUCTION

This book came into existence as a result of an interesting paradox. Although Ishmael Reed is one of the key African American satirists, his satire has not generated as much critical attention as his postmodern texts,<sup>1</sup> his involvement in culture wars, and the key role he has played in the establishment of American literary multiculturalism.<sup>2</sup> Apart from these areas of Reed scholarship, critics often prefer to decipher his complex intertextual works, explain at least some of the plethora of references, and expound on their meaning rather than to comment on his satire. Nonetheless, such scholarship is valuable, as first time readers of Reed's novels are often confused because of their syncretism, synchronicity,<sup>3</sup> and the resulting

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1 Even though Reed himself has rejected the label of a postmodern writer because of its Eurocentric emphasis, Dickson-Carr is correct in claiming that Reed's novels "in the 1970s provide excellent examples of both ironic revision and theories of postmodernism at work" (*African American Satire* 169). To an extent, this is a label that keeps accompanying Reed even up to the present day.

2 For example, Ludwig says that Reed is "nowadays in many ways the dean of American multiculturalism" because his writing influenced by African paganism was "in many ways the best representational model to promote a new pluralistic culture of secular variety" ("Ishmael Reed, the Sentimental Heathen" 139). For more information on the matter see Shinn's "The Art of War: Ishmael Reed and Frank Chin and the U.S. Black-Asian Alliance of Multicultural Satire," in which he claims that Reed is "one of the foremost publishers and promoters of multicultural works of literature that have been rejected and dismissed as 'minoritarian' and 'other'" (65).

3 The phrase is borrowed from literary scholar Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure, who summarises the relationship between Reed and his audience in the following way:

Readers and critics have been complaining that Reed's books are difficult to read because of their numerous subtexts, their non-Aristotelian plots (or artistic arrangement of events), and their stock, flat characters – in almost all of the nine novels. Reed returns the favor by having characters either mock the conventional ways of writing novels or proclaim their being in favor of Aristotelian aesthetics and round characters. The point to be made here is that Reed always has many non-related things (Syncretism) going on at the same time (Synchronicity), while

complexity.<sup>4</sup> Monographs such as *The Dark Heathenism of the American Novelist Ishmael Reed* (Mvuyekure 2007) and *Ishmael Reed and the Ends of Race* (McGee 1997) help to enhance the readability of Reed's works – as does Darryl Dickson-Carr's *African American Satire* (2001), which examines Reed's satire more than any other monograph, and yet it also comments more on the why than on the how. Therefore, by choosing to describe what the aims of Reed's cultural wars are rather than to examine how he wages them, these seminal studies touch upon Reed's satire only fleetingly. Paradoxically, Reed is a key African American satirist and yet his satire remains largely undescribed – an omission that this book seeks to address.

The sole purpose of this book is to describe the undescribed satire of Ishmael Reed by answering the following research questions: How has the satire of Ishmael Reed evolved? Which satirical techniques are dominant at which stages of his literary career? Finally, if there are changes in Reed's preferences for satirical techniques how can they be explained? To answer these questions, I examine the satire present in ten novels against Leonard Feinberg's taxonomy of satirical techniques<sup>5</sup> to establish which satirical techniques are most frequently used by Reed and when.

The short answer to the three questions is that Reed's satire has evolved from a stage in which it very frequently ridicules through reference to non-standard sexuality to a stage in which it very frequently ridicules through logical argumentation. I connect this evolution to new social realities emerging in the United States—especially to a closed chapter of American history called post-racial America<sup>6</sup>—whose validity at the time of writing this book is rightly questioned. Nonethe-

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his readers and critics tend to follow a straight line or one thing at a time in their reading. (“American Neo-HooDooism” 203–4)

While this complex relationship seems to be non-problematic in Reed's early works, his later novels (where he attacks exaggerated feminism) remain largely misunderstood. This in turn leads to a questionable understanding of Reed as an anti-feminist which contributed to Reed's less prominent position in American letters (in comparison with his early career, especially the publication of *Mumbo Jumbo* in 1972).

4 The resistance with which Reed's texts are greeted by university students is described in Kalenda Eaton's paper, “You Have to Know Way Too Much?": Teaching Ishmael Reed in the University Classroom,” which aptly summarizes the challenges faced by those who read Reed (and teach Reed) at the university level. One can only presume that the reactions of non-university readers who approach Reed's texts without the guidance of instructors might be even more abysmal than the title of Eaton's paper suggests.

5 Feinberg's taxonomy of 22 satirical techniques, which he describes in his seminal work *Introduction to Satire* (1967), is to my knowledge the most detailed taxonomy of satire put on paper. I have therefore chosen it over other descriptions of satire as I believe its usage leads to more nuanced results.

6 According to the *Random House Dictionary*, a post-racial era is “characterized by the absence of racial discord, discrimination, or prejudice previously or historically present” (n. pag.). This hopeful vision of American social life was especially common during the nation's first election of an African American president. As sociologists McAdam and Kloos claim, “when Barack Obama captured the White House in 2008, many heralded his victory as marking the long overdue onset of color-blind politics in America” (3). Yet, the reality of political life soon revealed that the concept of a post-racial

less, this was not the case during the late 1980s, the 1990s, and the 2010s, when Reed's latter novels were written and in which Reed tries to convince his fellow countrymen that racism has not left the country but only changed its appearance. This book shows that to influence such a changed audience a new mode of satire was needed, as the earlier one—which was inspired by the radicalism of Black Power and the Black Arts Movement—would no longer have been relevant in the changed conditions. The long answers to the above-cited research questions are presented in the following five chapters of this book. Before we progress further, however, allow me to discuss some potential pitfalls which lie along the way.

Traditionally, satire is understood to be a protean, unstable phenomenon and since this project works with satire it abounds with theoretical rabbit holes through which it can fall through. I would like to pay particular attention to two of them. The first one concerns definition; that is, the challenges of finding acceptable and agreed on definitions of satire and irony. Since satire and irony are fields where definitions have been contested for centuries, I have no intention of producing an authoritative account of satire in general, let alone that of Ishmael Reed in particular. For a different scholar might opt for different definitions and arrive at different results for the very same project. The second rabbit hole brings me to the intricacies of applying definitions, since some scholars rightly point out that irony is not given but instead lies in the eye of the interpreter (Hutcherson 43; Muecke 44), which I believe is also the case of satire. Hence, in spite of the fact that I have tried to limit my interpreter bias with the help of a linguistic theory of humour, my results cannot avoid being influenced by the social, cultural, and historical experience that has shaped my interpretation of the world and, by extension, that of the novels as well. Consequently, even though chapter five describes the evolution of Reed's satirical techniques from using non-standard sexuality and contrast-based irony to preferring argument-based satire, I offer this interpretation as a personal one with no claims as to its ultimate validity. Rather I think of my results in the same way as Wittgenstein thinks of the possibility of any language being complete at a given point in time.<sup>7</sup> Hence, my intention is only to add another street on the map of Ishmael Reed scholarship.

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society is nothing more than an ephemeral vision. Race expert Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw says that post-racial society “failed to produce a fundamental redistribution of racial power, nor did it eradicate white racism” (105). Nonetheless, in spite of being nothing more than an example of wishful thinking, as recent history clearly shows, the post-racial society is a concept with whose positive message many Americans identified. As such, it deserves critical attention and I fully examine the tenets of this concept in chapter six.

7 Of which he says the following:

Do not be troubled by the fact that languages ... consist only of orders. If you want to say that this shows them to be incomplete, ask yourself whether our language is complete;— whether it was so before the symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus were

Speaking of maps and organisation, this book is divided into five chapters. Since the misinterpretation of satire is less likely to occur once the interpreter is more knowledgeable of the satirist's intentions and opinions (Hutcheon 87), the first chapter starts with an overview of the most constant opinions and observations on Ishmael Reed. It examines sources which Reed has rejected (such as the Black Arts Movement, the label of satirist, and the stereotypical portrayal of African Americans in the media) but which nonetheless have influenced him. It also examines sources which have been consistent companions to Reed in his cultural wars, namely the concept of Neo-HooDoo; the improvisatory nature of jazz, which carries over into his plotting and writing; and the power of everyday life to shape the subject matter of his novels.

The second chapter describes the methodological steps which I pursue in order to extract satirical episodes from the novels for analysis. It does so by focusing on what constitutes humour from a linguistic perspective and examines the lesser studied part of the common understanding of satire, which is often seen as a combination of attack and humour. The chapter details why I consider humour to be a critical component of the definition of satire and describes how it influences the interpreter's decision about what is satire and what is not.

The third chapter describes how I modify Frye's understanding of satire as a combination of humour and attack so that it remains relevant for the analysis of Reed's postmodern fiction. It also examines why this research project does not subscribe to the protean simile of satire according to which satire simply cannot be defined and why it favours the research of satire scholar Peter Petro, who claims that "we are dealing with a genre whose definition should be no more problematic than a definition of, say, 'mathematics.'" (8) Finally, it discusses textual episodes which include attack but not humour (and thus violate Frye's definition of satire) and yet can be considered satiric. Following the path charted by Swift in his *The Modest Proposal*, the chapter thus ends on why it is culturally acceptable that humour is at times omitted from the equation.

The fourth chapter departs from theory and examines the evolution of the satirical techniques employed by Ishmael Reed over the five decades of his literary career. It provides the reader with representative satirical episodes that document the transition of his satire and irony from contrast-based modes to argumentation-

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incorporated in it; for these are, so to speak, suburbs of our language. (And how many houses or streets does it take before a town begins to be a town?) Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses. (18)

Wittgenstein's observation can be applied to the current state of research in scientific disciplines as well. Hence, both language and knowledge are, to an extent, open systems always in need of new stimuli.

based modes. Since these two modes are dominant in my analysis, I focus on them to the exclusion of others which appear less frequently or even scarcely (such as, for example, satire based on wordplay). The chapter proceeds chronologically starting with Reed's use of the dominant satirical technique of the early novels (non-standard sexuality) and ending with the dominant satirical technique of the later novels (argument-based satire). Nonetheless, at times, a technique is not represented frequently enough in a novel to be considered significant. Such a novel is then omitted and does not appear in my analysis.<sup>8</sup>

Last but not least, chapter five interprets the evolution of Reed's satire in the light of the recent social changes in the U.S. and ties it to the country's transition from the post-civil rights' stage to the post-racial stage. It examines the dependency of satire on social norms, the changed social norms associated with the transition of America into post-racial America, and the toll this change has had and continues to have on African Americans. In this final chapter I argue that the satire and irony of Ishmael Reed have evolved to remain effective and capable of influencing their audience in a country whose understandings of racism and multiculturalism have changed tremendously; I also argue that such satire and irony are more likely to effect change once both become more argumentative and perhaps less radical. And now, with preliminary matters over, let us begin our examination of the thoughts and sentiments that have shaped the literary output of Ishmael Reed.

Throughout the book, I use the MLA reference system, as outlined in *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (7th Edition). References are cited in the text and only very long references are presented in footnotes. While the context should make it clear what author and what text is being quoted, the full references can be found in the Works Cited section at the end of the book.

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8 This can, for example, be seen in the discussion of non-standard sexuality in section 5.1, where *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* are omitted for this reason.