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## **Ishmael Reed : the opinions of the man behind the novels**

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## 2 ISHMAEL REED: THE OPINIONS OF THE MAN BEHIND THE NOVELS

Ishmael Reed is a prolific African American author of ten novels, eight collections of essays, six collections of poetry, seven plays, and one opera. Over the five decades of his literary career, Reed has creatively exploited almost all Western literary genres: He revised the Bildungsroman (*The Freelance Pallbearers*), the Western (*Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*), the detective story (*Mumbo Jumbo*, *The Terrible Twos*, *The Terrible Threes*), Greek tragedy (*The Last Days of Louisiana Red*), the slave narrative (*Flight to Canada*), the epic (*Reckless Eyeballing*), the campus novel (*Japanese by Spring*), and the mockumentary (*Juice!*). These narrative excursions have drawn much attention to Reed,<sup>9</sup> who was described as a writer of exceptional erudition and imagination (Jařab 312). As such, Reed has had a significant impact on other seminal figures of African American literature and theory. For example, Henry Gates, Jr. says that Reed’s “revisionary techniques of parody and pastiche generated the ideas” which he examines in his seminal *The Signifying Monkey* (*The Signifying Monkey* ix). And although Dickson-Carr notes that Reed has influenced “at least some of the younger satirical novelists of the 1980s and 1990s” (*African American Satire* 163), Reed’s output also affected others such as “Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, August Wilson, Reginald Martin, Terry MacMillan, and Trey Ellis” (Mvuyekure *Dark Heathenism* vii). On account of his output, Reed has been described as “the most experimental of contemporary [African American] novelists” (Graham 11) and has received numerous awards.

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9 According to Martin, in the late 1970s, “only one black male writer, Ishmael Reed, continued to receive any considerable attention in the American press” (*Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* 27). This level of critical attention has not waned over the years and hence Dick can claim that Reed has been given “more critical attention than almost any other contemporary African American male” (Dick, *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed* xix).

This chapter examines the sources which have influenced Reed and which have enabled him to reach this prominent position. It places emphasis on racially motivated sources in spite of the fact that at the beginning of his career, Reed was routinely likened to such prominent white writers as Pynchon, Burroughs, Barthelme, Mailer, and Vonnegut (Schmitz 69; Dick *Critical Response* xxiii). However, it would be mistaken to look for many common features between these writers and Reed, apart from a reliance on roughly similar postmodern forms and motives of writing. McGee is correct in observing that all of the mentioned writers “are never marked or marginalized by ‘race’” and that “Reed never speaks from a position of authority within the dominant or hegemonic culture” (129). Since Reed is marked by race and speaks from a profoundly racial position, this chapter narrows down its inquiry to racial sources only. The chapter is divided into two parts: the first examines sources rejected by Reed which nonetheless influenced him. It pays special attention to the Black Arts Movement, the label of satirist, and the stereotypical representation of African Americans. The second part examines sources which have nourished Reed from his beginnings to the publication of his latest novel. It discusses the influence of the Umbra Society, African American jazzmen, and conception of everyday life which have prominently influenced Reed’s multicultural art.

## 2.1 Sources, Labels, and Stereotypes Rejected: On the Black Arts Movement, the Label of Satirist, and the Media Portrayal of African Americans

True to being a proper satirist, Ishmael Reed has, in his novels and essays, consistently mocked the prejudices and blind spots of white American society.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Reed has managed to be a consistent source of irritation for the African

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10 Despite the numerous grants and prizes awarded to him, the critical reception of Ishmael Reed has been complex and disharmonious at times. One reason for this may lie in the fact that Reed has used his race-based sources of inspiration to experiment with Western literary genres in order to “undercut their conventional heroes and histories” (Jessee 6). Angered by what he perceives as the unjust treatment of African Americans in most media, Reed explains that his main occupation was to “humble Judeo-Christian culture” (Reed, “The Writer as a Seer” 63). Although such an intention might be shared by other writers, Reed is writing from a marginalized position as an African American. It is therefore understandable that his subversive fiction might not be to everyone’s liking. This is, for example, documented by the fact that his current collections of essays—namely *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media* (2010) and *Going Too Far* (2012)—had to be published in Canada because Reed says that American publishers refused to publish them in America (*Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media* 13). Reed’s iconoclastic position was further emphasised when his 1980s and 1990s novels started to attack exaggerated feminism. Yet, while his early novels explain why they attack Judeo-Christian culture and the reader can thus evaluate whether their attacks are justified or not, the latter novels are not as clear. Unfortunately for Reed, these novels (which I fully discuss in chapter four) have been misread and Reed has been labelled as a misogynist. Consequently, for much of the white population of the United States of America, Reed can be considered to be a wilful writer who is not willing to respect the status quo.

American intelligentsia as well.<sup>11</sup> This is surprising as his career began in the 1960s, when rebellion against the literary and political establishment in the form of Black Power and the Black Arts Movement was in vogue. It would hence be logical had Reed found allies in the prominent figures of the movement. Yet, as the following paragraphs show, this was not the case.

The Black Arts Movement was an artistic organisation affiliated with the Black Power movement, which came into existence as a result of what some African Americans in the 1960s perceived as the failure of the U.S. government to “protect civil rights workers,” which led “to a shift from integrationist politics to the nationalistic slogan of ‘Black Power’” (Umoja 539). The Black Arts Movement was related to Black Power and both demanded that art produced by African Americans mirrored “a radical new state of black consciousness” (Thompson 485). Since both organisations were most influential in the 1960s and 1970s (i.e., at the start of Reed’s literary career), they had a formative influence over Reed’s early literary output. Dickson-Carr, who calls Reed “a de facto leader of the Black Arts Movement generation” (*African American Satire* 163), pertinently summarises the overlap between the aims of the Black Arts Movement and those of Ishmael Reed, which is why I quote him in full:

In the main, Reed agreed with the Black Aesthetic’s goal of offering a richer portrayal of African Americans’ complexities, free of demeaning stereotypes. Reed also posits a vision of history in his novels that places African and African American history and culture in the center rather than at the margins, where they had been cast by Western hierarchical thinking. Finally, Reed’s novels demonstrate that art should be functional to the extent that it forces an alteration of the way the reader views and interprets history and culture. (*African American Satire* 120)

Yet this was not the case as Reed refused to be a “protest writer or an exponent of the black experience” (McGee 10). According to Martin, Reed’s refusal to subscribe to a mode of literature championed by the New Black Aesthetic Critics angered its leading figures (such as Houston A. Baker and Addison Gayle), who in turn criticised Reed (*Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* 45–50). Yet, according to Dickson-Carr, such a critique did not alter Reed’s decision not to “fit within prevalent notions of what an African American author should write about, both as a creative artist and cultural critic, especially when faced with criticism from the African American critical community” (*Contemporary African American Fiction* 193).

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<sup>11</sup> Hence, even though scholar of African American literature Chester Fontenot, Jr. argues that Reed’s unwillingness to meet the expectations of white and African American critics helped Reed to be considered “as one of the best contemporary American writers” (20), Reed enjoys this position without receiving widespread acclaim.

In line with this view, Reed dealt with New Black Aesthetic Critics in his 1969 *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, where he mocks them by exaggerating their opinions ad absurdum: “All art must be for the end of liberating the masses. A landscape is only good when it shows the oppressor hanging from the tree” (36). To that, the novel’s protagonist suggests the antidote of creative freedom by claiming that: “No one says a novel has to be one thing. It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o’clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons” (36). Fabre suggests that it is symptomatic of this fluidity of form that no “character, no episode, no detail, is more important than another” (“The Dialectics of Shit” 11), which eventually resulted in Reed’s severance from other African American authors writing protest fiction.

Hence, in spite of early common features, the open nature of Reed’s multicultural literature became incompatible with the movement’s drive “to support black separatism/nationalism” (Thompson 485), because the latter was in direct contradiction with Reed’s aesthetics, which “calls into question the tendency of literature to monumentalize one canonical form of discourse as *the* discourse” (Fox 49). As Reed states in an interview with Joseph Henry: “My idea of ‘Neo-Hoodooism’ is quite different from the Black Nationalist approach because I see West African imagination as capable of being inspired by many different cultures” (Dick and Singh 211). Consequently, despite the early similarities noted by Dickson-Carr above, one must conclude that the influence of the Black Arts Movement on Reed was partial and definitely over at the moment when Reed described the members of the Black Arts Movement as “mono-cultural” (Dick and Singh 211).

The rejection of the label of being only a satirist is also related to the Black Arts Movement, for which Reed was too innovative, because he used satire to discuss serious content. Martin suggests that while the New Black Aesthetic Critics “demanded a direct confronting of social issues ... [it] was most often done in serious prose” (42). He points out that when Reed started using satire to discuss serious matters, he used it to deal “with subjects only entertained with seriousness before” (42). He argues that, in the 1970s, Reed quickly realised that though the label of satirist might have been useful in attracting early positive reviews, at the same time it could also weaken the social criticism inherent in his novels (36–7). Being a very socially conscious author, Reed naturally wished to avoid such a possibility, which led him repeatedly to reject the idea of being considered only as a satirist.

It seems that Reed must have felt the possibility of being sidelined as a satirist as all too real, as he rejects the label of a mere satirist in one interview after another. For example, in an interview with Peter Nazareth he says that: “People would like to dismiss me as a humourist or a satirist or a parodist” (Dick and Singh 184). Further, in an interview with Abbott and Simmons he goes on to say: “I use all the techniques that are available, traditional and new ones. Lots of people say

I'm a satirist but I also write mystery and I write poems which are not necessarily satirical, and I write ballads" (Dick and Singh 84). Ultimately, he expresses the unease behind such statements in an interview with Helm, "Satire is one of the techniques I use. But a lot of people just want to leave it at that" (Dick and Singh 148). This tendency to overlook his critical commentary seems to accompany Reed throughout his career as, even later, he feels the need to point out that his satire does indeed include social commentary:

The Raven myths of the Pacific Northwest are comic, but they deal with serious subjects: the creation of the world and the origin of Death. The major toast of the Afro-American tradition, "The Signifying Monkey," is comic, but it makes a serious point: how the weak are capable of overcoming the strong through wit... My work is also comic, but it makes, I feel, serious points about politics, culture, and religion. ("The Tradition of Serious Comedy in Afro-American Literature" 139-40)

This need to justify the use of satire hints at larger problems at play in the context of racial equality. Even though social commentary has been a customary part of the satire written by white authors for centuries, Henry Gates, Jr. claims that Reed's white targets might use the label of satirist to dismiss his critique.<sup>12</sup> It can be presumed that Reed's vehemence in rejecting the label might have been inspired by multiple such dismissals. Yet, this in turn shows that Reed's satire has been successful in angering its targets, as otherwise there would be no need to dismiss or diminish it. Interestingly enough, Reed's rejection of the label only shows how much he cares about the efficacy of his satire – which in turn validates his use of satire for the discussion of serious issues because it is effective and is noted by its targets.

Finally, the last source of influence which Reed often rejects—yet which has had a formidable sway over his literary output—is the stereotypical portrayal of African Americans in the media. For example, when watching the news in 1992, Reed observed a discrepancy between a news item and its visual representation. While it was suggested that crime rates were high in impoverished urban areas and affected

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12 Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains Reed's motivation by saying that:

Reed's reputation most often is subsumed under the vague, dubious, and often derogatory euphemism of "satirist"—as if that form of writing relegated his stature as an artist to some nebulous corner of the absurd or else, as with so many labels, allowed him to be dismissed summarily. ("Rev. of *Flight to Canada*" 120)

Despite the fact that the relationship between the men grew more complex after this review, Gates at that time defended Reed by commenting that his voice was important in revealing the essential role of African Americans in the creation of the culture of the United States of America (120), and hence that no dismissal should be in order.

## 2.2 On Sources Approved: On the Influence of Neo-HooDoo, Jazz, and Everyday Life

mainly the youth of all ethnicities, the visual background showed only images of African Americans (“Airing Dirty Laundry” 18). Reed interpreted such stereotypical portrayals as a form of enslavement and within a decade of having written his first novel he was already clear as to who was responsible for the negative representation of minorities: the media, the educational system, and radical liberals.

As Reed stated in an interview with O’Brien, radical liberals “have so much influence in the media and American culture” along with a “vested interest in making us [African Americans] look bad” (Dick and Singh 32). For example, Reed accuses the alliance of the media and politicians of manoeuvring African Americans into a few selected roles which present no threat to the status quo, either because African Americans in such roles are believed to support it or can be framed as its outcasts. Not surprisingly, the range of stereotyping is broad and all classes of African Americans are subjected to it, as Reed suggests:

The critics are afraid that the black people will have a Renaissance and they will break free out of this exotic zoo that critics have put them in: one novelist, one playwright, one poet, one opera singer, one mathematician, one scientist, one astronaut. And if they break out of the exotic zoo, and the floodgates open, then what you have is something they can’t deal with. (“When State Magicians Fail” 8)

The quote reveals Reed’s idealistic self and his strong faith in the qualities of African Americans (“[African Americans] will have a Renaissance”). Yet it also shows that a renaissance cannot take place as long as minorities are tied to stereotypes. This is worrying for Reed as such representations do not allow Americans to see “the full diversity and richness and depth” of African American culture (Dick and Singh 32). Naturally, whenever possible, Reed disrupts such portrayals with satire, as his writings show. A case in point is his unpublished collection of essays called *Afro-Americans You Don’t Hear About Because They Ain’t Rappin Singin Muggin Boxin or Dressed Up Like Big Bird on Sesame Street* (“The Writer as Seer: Ishmael Reed on Ishmael Reed” 68). Since Reed has always protested against this form of control and surveillance, his oeuvre is particularly rich with examples of satirical sabotage.

## 2.2 On Sources Approved: On the Influence of Neo-HooDoo, Jazz, and Everyday Life

The previous section examined sources which Reed has rejected, yet which continue to influence him. It is interesting to note that two of these sources are connected to white Western culture. It is perhaps not surprising that the sources of which Reed approves are all influenced by African or African American culture. The first among these is the Umbra Society, which Pierre Damien Mvuyekure

identifies as a key early source of influence. He reports that it was in the Umbra Society where Reed met with “literary luminaries such as James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Ralph Ellison, [and] Langston Hughes” (v). In Umbra, Reed learnt: “the technique of collage or putting together ideas from African, African American, and European cultural traditions” which he later “developed ... into Neo-HooDooism or Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic, the hallmark of all his essays, novels, plays, and poems” (*Dark Heathenism* v). Since the technique of collage (not only of literary genres but also of cultural values) is found in all of Reed’s novels, the influence of the Umbra Society on Reed was truly formative.

Reed’s concept of Neo-HooDoo can be understood as an expression of Reed’s eager interest in African culture and the influence which it exerts in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Neo-HooDoo has in various guises accompanied Reed through all of his novels, with the exception of *Juice!*, and I dare say that it is one of the two works for which Reed is most famous (the other being his 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo*). As a source of inspiration, Neo-HooDoo can be likened to Socrates’s understanding of daemon, for both seem to function in similar ways.<sup>14</sup> For example, Reed often refers to the metaphor of Neo-HooDoo as a doorway to the African and African American psyche. He stresses that when writing “you get a lot of help from heritage – you know ‘voices’” (“The Writer as Seer” 62). By way of illustration, when discussing the potential greatness of Dostoyevsky in an interview with Crouch, Reed says that what could make him great is “something in his heart, some kind of drive, some kind of demonic genius” (Dick and Singh 100). Given all of the above, it seems unavoidable that in Reed’s case this demonic genius should be influenced by the concerns and experience of African Americans and other cultures inspired by Africa. In an interview with Domini, Reed thus posits himself into a line of influence which he defines as “the popular Afro-American tradition, which I’m

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13 Neo-HooDoo is of course based on HooDoo which Sāmi Ludwig describes as:

A syncretic pagan religion which originated in Dahomey and was brought to the New World by West African slaves. Nowadays it is mainly practiced in Haiti, but also in West Africa, South America (Pocomania) and in the United States, where it is called HooDoo. (*Concrete Language* 352)

He further states that “Voodoo is a fusion of many different religions, such as African animism and ancestor worship, European Catholicism, and even Native American beliefs” (352) and that it is “comprehensive rather than exclusive” (353). Such features then make Hoodoo a perfect basis for Neo-HooDoo, where the prefix implies the return of the original religion back to the United States of America.

14 In *Symposium*, a daemon is described as “something in between mortal and immortal” (38) whose function is “Interpreting and conveying all that passes between gods and humans” (39). Although this Greek influence might be seen as odd given Reed’s disinclination to value Eurocentric culture above everything else, ever since *Mumbo Jumbo* where Reed argues that Greek culture is in fact influenced by Egypt—which makes it less Western than presumed and more African influenced than acknowledged—this type of reference is perfectly in line with Reed’s writing aims and aesthetics.



solidly in. In terms of Afro-American art, not only here but in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America as well, I'm solidly within my tradition" (Dick and Singh 134). Hence, what starts with the Umbra Society in the 1960s carries over into many of the following decades of Reed's literary career.

The influence of jazz is even more evident Reed's novels which highlight his ability to improvise on a topic. For example, in his first novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, this improvisation is evident in the pastiche of genres that compose the novel. This is also true for his very last novel, which again mixes many types of narration (with a special emphasis placed on TV broadcasting). But perhaps the most interesting example is *Japanese by Spring*, which Reed wrote in three languages (English, Japanese, Yoruba) and where he focalizes the values of American society from the perspective of these three cultures. Reed also stresses the influence of jazz in many of his interviews, in which he rejects comparisons to white authors and instead posits himself into a line of African American musicians. As he states in an interview with Al Young:

If anybody's going to compare me to anybody, then compare me to someone like Mingus and Charlie Parker, musicians who have fluidity with the chord structure just as we have with the syntax or the sentence which is our basic unit. We try to do the same thing. I try to do the same kind of thing from unit of sentence to paragraph to chapter where I get the same kind of shifts that you have going on in, for example, Charlie Parker. (Dick and Singh 44)

In this way, Reed says in an interview with Abbott and Simmons that he has "been influenced by more than writing" (Dick and Singh 89) and, by extension, more than writers. Interestingly enough, in his interviews Reed is hesitant to identify African American or Western writers who have influenced him. Instead he stresses the influence of everyday life and music—particularly the improvisatory nature of jazz. For example, in the interview with Abbott and Simmons, he says that three influential sources are: "television and radio and true life" (Dick and Singh 89). Yet, based on the frequency with which Reed compares himself to other jazz musicians and because of the ways in which his novels are written, one can make a solid case for jazz being one of the key influences on Reed's work.

Last but not least, true life can be said to share a similar position of significance, as it can be argued that what Reed calls "true life" has influenced his values, his fiction, and his multiculturalism. In the early 1970s, Reed was an enthusiastic witness of many multicultural changes and thrilled to see university professors speak Yoruba, discuss African and African American paintings in McDonalds' restaurants, and welcome the use of Spanish and English in public transport ("American Romance" 52). From these signs of a budding multicultural America he drew the conclusion that the writing scene was no longer a "country club for eastern

white men over forty, but more and more is likely to be done by men and women of different regions, classes, and ethnic groups” (“The Multi-Cultural Artist” 252). Yet, the reception of the new wave of multi-ethnic writing was not as positive as Reed had envisioned. Reed soon discovered that the literary mainstream had decided to “greet it with silence, cultivate ethnic tokens to denounce it, or denounce it, deny that it exists” (“In Opposition—Which State” 114). This annoyed Reed, who knew that multiculturalism was already a part of the American experience, albeit an unacknowledged one.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, this everyday experience motivated him to become one of the key figures of American literary multiculturalism.

Reed believed that the minority position of multicultural literature was due to the mainstream publishing industry’s lack of interest in making it more visible, which deprived Americans “of an intelligent view of the tremendous range of writing” produced in the United States of America (“The Multi-Cultural Artist” 254). Yet, he was aware that to deal with this obstacle and also with whiteness, which was “emerging as the dominant figure of freedom and autonomy through its negative construction of ‘blackness’” (McGee 6), such a state of affairs had to be challenged. The change came in 1976 and Reed described it as follows:

A group of white and non-white ethnic writers decided that, instead of engaging in a time and energy consuming confrontation with the commercial literary institutions, we could best serve the literature we championed by establishing new institutions. We began *The Before Columbus Foundation*, devoted to the promotion of multi-ethnic literatures. *The Before Columbus Foundation* distributes books and magazines published by more than two hundred multi-ethnic presses, and beginning last year [1987], represented these presses at international book fairs in Frankfurt, Cairo, and Moscow. (“In Opposition—Which State” 117)

Spurred on by having been ignored, Reed took the initiative. Apart from setting up *The Before Columbus Foundation*, Reed also established *The Yardbird Reader* magazine at around the same time and for the very same purposes as *The Before Columbus Foundation*. Similarly to the foundation, *Yardbird* was also “one of the pioneers of multi-ethnic literature in the 1970s” (Harris 75). Hence everyday life in the 1970s made Reed an active promoter and publisher of multicultural literature.

In summary, it can be concluded that Reed’s seclusion from the Black Arts Movement deepened his involvement with racial sources of inspiration that did not separate him from other minorities. This was not only beneficial for his own writing but also served well many other writers whom Reed published in some of

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15 As he says, “[the] blurring of cultural styles occurs in everyday life in the United States to a greater extent than anyone can imagine and is probably more prevalent than the sensational conflict between people of different backgrounds that is played up and often encouraged by the media” (“American Romance” 52).

his magazines either in print or online.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, the inspiration offered by Neo-Hoodoo, Jazz, and everyday life led Reed to a series of pragmatic decisions which have helped to establish American literary multiculturalism. As such, these sources of inspiration have been more influential than, for example, the prescriptive ideology of the Black Arts Movement. Having examined the sources that have influenced Reed's fiction, let us now pay attention to the methodological issues and possible pitfalls concerning this book.

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16 According to Dick, Reed has been "instrumental in starting or furthering the careers of both new and established African American authors" (*Contemporary African American Fiction* 192), such as Al Young, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara and Toni Morrison. These and many other minority writers have either been published in one of Reed's many magazines (*The Yardbird Reader*, *Y'Bird*, *Quilt* and *Konch*) or "have been the recipients of the American Book Award, which is bestowed by the Before Columbus Foundation, an organization devoted to promoting the art of multicultural writers that Reed cofounded in 1976" (*Contemporary African American Fiction* 192).