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The evolution of satirical techniques in the novels of Ishmael Reed

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5 THE EVOLUTION OF SATIRICAL TECHNIQUES IN THE NOVELS OF ISHMAEL REED

This chapter describes the evolution of dominant satirical techniques present in Reed's novels while acknowledging several conscious limitations. First, it does not examine techniques which appear marginally in Reed's oeuvre because of their lack of representativeness (e.g., it avoids satire based on wordplay). Second, it discusses only the most illustrative examples of each satirical technique in each novel instead of listing them all, as that would simply not be possible. Third, it proceeds in chronological order: it starts with techniques which are dominant in the first novel and follows through each subsequent novel (provided it includes examples of the given technique) until the last novel. Finally, as the novels of Ishmael Reed are heavily dependent on context, each analytical part is preceded by a brief summary of the novel's plot, its aims and critical responses. By limiting and sequencing the chapter in this way, my aim is to construct a narrative which describes the evolution of the most recurring satirical techniques, which I also take to be the most significant. Let us start with the technique which begins this evolution and that is non-standard sexuality.

5.1 Non-standard Sexuality: Its Definition and Targets

Due to its very frequent appearance in the early novels, non-standard sexuality is one of Reed's key satirical techniques that follows a steady pattern. Since the term non-standard might entail different meanings to different people,²³ its definition might be yet another protean task. First, it cannot be presumed that what the

²³ As Umberto Eco states, "when a text is produced not for a single addressee but for a community of readers – the author knows that he or she will be interpreted not according to his or her intentions

following pages describe as acts of non-standard sexuality are perceived as such by Ishmael Reed. Second, his readers might subscribe to different social norms and hence they might not interpret them as non-standard either. Third, many of the described episodes of non-standard sexuality involve homosexuality, which might have been considered as non-standard at the time of the novels' writing but which is no longer the case anymore. Therefore, the term cannot be defined sociologically, as such a definition would be unstable over time. Nor can it be defined by the real author or the novels' real readers; however, it can be defined through the novels' implied authors and implied readers, who shape and interpret the reactions of the novels' characters. The implied reader, who creates meaning in a given novel in response to the intentions of the implied author,²⁴ recognises the described sexual acts as non-standard because the novel's characters perceive them as such. Hence, I define non-standard sexuality in terms of the shocked reactions of characters who witness it or are informed about it. These reactions are forever present in the novels and, unlike possible sociological definitions, have a stable meaning over time.

The novels in which it is included show an oppressive character being involved in morally and ethically inappropriate sexual behaviour, which leads to the loss of his/her prestige, power, and moral standing. This is a significant outcome as the targeted character (who is always a male in Reed's novels) is usually in charge of minority characters who are unaware of his sexual preferences (until these are revealed by direct witness or mediated by hearsay). Nonetheless, as soon as they discover them, they are given grounds to question the control exerted over them by the satirised character. Typically, characters who witness non-standard sexuality react with shock and disgust (Bukka Doopeyduk in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*) or disbelief that such an option is at all possible (African American slaves in *Flight to Canada*). Since even the satirised characters feel the need to explain their actions (as in the case of Swille's last wish and his last will in *Flight to Canada*), it can be presumed that they themselves know that their actions are not standard.

5.1.1 *The Freelance Pallbearers* in Context

Even though Reed's first novel is set in a world fit for a dystopian sci-fi horror movie (as it tells of an alternative America oppressed by an evil, cannibalistic dictator with a defecating disease), it is based on the real struggles that African Americans

but according to a complex strategy of interactions which also involves the readers, along with their competence in language as a social treasury" (67).

²⁴ For more information on the implied author and the implied reader see Seymour Chatman's *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (74–89) and Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (422–30).

faced in the late 1960s under the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson. The novel describes the challenges which African Americans faced while trying to become equal members of American society. At the same time, there is a twist, as Reed fashions *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* as a cautionary tale about how not to achieve equality, as it shows its African American protagonist rejecting all that is African American, this rejection ultimately resulting in his death at the end of the novel.²⁵ Therefore, the novel could be considered as a kind of anti-Bildungsroman. Traditionally, such novels examine the plight of an individual coming to terms with their identity.²⁶ Yet, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* plays on this tradition by having its protagonist die in the process and never find his identity. The novel thus warns African Americans that achieving equality by relinquishing their inherent African Americanness (e.g., by trying to behave, sound, and think white) has grave consequences and is therefore not a viable option. After all, Bukka Doopeyduk, the protagonist of the novel, perishes in the process. Yet, the novel complicates his image even more by having him emulate HARRY SAM—the cannibalistic and oppressive dictator of the novel—instead of fighting him and also the regime which he represents. In fact, Bukka’s whitewashed journey eventually results in his attempt to replace HARRY SAM yet without at all ending the oppressive status quo which impoverishes other African American characters of the novel.²⁷

Despite the fact that the story is related to a larger number of intertexts,²⁸ two come to the fore because of their immediate visibility: the first being the American Dream and the second, Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. As for the first, literary critic

25 Interestingly enough, at the time of writing the novel Reed did not yet understand Hoodoo as a philosophical system which is beneficial to contemporary African Americans. Consequently, Bukka is deprived of any such help—which is essential for many of Reed’s following protagonists—and this might explain his unfavourable fate.

26 According to *A New Handbook of Literary Terms*, the term refers to “Bildung, often translated as ‘education,’ [which] means in German the development of the self through knowledge” (40). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* adds that such a development is usually “troubled” (27). *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* updates the definition by claiming that “Postmodernism’s attention to the suppressed narratives of marginalized groups has further expanded the envisioning potential of the Bildungsroman” (19). It further adds that “Non-white Bildungsromane ... explore the experience of self-realization under the oppressive regimes of political intolerance” which leads to the “redeveloping” of the genre “for the twenty-first century” (20).

27 The novel was reviewed both positively and negatively. A scholar of African American literature Kenneth Kinnamon suggests that it is an “extravagantly satirical allegory of the journey of Bukka Doopeyduk from innocence to experience” (1). A contrary view is presented by Irving Howe, a scholar of American literature, who suggests that even though Reed might have written the novel as “a black variation of Jonathan Swift,” in his view it came closer “to the commercial cooings of a Captain Kangaroo” (15). However, although reviewers might not agree whether it is a well written novel or not, they agree on its satirical nature. Even though Fabre suggests that “Satirizing processed and prostituted language represents one of the prime purposes of Reed in *The Freelance Pallbearers*” (3), I find examples of non-standard sexuality to be the dominant technique of satire in the novel.

28 According to Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure, the novel is intertextually related to the following works of fiction:

and writer Peter Nazareth points out that Bukka's consistent hard work invested in rising through the ranks of the oppressive regime can be related to "the Horatio Alger myth that you can make it within the system by hard work" (*In the Trickster Tradition* 176). Yet, Bukka's hard work is invested in misguided aims, as it maintains the oppressive dominance of white power, because of which Bukka loses the African American part of his personality and eventually his life. Nazareth thus poignantly quips that "One man's myth is another man's nightmare" (177). McGee supports this reading by pointing out that Bukka's name "recalls the name of Booker T. Washington, who preached a philosophy of self-help and cooperation with white authority" (19).²⁹ Consequently, I agree with Mvuyekure, who posits that "Doopeyduk eventually not only discovers that HARRY SAM is a dictator and murderer of children, but he also realizes that alienating himself from the black community and blindly embracing American myths about hard work and its reward can only lead to disappointment and disillusionment" ("American Neo-HooDooism" 207). Hence, Bukka's death can be read as Reed's critique of those African Americans who forsake their identity for advancement up the social ladder (which is a constant theme of Reed's novels, from the first to the very last).

The connection to Ellison's *Invisible Man* can be found in Bukka's surname, as the names in Reed's novels always reveal the nature of their bearers. Doopeyduk is derived from the noun "dupe" which *Merriam Webster* defines as "one that is easily deceived or cheated" (n. pag.). This quality is key to Bukka's character who, like the protagonist of *The Invisible Man* (1952), is duped by almost every character in the novel. Speaking of both novels, literary critic Michel Fabre enumerates many of the points which they share:

One should note at this point that *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* recalls, in more ways than one, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* whose naïve narrator also related the steps in his initiation to the ways of the world. In both novels, comparable elements recur: college life or individual study, the Brotherhood or trade-unionism, the veterans at

Vincent McHugh's *Caleb Cattum's America*, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Voltaire's *Candide*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Charles Wright's *The Wig*, Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*, the German Voodoo film *The Cabinet of Dr. Cagliari*, Nathaniel West's *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Daffy Duck cartoons, and voodoo aesthetics (to name a few). ("American Neo-HooDooism" 206)

Though in a personal communication Ishmael Reed said that the novel is primarily based on John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) and hence one should take Mvuyekure's suggestions with a grain of salt.

²⁹ It is of note that Bukka as the only African American character of the novel refuses to speak in African American English and prefers Standard English. According to Schmitz this shows that "Doopeyduk's attempt to fashion his discourse in formal English only reveals his stupidity, an ignorance not of correct grammar or proper diction, but of his world" (71). Schmitz thus argues that Bukka's language preferences show how mistaken Bukka is in his values.

the Golden Day or those in Franz Joseph Park, white radicals vs. black nationalists in Harlem or Soulsville, Cipher X or Brother Jack, Rinehart or Elijah Raven, etc. The attitude of the protagonists, who are more victimized than heroic, towards language, power, the dynamics and fluidity of shapes and form are comparable, conditioned as they have been by their gullibility; their roads take them from innocence to an underground hole or to butcher's hooks after failing to perform any kind of revolution. A detailed study might show how adroitly Reed has assimilated Ellison's essential teachings which, however, detracts nothing from his profound originality. (Fabre 10)³⁰

Yet, since the downfalls of both characters are of a similar nature, the intertextual relationship of *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* to *The Invisible Man* serves as a means of critiquing Bukka's gullibility and willing servitude. Interestingly enough, even in his first novel Reed demonstrates that he is not interested in putting African Americans on a pedestal. By intertextually connecting Bukka to the protagonist of *The Invisible Man*, Reed not only criticizes the oppressive system but at the same time also those African Americans who are willing to serve it.

Leaving for now matters of intertextuality, let us pay closer attention to the character whom Bukka attempts to replace: the dictator HARRY SAM. According to Fabre, HARRY SAM personifies "petrifying order" and that which is "fixed" (7). As such he is a fitting metaphor for the status quo which Bukka fails to overthrow. According to Reed, HARRY SAM is a personification of everything that limits African Americans. As he says in an interview with Shepperd, "Black people don't need anybody telling them what we should do, where we should eat, how we should act, who we should sleep with. That's like the same old goon squad, the same old HARRY SAM I tried to create in my novel, a dictatorship from the mediocrity" (Dick and Singh 6). As a negative force worthy of satire, HARRY SAM is ridiculed through a mysterious illness which, at most times, prevents him from leaving the toilet. Apart from an abstract principle, McGee suggests that HARRY SAM is based on the 36th president of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, who "was famous for addressing his aides, taking his briefings, and sometimes meeting with important cabinet members in the White House john" (21). Nonetheless, despite these particulars, McGee argues that *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* is not "strictly 'protest' fiction" because "Reed purposefully mutes the signifiers of race in this novel as if to suggest that it is not any specific form of ethnicity that is in question but the general concept of cultural difference" (23). In either case, the character

30 For more information on how Reed achieves originality via his innovative use of language in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* see Michael Fabre's "Ishmael Reed's *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* or the Dialectics of Shit." For more information on how Reed improvises on the messages of *The Invisible Man* in his later fiction see Mvuyekure's *The Dark Heathenism of the American Novelist Ishmael Reed* (193-7).

of HARRY SAM is a fitting target of satire and the following pages show how non-standard sexuality is used to ridicule him.

5.1.2 Non-standard Sexuality in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*

Non-standard Sexuality in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* is, for example, revealed during a parade in which a recording of a conversation between Harry Sam and the chief bishop of his religion is being offered for sale by two conmen who promote it with the following words:

We offer you a record that no home should be without. It's historical. It's edjooational. It's a credit to you people. A forty-five disc of the historic meeting between HARRY SAM and Soulsville's own Eclair Porkchop: "A Meeting of Titans." Just so that you can get a sample of this dignified recording, we're going to play a little bit of it." With this he pulled a folding stand from beneath his overcoat, set it up and mounted a small victrola on the top. He put the needle on the record and soon the voices of the two leaders could be heard.

AWWWWW, DO IT TO ME. AWWWWWW BABY. DO IT TO ME. WHERE DID YOU GET THAT LONG THING? MY MY O LORD, DON'T STOP, DON'T STOP. HELPLEASE DON'T STOP. DO IT THIS WAY. DO IT THAT WAY. OOOOOO MY MY MY YMUM YUMMY OOOO ... (65)

Although the conmen describe the record as "edjooational," "historical", and "dignified," the actual transcript does not deliver on the promise. Ironically, both men are shown to be involved in practices which do not reaffirm their positions. As for the bishop, he is revealed to be involved in sexual actions which are incompatible with his religious role. The religion in the novel is based on Christianity, which demands sexual chastity on the part of its high officials. The bishop clearly violates this prescription and he does so with a man, which aggravates his transgression even further. The dictator is not placed in a favourable light either. The quote includes expressive language which describes a situation which is neither educational, historical, nor dignified. Hence, instead of reaffirming the status of the two men (and the elites they represent), the record undermines it, as it shows them in an activity which is incongruent with the social roles they are supposed to fulfil. Knowing this, both men have chosen to meet in private as the high number of recorded discs shows. Since the state police soon appear to disperse the crowd and stop the record from being played, the novel signals how undesirable such a record is for maintaining the status of the elites among ordinary citizens.

The theme of sexuality which is perceived as non-standard (and therefore threatening to the status of those involved) reverberates through the whole novel and

naturally affects even Bukka. Towards the end of the novel, Bukka accidentally finds Sam in a situation which can be considered similar (136–8), yet this time with a higher number of male participants. Bukka thus undergoes a transformation fitting a *Bildungsroman*: he moves from the initial position of not knowing—in which he is a devoted follower of Sam—to knowing that Sam himself deviates from the official doctrine of his regime. In the spirit of being holier-than-thou, Bukka reasons that if he follows the doctrine better than Sam he would also logically make a better leader and he does not hesitate to pursue this option once the opportunity arises.

Therefore, witnessing Sam's sexual behaviour (which Bukka perceives as incorrect, as his shock suggests) eradicates all power that Sam had over Bukka. Yet, before Bukka tries to take power himself (and thus to confirm the hypothesis that non-standard sexuality is used to undermine the status and power of oppressive characters), Bukka is shocked first. This is demonstrated in the questions which he poses to each participant of the orgy. In fast succession, Bukka asks each participant a question. He starts with "What do you have to say for yourself?" (137) with the first man. He then proceeds to "What are you doing up here" (137) with the second man, and ends with the identification of the third man with "It couldn't be—NOSETROUBLE?" (138). By demanding an explanation or justification of the first man's participation, Bukka shows that he believes the first man to have been involved in an act for which he needs an excuse. Similarly, by inquiring why the second man is "here," Bukka reveals that he believes it would be proper had the man been elsewhere. His final statement then combines a negative modal verb expressing disbelief and the use of capital letters for a name otherwise spelled with non-capital letters. Such an emphasis reveals that his perception of the orgy is clearly non-standard and verging on the negative. The second example of non-standard sexuality is a gradation of the previous one: the reception is heightened in Bukka's shock, and there are more participants and graver results for the status of those involved. Having witnessed the scene, Bukka ceases to be a believer in the system and in Harry Sam, whom he later attempts to overthrow. Non-standard sexuality is the key in Bukka's transformation and also the impetus behind it.

Yet, non-standard sexuality is not used solely to ridicule the elites: it in fact encompasses all supporters of the regime, no matter from which class they hail. Examples of the technique are marked either by notions of inappropriateness or exaggeration (which are both discussed above). By way of illustration, when a member of the state police attempts to brush away flies from the face of a religious apprentice by slapping him, the apprentice is reported to have "cooed in ecstasy" (21), which is a rather exaggerated reaction. When he admits that he "enjoyed the roughing up" (20) that a gang of kids gave him for his preaching, his expression reveals that he is another non-standard man of the cloth. Episodes which are further marked with the above features are also linked to other mid-

dle class representatives of the regime such as a corrupt judge (81, 84–5) and government officials (109). Consequently, the technique is used to satirise all the characters who attempt to maintain a skewed distribution of power. Having now examined it in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, let us proceed to its exploration in the next novel in line.

5.1.3 *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* in Context

Despite having written ten novels populated with dozens of characters, each of Reed's novels is connected to those that come before and after it. By way of illustration, if *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* is an example of Bildungsroman with a twist, so is Reed's second novel, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, an example of the Western genre with a twist: it is a Hoodoo Western which subverts many of the assumptions that are traditional to its genre. Even though Fabre describes it as a "multidimensional Western" which includes many of the stereotypical ingredients,³¹ *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is at the same time "multicultural and multiethnic" (Mvuyekure "American Neo-Hoodooism" 208). This is possible largely because of Reed's changed understanding of Hoodoo, which progresses from a malevolent force practiced by shady characters in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* to a benevolent African-based spiritual practice that enables the cowboy protagonist of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* to challenge Western hegemony.

Consequently, one may agree with Fabre, who claims that Reed's "second novel represents a significant departure from Reed's bildungsroman, whose anti-hero failed to debunk an obscene, Nixon-like potentate" ("Postmodernist Rhetoric" 18) and adds that if the protagonist of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* eventually manages to overthrow a similarly obscene (yet nominally different) potentate, it is only because of a different conception of Hoodoo. According to Mvuyekure, Hoodoo in Reed's second novel "moves from a Hollywood-type idea of Voodoo to a well-documented concept of Hoodoo as a North American version of Dahomean and Haitian voodoo" ("American Neo-Hoodooism" 208). Since Hoodoo thus becomes legitimate and benevolent, Reed uses it not only as a means of dealing with the differences between the novel's protagonist and antagonist, an African American cowboy called Loop Garoo and a white wealthy rancher called Drag Gibson, but also with the world views which they represent. In this scenario, Gibson stands in for the same oppressive force that HARRY SAM impersonated in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*.

31 For example, Fabre lists the following: "Frontier life and the conquest of the open lands, wagon trains, powerful owners and boisterous cowboys, cattle migrating along the Chrisholm Trail, shotgun towns complete with outlaws and their saloon and main street battling places" ("Postmodernist Rhetoric" 17).

Nonetheless, why does Reed associate Hoodoo with the Western genre and to what purpose? He suggests that it is because of a thematic unity which they both share. As he states, “If, according to Afro-American folklore, spirits ride human hosts and are referred to as ‘horsemen,’ then I would naturally write a western, here again using the traditional styles of Afro-American folklore but enmeshing such styles with popular forms with which readers could identify” (“The Tradition of Serious Comedy” 137). According to Mvuyekure, such conceptual linking enables Reed’s protagonist to “oppose not only gunfire but also world Catholicism” (*Dark Heathenism* 60–61). For example, in the novel, Loop is shown to celebrate a “tailor made micro-Hoodoo mass to end 2000 years of bad news” (63) where “bad news” stand for oppression and the stereotypical representation of minorities. One of the aims of Neo-Hoodoo is thus to challenge those who would subscribe to such opinions. This can be seen from Loop’s invocation of Black Hawk,³² who was a Native American war leader, whom Loop incites to:

Open up some of these prissy orthodox minds so that they will no longer call Black People’s American experience “corrupt,” “perverse” and “decadent.” Please show them that Booker T. and the MG’s, Etta James, Johnny Ace and Bojangle tapdancing is just as beautiful as anything that happened anywhere else in the world. Teach them that anywhere people go they have experience and that all experience is art. (64)

Passages such as these show that Reed is not trapped in a dualistic fight between the supposedly good (everything African-related) and the supposedly bad (everything West-related). He instead uses his new understanding of Hoodoo to enable Loop to obstruct “any type of oppression and totalizing order” as his aim is to “re-establish openness and freedom in the West” (Mvuyekure *Dark Heathenism* 67). Or, as the literary critic Johannes Fehrle points out, “*Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* distrusts all monoglossic and generalizing concepts, whether ‘white’ or ‘black,’ juxtaposing them with the religion/magic/philosophy/groove/way of life of Neo-Hoodoo, which, although essentially black in origin, unlike similar white institutions does not exclude other on account of their race” (29–30). The invocation of Black Hawk then shows that *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* strives to posit the experiences of all races as equally valuable and that any such experience is a valid source of art. Thus, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is not solely a multicultural novel, as it stresses that American art is of no lesser value than that which is produced in Europe.³³

³² The fact that Loop invokes a Native American chief in an African-based ceremony is one of the reasons why (not only) Mvuyekure can consider *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* to be “multicultural and multiethnic” (“American Neo-Hoodooism” 208).

³³ This is yet another common feature which *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* shares with *The Free-Lance*

The title of the novel, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, refers to the name of the town in which the novel is set and hints at Reed's challenging the power of the media. Its first part refers to yellow backs, which according to Reed were "Old West books about cowboy heroes" ("The Writer as Seer" 63). Traditionally, such books did not feature positive portrayals of ethnic minorities and the novel rewrites such misrepresentation with the actions of its protagonist. The second part of the novel's title refers to the town's radio station, which broadcasts messages that support the oppressive dominance of the white landowner Drag Gibson. However, since he is eventually defeated by the novel's African American protagonist, Loop Garoo—who subverts the practices of yellow backs and dismantles the radio station—the novel and its title thus convey a message that even one individual is capable of challenging the status quo.

At the beginning of the novel, Loop Garoo arrives in Yellow Back Radio, a town ruled by armed children who have temporarily overthrown the despotic rule of Drag Gibson. However, the children's new and just society is soon destroyed by Gibson, who arranges to "wipe them menaces out" so that his "quest for power will be satisfied" (*Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* 20). His willingness to have his henchmen kill the rebellious children reveals him as the novel's antagonist. The interpretation of Gibson as an antagonist is further supported by the fact that he adopts the very same approach to deal with Native Americans. Literary scholar Neil Schmitz describes Gibson as "a murderous racist" (133–4) and these negative features are further strengthened when he is described as having "an ego as wide as the Grand Canyon" (*Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* 22) and also identified as the person responsible for bringing enslaved African Americans into the U.S. (81).

Pallbearers. For in an interview with Shepperd, Reed identifies the ordinary American experience as one of the primary sources for *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*:

We have so many volumes and volumes of experience here we could keep on going forever. I think that the only reason we neglect them is that we associate them with the bad old days of colonialism, so that we don't think it's worthy, in that way we fall into a white man's bag towards black art. It's the same mistake that whites make when they look to Europe, looking to French or Italian or Russian Studies when all the time it's right under your nose ...

Much of the thinking of the black intellectuals comes from Marxism, and that's not red-baiting, it's the way it happens historically. It's all there in the "Brotherhood" in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, or in Max in Richard Wright's *Native Son*: "We have no heritage." We do have a heritage. You may think it's scummy and low-down and funky and homespun, but it's there. I think it's beautiful. I'd invite it to dinner. And I think that's what *Pallbearers* is all about. (Dick and Singh 12)

Yet the same sentiments are echoed by *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and thus it is safe to presume that despite significant changes in Reed's understanding of Hoodoo, his second novel is as interested in challenging the status quo (no matter whether racial or artistic) as his first.

5.1.4 Non-standard Sexuality in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*

Reed satirizes Gibson by means of non-standard sexuality by allowing him to break the white society's rules governing appropriate sexual behaviour. This is illustrated by emphasizing Gibson's fondness for zoophilia, which is demonstrated using a ritual aimed to protect his wealth:

Three horsemen – the Banker, the Marshal and the Doctor – decided to pay a little visit to Drag Gibson's ranch. They had to wait because *Drag was at his usual hobby, embracing his property.*

A green mustang had been led out of its stall. It served as a symbol for his streams of fish, his herds, his fruit so large they weighed down the mountains, black gold and diamonds which lay in untapped fields, and his barnyard *overflowing with robust and erotic fowl.*

Holding their Stetsons in their hands the delegation looked on as Drag prepared to kiss his holdings. The ranch hands dragged the animal from his compartment towards the front of the Big Black House where Drag bent over and *french kissed the animal between his teeth*, licking the slaver from around the horse's gums.

This was one lonely horse. The male horses avoided him because they thought him stuck-up and the females because they thought that since green he was a queer horse. See, he had turned green from old nightmares.

After the ceremony the unfortunate critter was led back to his stall, a hoof covering his eye. (19, emphasis added)

Feinberg suggests that while criticizing, satirists “usually apply a standard not of morality but of appropriateness – in other words, a *social norm*” (11). Yet, the quoted passage breaks the social norm several times, starting with denoting Gibson's zoophilic ritual as his “usual hobby,” proceeding with his description of poultry as “erotic,” and culminating with the graphic description of the actual ceremony. The passage further emphasises the reading of Gibson's behaviour as non-standard by proposing it as the source of the “unfortunate” horse's past and present trauma, which he attempts to forget by putting a hoof over his eye.

However, Gibson's non-standard sexual behaviour is not limited to horses, as he explains in a conversation on the topic of why he prefers animals to women: “Why I don't need em – I got *Cowboy Mag.* Man, did you see that polled Angus in there last month? Drag said wringing his right hand. Wow. Too much” (58). By having Gibson express why animals are more sexually appealing than women, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* shows his character as non-standard and breaking the approved norm of sexual conduct.

As in the case of *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, even *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* contains instances of non-standard satire targeted at corrupt officials who up-

hold a despotic regime. In the novel these are military officers who participate in the genocide of Native Americans and are ridiculed en masse in a scene which could be taken from Gustave Dore's paintings of Turkish baths. The novel shows the army officers in an underground secret spa where "high ranking members of the Army were babbling softly out of their minds while big black masseurs in turbans and baggy pants were running their jazzy hands across their bodies" (141). One of the sources of satire at play in this scene is the incongruous power reversal between the high-ranking officers and the enslaved African Americans who are massaging (and thus controlling) the former, albeit temporarily. Further, the proximity of the spa—which is located "in the basement of the Army's headquarters" (141)—clearly shows the importance of the African American masseurs to the Army. As in the case of Harry Sam and the bishop, even this scene features highly emotional language on the part of the targeted characters, which shows how much they enjoy the reversal of power. The army men are first shown as "babbling softly out of their minds" (141) before the key officer is allowed to voice his feelings about the massage to one of the black masseurs:

Your charm certainly works. Your strong black hands just seem to make my bones jump and shout for joy. *Please ask the owner for my car keys. You can come to my apartment and take anything you want. Take my credit card, take my status—it doesn't mean anything just do it to me more often, you know how you do things so fine and sweet. You're the finest pipe fitter I've ever known, O I just wish I could do more to reward you for your thrilling expertise.* (140, emphasis added)

In the whole of Reed's oeuvre, the army officer is the only satirised character who openly admits what the others only show: that non-standard sexuality frequently results in a loss of authority in Reed's oeuvre. Nonetheless, even though the targeted characters might not have the army officer's clairvoyance, there are always other characters who signal to the readers that authority and status have been lost.

For example, the servants of Drag Gibson—who are aware of their master's preferences—are guilty of numerous breaches of etiquette which clearly reveal their disrespect for him. These include verbal aggression towards Drag (56), pranks based on switching his beer with urine (87), and an impromptu celebration of his death which includes confetti, balloons, and jigs (111). Apart from the main episodes of non-standard sexuality which I have already discussed, even these instances of slave disloyalty follow after examples of non-standard sexuality. Because of this strong correlation between *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, and *Flight to Canada* (as the next section illustrates), I claim that Reed uses non-standard sexuality in his early novels to decrease the authority and status of the targeted characters. In the above-discussed examples, the technique is used to free the enslaved characters from further obedience to their masters and to give them a chance to

secure their freedom, which some achieve (as the next section shows) and some do not (Bukka). Nonetheless, the fact that the revelation of non-standard sexuality precedes such attempts at gaining personal freedom clearly shows its significance as one of the dominant satirical modes of Reed's early novels.

5.1.5 *Flight to Canada* in Context

The intersection of everyday life and Hoodoo is one of the most prominent issues that Reed's first four novels explore. However, Reed's fifth novel, *Flight to Canada* (1976), presents a departure from this direction as it primarily examines the freedom of African American writing. The novel explores this theme in Reed's usual set-up: the struggle between the multicultural, represented by minorities, and the monocultural, represented by white people, which takes place in 1860s America. Given this setting, it stands to reason that *Flight to Canada* would naturally examine the attempts of enslaved characters to secure their freedom, which it does. Additionally, it also tackles the question of the freedom of the texts which they produce. Reed's assertion that such textual freedom is not guaranteed is central to the novel and is demonstrated on the slave narrative of Josiah Henson, which according to Reed was plagiarized by Harriet Beecher Stowe³⁴ (*Flight to Canada* 8–9). In fact, literary critic Ashraf Rushdy claims that “The whole book is framed around the question of how to protect writing so that it is not vulnerable to theft” (“The Neo-slave narrative” 100). This theme is examined in the novel, primarily on the character of Uncle Robin, who is a thinly veiled revision of Beecher's Uncle Tom and who uses Hoodoo to secure freedom for himself, other enslaved characters, and in the end also for his narrative.

Reed's central premise is that the well-documented success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exploits the slave narrative written by Josiah Henson. This annoys Reed because Henson was impoverished while Beecher-Stowe became rich by appropriating his story. Reed thus accuses Beecher-Stowe not only of taking advantage of Henson but also of harming him on another, and perhaps more significant, level. He illus-

34 Mvuyekure identifies the following among the primary intertexts:

The slave narrative and the historical novel, revisits American Civil War, and discusses slavery (old and contemporary), Abraham Lincoln, Harriet Beecher Stowe and her *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Alfred Lord Tennyson and his *Idylls of the King*, Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin* (during the performance of which Lincoln was shot), the Native American myths of the raven, Edgar Allan Poe's “The Raven,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and “The Cask of Amontillado,” Phillis Wheatley's “To His Excellency, General Washington,” *Gone With the Wind*, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and the politics of race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism. (“American Neo-Hoodooism” 213)

Hence, the novel continues with Reed's traditionally high degree of intertextuality.

trates this by saying that “A man’s story is his gris-gris, you know. Taking his story is like taking his gris-gris. The thing that is himself. It’s like robbing a man of his Etheric Double. People pine away” (8). Thus the key concern of *Flight to Canada* is ensuring that one’s gris-gris (be it a gris-gris of a character or of a minority) is not stolen and remains in connection with those whom it is supposed to nourish and nurture – or as Peter Nazareth says: “Harriet Beecher Stowe stole the story of Henson, so if there is no sympathy in nature, there must be sympathy in art: Reed seeks artistic redress on behalf of Henson by putting her into an updated story of Uncle Tom, exposing her, and preventing her from doing it all over again” (*In the Trickster Tradition* 171). Unsurprisingly at this point in Reed’s oeuvre, Uncle Robin relies on Hoodoo to create possibilities to keep his own gris-gris, not only for his benefit but also for the benefit of many other African American and non-African American characters as well.

In *Flight to Canada*, Reed still draws on Hoodoo for the purpose of sabotaging the dominant monocultural view and society. He revises *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by having Robin trick his master’s relatives (thanks to Hoodoo) after his master’s sudden death and thus gain freedom, life, and his previous master’s riches because of the last will which he forges. It is revealed that Robin “prayed to one of our gods, and he came to me in a dream ... He said it was okay to do it. The ‘others’ had approved” (*Flight to Canada* 170). Yet this god is not the Christian god of Uncle Tom, whose religious values lead him to his death. Instead, this god is one of the many African deities that entered America with the slaves who survived the Middle Passage. As Robin says: “When we came here, our gods came with us. They’ll never go away” (170). Further, Hoodoo is also used to guarantee that the story of Uncle Robin would be written in “such a way that, using a process the old curers used, to lay hands on the story would be lethal to the thief. This way ... Uncle Robin would have the protection that Uncle Tom (Josiah Henson) didn’t” (11). In this manner, Hoodoo is instrumental not only in safeguarding his present life but also in protecting his future legacy.

Peter Nazareth argues that it is this knowledge of Hoodoo that enables Robin to pursue options that result in a life which is very different than that of Uncle Tom. He says that “Uncle Robin knows his culture and his gods and knows, like Raven, that the slaves were kidnapped, not saved: so he is a player until the right time” (*In the Trickster Tradition* 185). Mvuyekure even goes as far as to say that “*Flight to Canada* (1976) suggests that characters who survive the displacement caused by slavery are those who possess the knowledge of ‘ancient Afro-American oral literature,’ which can allow them to trick the master as well as to use the acquired writing skills as someone would Hoodoo” (“American Neo-Hoodooism” 213). In this regard, Hoodoo is again used to create a multicultural society, which the novel shows by having Uncle Robin turn the former plantation into a retreat centre for artists (11) open to different minorities and followers of various religions. Even

Christianity, the ideological backbone of the society which enslaved Uncle Robin, can “stay, but it’s going to have to stop being so bossy” (171), as Uncle Robin adds.

5.1.6 Non-standard Sexuality in *Flight to Canada*

To return to the examination of satirical techniques, *Flight to Canada* includes many examples of non-standard sexuality. There is a wide scholarly consensus that the novel criticizes both the racism of the nineteenth century and that of the twenty-first (Mielke 9, Dubey 164, Levecq 282, Weixlmann 57–62). Since Arthur Swille is an avid pro-slavery supporter and a plantation owner famous for his opinion that “The slaves like it here” (*Flight to Canada* 37), he is a clear target for Reed’s satire. Yet, Swille is not satirized via zoophilia like Gibson in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* but through a different form of non-standard sexuality, which in his case takes the form of incestuous feelings for his deceased sister, Vivian. These thoughts are disclosed in a monologue in which he ponders the possible result of the Civil War and his relationship with Vivian:

Let Davis and Lincoln kill each other off, and then during the confusion I’ll declare myself king, and, as for Queen, Vivian.

Vivian, my disconsolate damsel, if only you ... my fair pale sister. Your virgin knees and golden hair in your sepulcher by the sea. Let me creep into your mausoleum, baby. My insatiable Vivian. (108)

The passage reveals Swille’s non-standard sexuality in stages. It first hints at it with Swille’s fantasy in which he imagines himself and his sister as a married couple. The ensuing sentences intensify the notion of inappropriate sexuality as they show that Swille wishes to consummate the marriage. This reading is further empowered by the language used, which is charged with sexual overtones: Swille perceives Vivian as “insatiable” which in combination with “creeping into [her] mausoleum” and the description of “virgin knees” implies activities of a sexual nature. Swille further acknowledges his different sexuality when he admits dependency on his affection for Vivian: “What would I do without our great love, a love as old as Ikhnaton, the royal love, the royal love ... the royal” (109–10). Here, Swille compares their relationship to the incestuous one involving Akhnaten, an Egyptian pharaoh who fathered a child with his own sister. Consequently, there is little doubt that Swille perceives the nature of his relationship to Vivian as sexual and that as far as social norms governing sexual behaviour in the United States in the 1860s go, such a relationship is perceived as inappropriate.³⁵

35 This scene is being witnessed by an African American child, who sees Swille in his sister’s tomb

While there are other expressions of Swille's deviant sexual feelings for his sister, his will is the most prominent among them. After Swille dies in an unforeseen accident, his testament emphasizes the importance of his non-standard feelings for his sister. Consequently, the judge reading Swille's last will is surprised to read the following words:

“And my final request may sound a little odd to the Yankees who've invaded our bucolic haven, but I wish to be buried in my sister's sepulcher by the sea, joined in the Kama Sutra position below ...”—the Judge blushed as he examined the illustration on the document—“that we may be joined together in eternal and sweet Death.”

(Flight to Canada 169)

This passage offers an interesting mix of intertextual references that reaffirm Swille's non-standard feelings. The first is the reference to a Kama Sutra position, which is left undescribed yet is so unexpected in a relationship between a brother and a sister that it makes the judge blush. The second is a reference to Edgar Allan Poe and his poem “Annabel Lee.” This intertextual link is triggered by the phrase “sepulcher by the sea,” which summarizes the spatial location of the poem that describes the eternal love between its narrator and Annabel Lee. *Flight to Canada* borrows this notion of eternity yet it reframes it with new, sexual content via the reference to the Kama Sutra. At this point one might speculate that Reed is also satirising Poe, who married his underage first cousin when she was 13 years of age. In either case, it is safe to conclude that the character of Arthur Swille is created as one exhibiting consistent non-standard sexual behaviour.

Like Gibson's deviation, even Swille's non-standard sexual conduct shares the same features of being an instrument of Reed's early satire. The inappropriate sexuality of both men is in contradiction with their status, as suggested by the judge's blushing and the trauma of the green horse. References to their behaviour appear consistently in both novels and so cannot be considered random. As humour theorist Katrina Triesenberg notes: “Stereotypes are a convenient way to get through to a relaxed audience; and certainly, the humor writer wants his audience relaxed” (415). By having already recognized one character as satirized, Reed's readers are more likely to identify the repetition of this satirical technique with greater ease during their subsequent readings of his other novels. This decreases

where he was “on top of his sister and [he] was crying and sobbing, and that he was swearing and that he was making so much noise that he didn't even notice the child and the child run away” (60). The precise details of what exactly Swille is doing are not described. Yet, the child feels motivated to run away—in spite of the unexpected nature of what it was witnessing—and the enslaved women find this an important piece of news which they share. Hence, whatever Swille was doing, it must have been non-standard otherwise it would not have attracted so much attention.

the level of inference required to recognize that both Swille and Gibson are shown as failing the sexual norms of the white society and thus are being satirised.

It can be presumed that Reed connects Swille and Gibson to non-standard sexuality so that the readers are motivated by social logic to find them ignoble. Since “for those in high positions to be laughed at is to lose status and authority” (Davies 56), Reed’s satire diminishes both the value of the Southern slavery plantation system as well as that of the oppression of ethnic minorities. Hence, as the previous analysis shows, Reed’s early satire deals with racist and anti-multicultural characters by revealing their vices and objectionable qualities.

5.2 Contrast-based Irony: Its Definition and Targets

There is no agreement among critics about what irony is, and many would hold to the romantic claim ... that its very spirit and value are violated by the effort to be clear about it.

(Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* ix)

“Only that which has no history can be defined” (Nietzsche). For this and other reasons the concept of irony is vague, unstable and multiform. The word “irony” does not now mean only what it meant in earlier centuries, it does not mean in one country all it may mean in another, nor in the street what it may mean in the study, nor to one scholar what it may mean to another.

(Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* 7)

In his *Introduction to Satire*, Feinberg defines two types of ironies—dramatic and verbal—the former of which I would like to use as a conceptual basis for my definition of contrast-based irony. Feinberg defines dramatic irony as the opposite of what is expected and illustrates this understanding by providing several ironic episodes:

Clisthenes introduced the punishment of ‘ostracism,’ which banished offenders from their native land; shortly afterwards Clisthenes was ostracized. Eutropius persuaded the Emperor to abolish the safety of ‘sanctuary’; later, having fled to a church to escape punishment, he was returned to the Emperor and executed. The man who invented the guillotine was executed on it. The man who built the Bastille was imprisoned in it. (158)

It is possible to understand Feinberg's description of irony as the contrast between the conscious action of a character and the rather unexpected result which it later produces. However, I would like to emphasise here the contrast more than the unexpected result, as, by doing so, Feinberg's understanding of irony would be more in line with the general (and slightly more up-to-date) understanding of irony as "the mode of the unsaid, the unheard, the unseen" (Hutcheon 9) – in other words, as a mode of communication which contrasts one source of information with another in order to arrive at an unexpected destination. Or as Booth suggests, irony "occurs whenever an author deliberately asks us to compare what two or more characters say of each other, or what a character says now with what he says or does later" (63). Booth specifies this notion even further by introducing so-called ironic portraits where "the reconstruction of messages or content seems to be for the sake of revising and completing a picture of the speaker or of an action in which he is involved" (137). This is a useful notion, for, as the following interpretations show, it drives much of Reed's irony targeted at oppressive characters that oppose multiculturalism.

5.2.1 Contrast-based Irony in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*

Examples of contrast-based irony in the novel stem from the comparison of what oppressed characters believe themselves to be doing and what they actually are doing. Such is the case of many African Americans who believe themselves to be revolutionaries sabotaging the regime while they are in fact supporting it. The character of Elijah Raven demonstrates this behaviour succinctly when he tells Bukka about his plan to bring the regime down with recycled waste:

'Little does the Joo know that I'm secretly collecting milk bottles and rags as I prepare for 'Git It On' right under my man's nose. See, I'm a poet down here in this artistic community, going around saying mothafuka in public by night, but by day I'm stacking milk bottles in the closet instead of taking them back to the store for the two cents deposit. That's what you might call outmanoeuvring the whitey.'

'There's no two-cent deposit on milk bottles these days, and they're disposable,' I said. (98)

Readers can recognize the episode as ironic, as there is no way that Raven's plan to overthrow the regime by collecting milk bottles will ever work (as even the naïve Bukka is capable of pointing out). Since all of Raven's previous efforts have been in vain, the reader experiences *schadenfreude* at his expense and perceives his futile actions as ironic. A similar logic can also be applied to Raven's conviction of being a rebel when he is in fact trapped in a cycle of meaningless action which

does not threaten the regime at all. Hence, it is the contrast between what Raven believes and what he actually does that drives the irony behind the episode.

Another episode shows Raven as an employee of the dictator while still believing himself to be a rebel. He justifies his employment with yet another revolutionary plan: "You see, I drive the truck for SAM: Doing a little moonlightin'. Little does he know that I'm collecting box tops from his cereal right under his nose so that when the revolution comes we can pull a Quaker Oats gambit on the kats" (146). As in the previous example, irony is generated by the contrast of intention and action, as no matter how many box tops Raven collects, he is in no way "outmanoeuvring the whitey." Episodes like these satirize African Americans who proclaim themselves to be revolutionary but are only so in their minds whilst their actions do not harm the regime. In spite of his revolutionary intentions, Raven is as much of a supporter of the regime as Bukka is, which is indeed ironic.

In a similar fashion, Reed also lampoons supposedly revolutionary and pro-African American media, which claim to fight for the rights of African Americans. Yet, as in the case of Elijah Raven, their actions fail to be significant. For example, later in the novel, Bukka is asked to appear on a "controversial" show (106) to discuss "how the migration of the eastern brown pelican affects the civil rights movement" (106). This ludicrous topic is, of course, as "controversial" as Raven's collecting of box tops and as ineffective with respect to promoting change. Again the contrast of intention and action enables the reader to recognise the show as highly ironic. In the same spirit, Bukka is also invited to a panel discussion organized by:

Poison Dart magazine, the magazine of black liberation. We are having a symposium on the role of the black writer in contemporary society. We shall also be discussing whether the brothers should part their hair on the side or part it down the middle. These are grave issues and you as a friend of the liberation movement shouldn't want to miss the discussion. (107)

It is ironic that a revolutionary magazine would seek to liberate African Americans by discussing such trivial topics. Since hair parting is on par with pelican migration as far as revolutionary relevance is concerned, both media outlets can hardly be considered efficient or even helpful with respect to promoting racial equality in a multicultural society. Hence, irony based on the contrast of intention and action is used to satirize characters which do not improve the conditions of African Americans even though they claim to do so.

Even Bukka is satirized for the same reason: once he becomes the dictator he is only interested in perpetuating the status quo (and thus improving his own position) and not the situation of the regime's minorities. Since he is ultimately overthrown and crucified by the very regime which he so enthusiastically supports, all

the previous instances in which he has promoted the regime can be read as ironic. A fitting example is his admission that, save for his work, which by definition maintains the regime, his only other activity is the close-reading and contemplation of the regime's credo. As he himself states: "[I]n my spare time I go over rather obscure passages in the Nazarene Manual and make red pencil marks in the margins of the pages. Sometimes I meditate over these issues on long walks" (72). The fact that Bukka does so in his free time and with such intensity—as the red pencil and long walks suggest—reveals that he is a naïve simpleton—for the remaining African American characters can clearly recognize that they are oppressed by the regime (which Reed shows by having them live in ghettos and do third-rate work). They know that their impoverished existence is due to the regime's existence and are mostly hostile to it. Bukka is similarly impoverished yet he cherishes the official documents of the regime, which shows how much he values its existence. A similar contrast is also involved in other episodes – for example, in Bukka's calling the police on children who play too loud and thus disturb the peace of the regime, or in his giving a lecture to cinema goers on their improper behaviour when they fail to applaud the obese dictator attired in shorts. All of these examples stem from the contrast of intention (Bukka's support of the regime) and action (the regime's crucifixion of Bukka) and thus can be read as ironic.

In summary, contrast-based irony in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* enables the readers to perceive an objectionable quality in a character (be it naivety or stupidity) as a satirical punishment for a lack of multicultural effort. Interestingly, readers are allowed to deduce why certain characters are disreputable but are not told so directly by any of the other characters nor by the narrator. In comparison with Reed's examples of argument-based satire, they are thus given less instruction to detect racism as such and more freedom to do so on their own. Nonetheless, let us now continue with the examination of contrast-based irony, which remains a significant feature of Reed's novels till the late 1980s.

5.2.2 Contrast-based Irony in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*

The mediator of contrast-based irony in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is the character of Chief Showcase, who is the last living Native American in the fictional universe of the novel and hence a character very motivated to seek revenge. Yet, before such an opportunity arises, much of the novel's irony is embodied by Showcase. Because of his supposedly endangered position, Showcase is underestimated by all the oppressive characters. Nevertheless, the fact that his character is not openly hostile to Drag Gibson allows Reed to position Showcase well for a number of ironic situations. Showcase openly acknowledges his supposed inferiority while in secret he plots against those who have decimated Native Americans,

which in the novel are Drag Gibson and officers of the U. S. Army (both of which have already been satirised by means of the portrayal of non-standard sexuality).

An illustrative example of irony which examines Showcase's situation is the following speech which he delivers while having intercourse with Drag Gibson's wife: "The white man has the brain of Aristotle, the body of Michelangelo's David and the shining spirit of the Prime-mover, how would it look for a lowly savage and wretch such as me meddling in his noble affairs?" (109). While the speech projects an air of humility, its sincerity is nullified by the accompanying bodily activity. In fact, having intercourse with the wife of his superior can very well be understood as an example of "meddling" and thus Showcase himself provides the necessary crosslight. This episode thus safely rests on the contrast between the said and done.

Yet, Showcases' meddling in the affairs of the white man does not stop there. Throughout the remainder of the book, he mercilessly pits the Army officers against Gibson (and Gibson against the Army officers) in an attempt to secure a better position for himself. Because of a HooDoo spell that Loop puts on Drag, everyone expects him to die, which pleases the Army officers as they would be able to take over his lands. However, when Drag miraculously recovers, Showcase intentionally misinforms the officers by selling the following message: "Drag is about to tip away. The whole thing belongs to you baby. Come on in your highness" (143). At virtually the same time, Showcase secures Drag's favour with flattery along the lines of "you are in charge, the top dog and the one who is really number 1" (138). There are numerous other examples of such successful manipulation, these revealing the gullibility of both Drag and the officers, neither party seeing through Showcase's tricks. Bearing this in mind, one needs to understand Showcases statement that "the white man is smarter than God" as a prime example of irony and "meddling" in which the character at the bottom of the social hierarchy outsmarts those at the top and thus, at least symbolically, bests them. Similar examples of irony in which a character at the bottom outsmarts those at the top can be found in *Flight to Canada*, where this pattern is examined on the dynamics between a slave, Uncle Robin, and his master, Arthur Swille. Yet, because of the chronological sequencing chosen for this book, I shall discuss them only after Reed's third and fourth novels.

5.2.3 *Mumbo Jumbo* in Context

Much like Reed's first two novels, the plot of *Mumbo Jumbo*—on the most superficial level—examines the struggle between characters who can interpret the world fluidly from multiple perspectives and those who cannot do so and instead demand strict and normative adherence to Western perceptions of the world and Western values.

As in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* and *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, Reed counters the latter approach by proposing that one's understanding of the world does not necessarily have to be based on Christianity, but can be modelled on other non-exclusive interpretations proposed by different minorities. PaPa LaBas, the protagonist of the novel, who can be perceived as the evolution of Loop Garoo from *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* with even more HooDoo powers,³⁶ defines and proposes his adherence to such an open paradigm with the following words:

I which bountifully permits 1000s of spirits, as many as the imagination can hold. Infinite Spirits and Gods. So many that it would take a book larger than the Koran and the Bible, the Tibetan Book of the Dead and all of the holy books of the world to list, and still room would have to be made for more. (35)

Even though Loop Garoo is motivated by a similar paradigm, he still uses HooDoo (which Reed equates with such conceptual fluidity) to a relatively small extent. On the other hand, HooDoo is central to *Mumbo Jumbo* as it drives its plot in the form of a HooDoo epidemic, called Jes Grew, which the novel's monocultural characters attempt to suppress and the multicultural characters try to be contaminated by. Yet since the monocultural characters wish to quell the epidemic in order to maintain Western hegemony, they become the targets of Reed's satire, which employs contrast-based irony to ridicule their attempts to do so.

Hence, *Mumbo Jumbo* continues with the anti-hegemonic tendencies charted in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* and *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. Interestingly enough, Reed's artistic aim for *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, which he reveals in an interview with O'Brien, can be read as a blueprint for *Mumbo Jumbo*:

I think the people we want to aim our questioning toward are those who supply the nation with its mind, tutor its mind, develop and cultivate its mind, and these are the people involved in culture. They are responsible for the national mind and they've done a very bad thing with their propaganda and racism. Think of all the vehemence and nasty remarks they aimed at Black Studies programs, somebody like William Buckley, that Christian fanatic, saying that Bach is worth more than all the Black Studies programs in the world. He sees the conflict as being between the barbarians and the Christians. And, you know, I'm glad I'm on the side of the barbarians. So this is what we want: to sabotage history. (Dick and Singh 37)

36 Ludwig notes that in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, "Voodoo is mainly a counterforce of general disorder. Later Loop Garoo Kid, the black cowboy in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, already uses conjuring as a systematic device to fight his enemies. And finally, in Reed's third novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, Voodoo loses its ring of antagonism, turning into a positive approach of polytheism" ("The Sentimental Heathen" 149). The character of PaPa LaBas is the beneficiary of this change in the understanding of HooDoo and thus the possessor of an even more appreciated version of HooDoo than Loop Garoo.

Jes Grew, coupled with other HooDoo forces, aims to pursue precisely such an end in *Mumbo Jumbo*. This has been noted by literary critics who correctly identified his allegiance with multicultural resistance. For example, Slapppy says that *Mumbo Jumbo* is “exposing the fallacies and limitations of the Western monotheistic tradition” (*Critical Response* 41). Similarly, Kameelah Martin argues that in *Mumbo Jumbo* Reed “seeks to dismantle the Western hegemonic rule over literary production by subverting language, mythology, and religion, thereby demonstrating that literature produced according to Western standards is not necessarily superior to that allied with other cultures” (108).³⁷ Finally, Dickson-Carr points out that in the novel, “Reed aims his barbs at the sacred figures and ideas of Western cultures not merely for the sake of the humorous, nihilistic destruction of each ideology, but instead to force the reader to question their hegemony” (*African American Satire* 153). Hence, much as in his first two novels, Reed again draws on two elements to help him complete his sabotaging project: everyday life and HooDoo. Let us now examine both forces in the forms which they take in *Mumbo Jumbo*.

In his previous novels, everyday life helps Reed to challenge Western hegemony because, for him, it serves as a source of art. Hypothetically, it could also work as a source of art for the African American characters of *Mumbo Jumbo* were they not influenced by Western values, which claim that their art is not as valid as art produced by whites. Since the novel is set in the early 1920s this dubious claim is not contested but taken for granted and accepted as the social norm. Interestingly enough, Reed’s decision to locate the novel in the 1920s is still in accordance with the claim that everyday life inspires him. Despite admitting that the novel partly comments on the “Nixon administration” (Dick and Singh 17), the spatial setting of the 1920s is Reed’s attempt to find a time period which is even more telling of the issues of the 1970s than the 1970s. Reed explains in an interview with O’Brien that this decision was motivated by his wish to “transcend some particular political event and make a statement about American civilization as a whole,” (17). He then goes on to suggest that both decades in fact share some distinctive features:

I didn’t want to use the King Lear model because that’s someone else’s experience. I didn’t want to invoke Antigone as the French did to talk about Hitler. I want to go into the mysteries of the American civilization. The American civilization has finally got its rhythm; looking into the past you can see rhythms of this civilization. So I stepped back to an age that reminds me of the one I’m writing in. I stepped back to the twenties. Instead of Nixon I invoked Harding. The parallels between the two are remarkable. (Dick and Singh 17)

37 One can note how much Martin’s summary of Reed’s intentions reflects the spirit of Loop Garoo’s “tailor made micro-HooDoo mass to end 2000 years of bad news” (*Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* 63).

Hence, Reed's experience of everyday life in the 1970s inspired him to create a novel which, in a round-about way, challenges not only the hegemonic values of the 1970s but also those of the 1920s.

There are numerous characters in *Mumbo Jumbo* who claim that only Western culture (understand: white) is a proper source of art and values and that only white art is valuable, inspired by both decades. Reed gleefully counters these views by showing how contemporary Western culture is indebted not only to Greece but also to Egypt for some of its foundational notions.³⁸ Reed in fact extends his critique even to those characters who seem to be helpful to African Americans. Thus, the novel includes a prominent critique of a white beneficiary Carl Van Vechten, who significantly supported the members of the Harlem Renaissance. Reed finds such support as questionable as that of Harriet Beecher Stowe for the abolitionist movement. *Mumbo Jumbo* in fact argues that Vechten's support was restrictive because his patronage influenced the artistic production of the movement's members. White patronage thus stands in direct opposition to art arising from everyday African American life, which Reed (in its best examples) connects with fluidity and open society. According to Dickson-Carr, "Reed has expressed his objection to such patronage, for not only has it quelled progressive political movements, it has also neutralized some of the best work in African American culture and literature" (155). Dickson-Carr convincingly argues that "White patronage ... acts as a sign for a long-standing conspiracy against people of color disguised in (often false) benevolence" (155). At this point, the novel returns to Reed's constant companion, HooDoo, which Reed mingles with everyday life so that both can empower the African American characters of the novel.

In the novel, HooDoo is conveyed by the mystical epidemic called Jes Grew. In a 1973 interview with Gaga, Reed observes that the "term originates from a remark by James Weldon Johnson in this anthology on Negro poetry in which he described some of the early ragtime songs as having sprung up without having any antecedent" (Dick and Singh 55). Interestingly enough, Mvuyekure notes that Jes Grew "functions as a synecdoche for all the African cultures that have survived the Middle Passage, slavery, colonialism, and imperialism" (*Dark Heathenism* 118) while Dickson-Carr says that "Jes Grew, the latest manifestation of Neo-HooDooism and the point of conflict in the novel, is a metaphor for multiculturalism" (211). Since these themes are central to Reed's first two novels, both critics emphasise the strong thematic connections that tie one novel to the other. Nonetheless, there is progress, since HooDoo in *Mumbo Jumbo* is also personified by PaPa LaBas, who is a more mature practitioner than Loop Garoo. Mvuyekure describes him as a "HooDoo detective and HooDoo therapist" who is "based on

38 Or as Darryl Dickson-Carr says, "The novel offers proof that most forms of Western thought, when they have not been derogatory toward the black diaspora, derived their frameworks from non-Western cultures, religions, and philosophies" (*African American Satire* 154).

the figure of Legba (Fon) or Esu-Elegbara (Yoruba), the Western Voodoo *loa* of the crossroads and interpretation” (210). The novel then details how Reed stacks these representatives of Hoodoo against the servants of the status quo. But since this aspect of *Mumbo Jumbo* is already well described in the literature, let us now turn our attention to the examination of satire in the novel.

5.2.4 Contrast-based Irony in *Mumbo Jumbo*

With the publication of *Mumbo Jumbo* in 1972, Reed chose a new target for his literary satire. Instead of attacking powerful individuals, his novels start to describe the ongoing struggles between his multi-ethnic characters and organisations that often represent abstract notions. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, the oppressive organisation is represented by a society of knights, which by extension is supposed to represent Western (medieval values) with Christianity at their core. In the novel, these knights actively oppose a mystical epidemic that enables ethnic minorities to achieve happiness through embracing their ethnicity. Much like the previous novel, *Mumbo Jumbo* is therefore about the positive emphasis placed on ethnicity. To this goal, the second story line describes the attempts of a group of thieves who break into the largest museums to repatriate the art produced by their ancestors. Like the previous novels, *Mumbo Jumbo* is considered satiric. Lorenzo Thomas, an American poet and a scholar of African American literature, says that the novel satirises a number of historical figures (38), while Martin claims that it is Reed’s “most sustained, illuminative satire” (“*The Free-Lance Pallbearers Confronts The Terrible Threes*” 37). This is in accordance with Friedman’s review of the novel, which calls it “a satire on the unfinished race between the races in America and throughout history” (35). Hence, even in his third novel, Reed uses satire to question those who suppress the value of ethnicity and demote everything but whiteness.

Consequently, satire in *Mumbo Jumbo* attacks those who cannot accept a fluid multiplicity of perspectives but instead demand strict adherence to a Western (medieval) perception of the world. By way of illustration, Reed proposes that one’s understanding of the world does not necessarily have to be based on Christianity, but can be modelled on other non-exclusive interpretations proposed by different ethnics. Although such a paradigm motivates the actions of Loop Garoo, *Mumbo Jumbo* makes this idea central to the novel’s plot, as it incorporates a mystical epidemic which enables those affected to approach life directly from the above quoted perspective. The novel proposes that being afflicted with this epidemic quenches “lusting after relevance” (4), which the dominant mode of understanding the world of the 1970s does not allow. Naturally, the novel’s characters who represent the opposing (restricted) paradigm find the epidemic “the end of Civilization As We Know It” (4) and attempt to stop it. Hence, they become the target

of Reed's satire, which employs contrast-based irony to ridicule their attempts to do so as the following examples show.

The chief monocultural characters in the novel are embodied by the head of a Christian knight order, Hinckle Von Vompton, and his henchman, Hubert "Safecracker" Gould. Satirised African Americans are represented by Woodrow Wilson Jefferson, who, like his predecessors in the already discussed novels, is naïve enough to help both men to suppress the epidemic. Frustrated with the pandemic, Vompton and Gould face the danger of becoming unimportant in the new world order. Since their initial attempts to stop it fail, they devise a plan to rob the followers of the epidemic of its enlivening qualities. They first intend to start a magazine which would publish content interesting to the affected multicultural characters. Second, once the readership is established, they plan to engage a persuasive speaker to write a piece that would turn the readers against the epidemic. They describe the plan in the following way:

What we will do is begin a magazine that will attract its followers, featuring the kind of milieu it surrounds itself with. Jazz reviewers, cabarets, pornography, social issues, anti-Prohibition, placed between acres of flappers' tits. Here we will feature the Talking Android who will tell the J. G. C.s that Jes Grew is not ready and owes a large debt to Irish Theatre. (69)

The success of the plan thus depends on meeting these two conditions. Herein lies the irony of *Mumbo Jumbo*, for Vompton and Gould hire Jefferson Woodrow Wilson, the intellectual equal of Bukka Doopeyduk from *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, to achieve both goals. By doing so, they limit their chances of success to zero, as Wilson's character exhibits features that are antithetical to the electrifying properties of Jes Grew. In fact, Jefferson is crafted to be perhaps the most boring of all Reed's characters and thus he is utterly incapable of attracting the followers of Jes Grew.

A case in point is Jefferson's wish to start working for the magazine because he admires Marx and Engels and believes that both men work for the magazine too. Two points are worth noting here and both of them use contrast to satirise Jefferson: first, Jefferson is shown to be a completely unsuitable candidate for the position of a man whose intelligence is supposed to manipulate a demanding audience, as he is not even aware that both Marx and Engels are already long dead. Yet, he is eventually hired, which satirises not only him but also Vompton and Gould. Second, Jefferson's inadequacy is emphasised by his fondness for Marx and Engels, as he is supposed to appeal to an ethnic audience fond of jazz and dance halls. Reed thus achieves a starkly incongruous contrast by pairing heavy German philosophers with jazz culture.

Nonetheless, none of this bothers Jefferson, who is not discouraged even though he is told that Marx and Engels cannot be found on the premises of the

magazine – he is “an ambitious man. If he wasn’t going to find these men here, he was going to return to the room he rents above Frimbo’s Funeral Home and look them up in the phone book” (75). The novel is clear in presenting Jefferson as the next naïve African American man (after Bukka Doopeyduk) awaiting an opportunity to be exploited, which is an opportunity that Vompton and Gould do not miss (which Reed turns into yet another occasion to lampoon them). After all, they are the men who hire him, even though his sole qualification is having read “all the 487 articles written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels” which he knows “by heart” (76). The irony at play stems from the contrast between what both men need and what Jefferson can offer. Instead of being capable of writing about potentially appealing topics such as jazz, cabarets, and women, Jefferson is enamoured by Marx and Engels:

He liked the style. Objective, scientific, the use of the collective We, Our. Therefore there were no illusions and unforeseen events like these country folks in Re-mote Mississippi, believing in haints and things; and spirits and 2-headed men; mermaids and witches. He would abandon this darkness for the clearing. (29)

Ironically, had Jefferson commented on the folklore of Mississippi, he might have been the perfect candidate for the position. Instead, he chooses to ponder “Economics, integration, separation ... capitalism” (78). Similarly ironic is Vompton’s expectation that Jefferson could stop writing about “Marxist rhetoric” and instead make “a transition ... to the Jazz prose we want” (100). However, in comparison with *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, *Mumbo Jumbo* is capable of using the character of a naïve African American man not only for in-group but also for out-group satire.

Further irony ensues when Vompton and Gould have no other option than to use Jefferson as the influential speaker, even despite his complete unsuitability and previous failure. Yet, Jefferson, coming from rural Mississippi, is “too black” and thus needs to be white-faced to gain credibility as Vompton realizes upon examining “the skin-lightener ads in a Race newspaper he had bought for leads on Talking Android candidates” (140). However, due to unexpected circumstances, Jefferson leaves the novel and can no longer play the part of the influential speaker. Consequently, Vompton decides to use the only other man available, Gould, a white American like himself who is, however, too white to be appealing to the chosen audience. And thus Gould is blackfaced. Vompton’s ironic chase for the appropriate mixture of blackness and whiteness seems to be at an end as Gould is introduced to an influential audience with the following words:

Mr Von Vompton has brought with him a man he considers 1 of the most exciting young poets to come on the scene, a man who is the dominant figure in Negro let-

ters today, a man who like no 1 else captures the complexity of Negro thought ... Mr Hubert "Safecracker" Gould!!! (157)

Reed thoroughly satirises both Vompton and Gould by offering a number of contrasts. Not only is Gould not a young poet simply by virtue of not being young any more, he cannot be considered "the dominant" voice of African American literature either, as he is not African American at all. Similarly, the claim that Gould captures "the complexity of Negro thought" is invalid since Gould mentions elsewhere that his knowledge of African Americans is based on his visits to Harlem where he has been "3 maybe 4 times" (141).³⁹ Consequently, when he is later heralded as "the only Negro poet with any sense" (191), the readers have been provided with enough information to decode such an utterance as ironic. As these examples illustrate contrast-based irony in *Mumbo Jumbo* sufficiently, let us proceed to the exploration of contrast-based irony in Reed's fourth novel.

5.2.5 *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* in Context

Reed's fourth novel, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974), continues with the project of examining how ancient African spiritual practices (i.e., Hoodoo) enable African Americans to face the challenges of 1970s America. Hence, there is quite a significant overlap with the aims of *Mumbo Jumbo*. However, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* shares with the previous novel not only similarities relating to theme and the use of multiple intertexts⁴⁰ but also those concerning genre and character, for it includes PaPa LaBas, who returns "to investigate the murder of Ed Yellings, an Osiris-type Hoodoo therapist who is murdered because he was trying to get rid of Louisiana Red, a neo-slave mentality that leads African Americans to kill and hold one another down like crabs in a barrel" ("American Neo-Hoodooism" 212). Similarly, much like *Mumbo Jumbo*, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* also include a mystical epidemic, called Louisiana Red, which can be understood as the opposite of Jes Grew and which Mvuyekure describes as "a hindrance to decolo-

39 This is not to say that Gould disparages the possibility that African Americans could produce great art. On the contrary, he is shown to steal some of it being sure that "some publisher will be eager to accept such a manuscript; some of it is quite good. I'll dash off an introduction and with the royalties why ... why ... I'll be able to buy a summer house in the Berkeley hills" (141). However, his willingness to take advantage of African American culture does not yet make him an expert on the culture – which thus renders the introduction as thoroughly ironic.

40 Mvuyekure suggests that "The signifyin(g) revisions (parodic intertexts) include Cab Calloway's song 'Minnie the Moocher' ..., Egyptian Antigone, Sophocles's *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the *Amos 'n' Andy Show*, *The Picayune Creole Cook Book*, the Congolese history in the 1960s, the detective story, and Marie Laveau and Doc John of nineteenth-century New Orleans" ("American Neo-Hoodooism" 212).

nization, multiethnicity, and multiculturalism” (*Dark Heathenism* 136). Because of its reversed direction, Louisiana Red does not uplift minorities, instead it forces them to harm each other. This is also the reason why the murdered Ed Yellings tried to suppress it with Hoodoo.⁴¹

However, unlike *Mumbo Jumbo*, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* is not primarily interested in the relationship between different cultures and aesthetics or in the question of who is indebted to whom. Instead, Reed turns his analytical gaze on the different types of relationships that African Americans have with each other. Hence, this novel not only shows how Western hegemony is harmful to African Americans, but also how African Americans can very often be harmful to one another because of Western hegemony. The novel demonstrates this by ultimately revealing that Ed Yellings was murdered by Minnie, his own daughter, who was manipulated by white characters. In this way, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* can be understood as a logical development of the themes examined in *Mumbo Jumbo* and on this matter Mvuyekure even describes it as “a sequel” (*Dark Heathenism* 128).

The Last Days of Louisiana Red also continues Reed’s project of improving the public image of Hoodoo, as Ed Yellings was creating a cure that would help African Americans (and other minorities) to alleviate the stress of living in a racist society. Hoodoo thus continues to be presented as a positive force from whose adoption all minorities (and even the dominant society) could benefit. Indeed, the novel suggests as much by showing that Hoodoo can be used not only by a selected few (as is the case in *Mumbo Jumbo*) but also, in fact, by almost anyone who is interested in sharing its aims. The novel thus includes a vast network of Hoodoo “Workers” who are in the “Business” of spreading the beneficial influence of Hoodoo. Ludwig rightly notes that:

These Hoodoo doctors follow their own secret standards of excellence, illustrating the point that one cannot forever remain subversive and antagonistic, like their red-hot opponents, the fretting “Moochers.” ... This new notion of “conjuring” even borders on Benjamin Franklin-like ideas of an American work ethic. Note, however, that Reed’s workers are not individual egoists who want to be better than others. Their “business” is based on an ethics of respect and cooperation. Their individualism is in the service of their society. (“The Sentimental Heathen” 150)

In direct opposition to such ethical excellence is the group of Moochers (whose leader is revealed to have been responsible for the death of Ed Yellings), whom McGee describes as “a mockery of sixties-style radical groups like the Black Pan-

41 Interestingly enough, Mvuyekure compares Yellings to Fanon, who attempted to achieve similar means yet in a different culture: “In a sense, Ed Yellings functions as a Hoodoo therapist, not unlike Frantz Fanon in Algeria, who strives to redress the psychological effects of slavery and colonization as represented by Louisiana Red” (“American Neo-Hoodooism” 212).

thers or the Weathermen” and “political opportunists of every sort” (47). This struggle between the Workers and the Moochers, and the positive and despondent outlooks on life which they represent, is then entered by PaPa LaBas, who is called in to solve the murder of Ed Yellings and continue to oversee the operation of the Workers. However, since the Moochers are directly responsible for the murder, let us now examine how Reed targets their representatives in the novel.

Reed’s fourth novel continues his multicultural aesthetic, this targeting organisations that he considers dangerous to African Americans. *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* accuses African American women of betraying their men. The novel tells the story of a group of African Americans who rediscover an old Hoodoo formula that could cure people of all their addictions. Even though all races would benefit from the dissemination of the cure, it is discovered by an African American male who intends to use it primarily for the betterment of other African Americans. However, the unexpected death of the formula’s founder (at the hands of an African American female) ends his plans. For the first time in Reed’s oeuvre, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* associates its ominous organisation mostly with women who are behind the death of the founder and who further oppose the spread of the Hoodoo treatment. Hence, supporters of the said organisation become the targets of satire in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* which also heavily features irony. In her review of the novel, Barbara Smith suggests that “*The Last Days of Louisiana Red* might serve as a textbook on irony” and that Reed’s best satiric method is “the interweaving of fantastic verbal absurdities with the familiar absurdities of everyday life” (83).

5.2.6 Contrast-based Irony in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*

Reed fashions the antagonists of the novel by creating a group of African American characters called Moochers who exert psychological stress on the other non-moocher characters and spread messages of African American dependency on white Americans. As one of the opposing characters suggests: “They hate industry” (40). The key message of the Moochers’ movement is that “Colored folks ain’t cut out for no bizness” (46). They further claim that all thinking is “white folks’ matters” (58) and thus advocate a complete surrender to the white status quo. Consequently, the Moochers (both their female leaders and male members) are satirised for their defeatist attitude from the very start of the novel, where they are introduced in the following fashion:

Moochers are a special order of parasite, not even a beneficial parasite but one that takes—takes energy, takes supplies. Moochers write you letters saying reply at once or at your earliest convenience, we are in a hurry, may I hear from you soon, or

please get right back to me—promptly. Moochers threaten to jump out of the window if you don't love them. (16-7)

Since the defining feature of Moochers is their addiction to other people's attention, many of their utterances which claim self-dependency—which not one member of the Moochers possesses—can be interpreted as ironic. For example, there are several examples in which Moochers portray themselves as not interested in the attention of others. A Mocher in the novel says: "That's o.k. I'll go on a hunger strike. Don't mind me, I'll just lie here in the street; roll a truck over me if you wish" (25). Yet, similar claims are revealed as ironic once cross-checked with the information that Moochers cannot provide for themselves and depend for their survival on stealing or robbing from others. This much is evident from the quotation: while it pretends to reflect zero interest in the attention of others ("That's o.k ... Don't mind me"), it chooses a course of action which is guaranteed to attract the attention of all the drivers and passers-by present ("I'll just lie here in the street; roll a truck over me if you wish"). Such proclamations are ironic because of the inherent contrast between the said and the intended.

The attempts of Moochers to be perceived as people of intellect are similarly ludicrous. This is particularly the case of Kingfish and Brown, the two most representative members of the Moochers, to whom Reed ascribes many ingenious dialogues. For example, once Brown hears a particularly farfetched plan devised by Kingfish, he proceeds to praise Kingfish's cognitive skills: "Why, Kingfish, you is a genius. You and me is the only genius to emerge from the 1950s" (47). Yet, nearly all of the novel's descriptions of the characters prove otherwise. A case in point is the following failed attempt at explaining what Mocherism is about, which Kingfish and Amos produce upon the request of another character:

Kingfish: We is in the Moochers. Minnie's Moochers.

Amos: That's wonderful. What are some of your programs?

Kingfish: Well, last week we ...

Andy: We are planning ...

Kingfish: Well, next Thursday, there's suppose to be a ...

Andy: If it don't happen Saturday night (120-1)

At the core of the many different definitions of genius is knowledge, either specialised or spanning several fields. Yet, neither Mocher manifests either type of knowledge. Instead, the quote reveals them to be ignorant even of the aim of their movement. This is significant (and ironic at the same time) since the characters are nothing more than Moochers and if they cannot define Mocherism one wonders what they can do. Instead of providing at least a working definition of Mocherism, both characters glide on the surface of things by only repeating the

name of their movement. A simple description of key values is beyond them, as is remembering what they did or plan to do. Their inability to pinpoint at least some defining characteristics of their lives hardly testifies to their intellectual genius, despite their belief in it.

This ironic reading of both characters is further emphasised when Kingfish and Brown devise a number of apparently brilliant plans only to see them fail. The most representative of these cases is their attempt to pass off as members of the Hare Krishna movement in order to justify their mooching as an ethically correct part of their religion. The plan fails because even though they shave their heads and wear saffron robes, the onlookers recognise the fake nature of the act as Kingfish keeps wearing a derby hat and Brown keeps on smoking his cigarette (120). While the onlookers recognise that such behaviour is in stark contrast with the behaviour of Hare Krishna members, neither of the comen is cognisant of the incongruence of such details. Consequently, the scene ends up a failure:

Kingfish: Karmels! Karmels!

(A crowd has gathered and is laughing at them)

Andy: (whispers) Fish, what is these peoples laughing at us for? Don't they know that this is them Indian fellers' religion? Ain't they got no respect?

Kingfish: They's got respect, Bro. Andy, but they shows it through beatitudes.

Andy: What?

Kingfish: Look, they ain't laughing at you, dummy, they's blissful; they delighted. There are many cases of people that gets moved away by saying Karmels; they starts to laugh and can't stop. They's happy. (117)

The irony is confirmed by their complete misreading of the situation, as neither of them has the intellectual capacity to recognise that a derby hat and a lit cigarette are incompatible with Hinduism. Similarly ironic is Kingfish's attempt to console Brown with an analysis of the situation that could not be further from the described fictional reality. His misunderstanding of the concept of beatitudes and his inability to explain it further confirm his low intellect. Yet, the climax of the passage is his mistaken attribution of the audience's amusement to religious fervour which he believes himself to be the source of. Irony thus again stems from the clash of contrasting ideas: those of the Moochers and those of the audience. The scene ends with Kingfish and Browns' beating of an onlooker, which may be read as their attempt to experience the Christian concept of beatitudes. Since this only further violates the ethical code of the Hare Krishna sect, it is safe to say that, indeed, neither Kingfish nor Brown is a genius and that even Reed's fourth novel uses in-group irony to target African Americans who support the white status quo.

5.2.7 Contrast-based Irony in *Flight to Canada*

Irony in *Flight to Canada* is used to attack powerful white men. The embodiment of such a class of people is the character of Arthur Swille, a Southern multi-billionaire who is respected and feared by both parties of the Civil War for his money and international influence. Since *Flight to Canada* is set in the early 1860s, the abolition of slavery is naturally one of the key themes of the novel, and the character of Swille is satirised for being an avid pro-slavery supporter and for his opinion that, “The slaves like it here” (37). Nonetheless, the narrator shows that this indeed is not the case, as it chronicles the journeys of a selected few of escaped slaves on their way to freedom. Also, even those African Americans who remain on Swille’s plantation as slaves do not seem to be particularly enthusiastic about their situation and, as will be shown, actively seek ways of changing their status.

Swille is not a typical slave master, as much of his estate is already run by his African American valet, Uncle Robin. While Swille devotes his time to satiating his addiction to cocaine and sadism, Uncle Robin “travels all over the South in an airplane, buying supplies for the estate” and has “become quite a bargainer and knows all about all of the sales” (35). This arrangement seems to be much appreciated by Swille, who, in a dialogue with Uncle Robin, confides: “I don’t know what I’d do without you ... Robin, you make a man feel like ... well, like a God” (35). This extract introduces an interesting contradiction: the Christian God is commonly believed to be omnipotent. Yet, when it comes to Swille, Uncle Robin is the powerful character while Swille is simply dependent on him. In short, Swille is presented as a ridiculous and spoilt individual whose estate is run by his African American servant.

Interestingly enough, Swille does not seem to mind his dependency on robin as he believes himself to have significant skills elsewhere. This particular belief lays the foundation for irony. Swille voices it in a conversation on finance with Abraham Lincoln, where he says that:

Of course, I still buy the ... well, the help. Just got back from Ryan’s Mart in Charleston with a boy named Pompey. Does the work of ten niggers. I got him working in the house here. He doesn’t say much but is really fast. The boy can serve dinner before it’s cooked, beats himself getting up in the morning so that when he goes to the bathroom to shave he has to push his shadow out of the way, and zips about the house like a toy train. I’m really proud of this bargain. Why on his days off he stands outside of the door, protecting me, like a piece of wood. He can stand there for hours without even blinking an eye. Says he would die if something happens to me. Isn’t that right, Uncle Robin? Though he’s asp-tongued and speaks in his nasal tone, Pompey is a saint ... They don’t make them like that anymore, Mr. Lincoln. I have a shrewd eye for good property, don’t you think, Abe?” (35)

This conversation takes place early on in the novel and at that time readers have no information that would contradict Swille's assessment of his new house slave. Such information is only presented in the last chapters of the novel, which discuss the consequences of Swille's death and which are therefore vital for recognising the irony at play. Swille's demise is surprising not only because it is unexpected, but also because of the peculiar circumstances that precede it. At first, Swille is approached by his usually submissive wife, who threatens to take his life with a gun. The source of her mysterious courage lies in a vision of her dead son, who visited her from the netherworlds, and informed her of how Swille was involved in his demise. Enraged, Ms. Swille finds a gun and threatens his life. Swille, however, manages to pacify her and persuade her not to shoot him. Yet, at the same time, an apparition of his dead sister enters the room and starts talking about their incestuous relationship (135–36). A commotion ensues, during which the spectre pushes Swille into the fireplace. When his slaves intentionally fail to extinguish the fire, Swille dies. Hence, it can safely be concluded that the two apparitions cause the death of Arthur Swille. Nonetheless, as the narrator reveals at the very end of the novel (175), both apparitions were imitated by Pompey. In fact, Swille is thus murdered by one of the few slaves whom he trusts most with his life. Consequently, Swille's first observation that Pompey "would die if something happens to me" is ironic because Pompey murders Swille and is not particularly remorseful about that the fact. This then rules out Swille's second assessment, which claims that "Pompey is a saint," and also his third assessment, according to which Swille has "a shrewd eye for good property" (35), as the servant whom he thought to be a bargain proves to be rather costly in the end. Hence, the readers can find all of Swille's observations ironic because of the contrast between the intentions which they express and the other contradictory information provided by the novel.

Swille is not only wrong about Pompey, but also—and even more fatally perhaps—about Uncle Robin, his seemingly loyal valet, of whom Swille again pronounces several observations which turn out to be ironic. For example, in the same conversation with Abraham Lincoln, Swille remarks that: "It's upon my son's advice that I don't permit any of the employees to use the telephone. I permit Uncle Robin to use it because he's such a simple creature he wouldn't have the thought powers for using it deviously. He's been in the house for so long that he's lost his thirst for pagan ways and is as good a gentleman as you or me" (34). However, both claims are shown to be inaccurate. First, Robin is shown to be misusing his telephone privileges as he uses the telephone to organise slave betting across the whole United States (40–41). Of course, all of these rather sophisticated actions are incongruent with him being "a simple creature" as Swille thinks. Second, Uncle Robin is more interested in "pagan ways" than Swille suspects. Later in the novel the readers are told that Robin has forged Swille's last will (in order

to inherit all of his property) and is poisoning him. Nonetheless, Robin makes it clear that he used Hoodoo practices beforehand to establish whether pagan gods would approve. As Robin suggests: “I prayed to one of our gods ... He said it was okay to do it. The ‘others’ had approved” (170). Hence, even though Uncle Robin knows how to appear “simple,” he is definitely not. Ironically, Swille’s positive assessment of Robin would eventually have cost Swille his life had Pompey not murdered him sooner. Thus, as in the case of Pompey, Swille’s assessment of Uncle Robin is highly ironic.

Irony also targets Abraham Lincoln, who is satirised for not questioning Swille’s empire and thus for implicitly condoning his enslavement of African Americans. In the novel, Swille agrees to sponsor Lincoln to the amount of five million dollars. Yet, Lincoln is later surprised to find that he left the meeting with only four. Both Lincoln and his similarly bemused aide discuss the missing million when the aide inquires whether Robin, who carried the bags with the money for Lincoln, could not have been involved: “‘What could’ve happened, sir? The nigger?’ ‘I doubt it. Poor submissive creature. You should have seen him shuffle about the place. Yessiring and nosirring. Maybe he didn’t intend to give me but four’” (50). In this scene Lincoln repeats the mistakes of Arthur Swille by also underestimating an African American character.

However, Lincoln’s next underestimation costs him his life. In the same discussion with his aide, Lincoln is briefed that one of his bodyguards has taken up drinking. The aide then proceeds to advise Lincoln to fire the bodyguard, to which Lincoln replies: “I don’t plan to fire that one. Just put him on detail at insignificant events. The theatre. I might need Swille’s support some more and so I’m going to start doing more for culture. Tidy up my performance. I want you to get me and Mary Todd some tickets to a theatre from time to time” (46). Lincoln’s evaluation of the situation can be considered to closely reflect Swille’s earlier assessment of Pompey. Even though both Pompey and Lincoln’s secret service man act as their bodyguards, the first does not behave as a bodyguard should (and is still retained) while the other is not capable of doing so (and is also retained). Furthermore, because the assessments of Lincoln and Swille turn out to be in direct contradiction with other information provided by the novel, they are thus rendered as highly ironic since both men lose their lives because of their evaluations.

As is customary with Reed’s irony, it attacks all those who support a system which is oppressive to ethnic minorities. In *Flight to Canada*, such a system is embodied by the Southern plantations and those who were connected with them. Apart from Swille, the novel thus attacks American Southerners who profit from slavery along with European and British nobles and celebrities (such as Oscar Wilde) who supported the South in the Civil War and thus promoted slavery. A typical illustration—mediated by *Flight to Canada*’s omniscient narrator—is the case of Swille’s connection to said European nobles:

Listening to Arthur and his knights, so refined and noble that they launched a war against the Arabs for the recovery of an *objet d'art*, yet treated their serfs like human plows, de-budding their women at will; torturing and witchifying the resistance with newfangled devices. Dracula, if you recall, was a count. (15)

Irony is again generated from the contrast between the said and the intended: once the positive evaluation (“so refined and noble”) is cross-referenced with other provided information it is difficult to actually hold the nobles in high regard. Hence, irony in *Flight to Canada* is not only focused on white American targets but crosses the Atlantic to target white Europeans as well.

5.2.8 *The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes* in Context

At the forefront of Reed’s *The Terrible Twos* (1982) and *The Terrible Threes* (1989) are the issues of corruption among American political elites and their consent to the corporate oppression of minorities and the ecological exploitation of the natural world.⁴² Further, the novels can also be understood as a psychological journey from naïve innocence to bitter experience on the part of their fictional white protagonist, Dean Clift, the American president supposedly—but, in fact, not—in charge of the elites.⁴³ The two novels thus more openly criticize American politics than the previous ones, which rely more on allegory than on explicit naming. Dickson-Carr identifies Reed’s target in the novels by saying that Reed’s “concentration on the rise of neoconservatism in recent years forms the crux of *The Terrible Twos* (1982) and its sequel, *The Terrible Threes* (1989)” (170). Similarly, McGee suggests that “Since *Flight to Canada*, Reed’s work has become more topical, particularly in response to the rise of conservative politics in the eighties”

42 Since the novels share the same fictional universe and are thematically linked, I examine the context for both of them in one sub-chapter instead of two.

43 Dickson-Carr claims that the character is inspired by several non-fictional politicians. As he says:

The metaphor of the two-year-old as representative of American political and social concerns continually resurfaces throughout the text, primarily through the presence of Dean Clift (a composite character whose name is taken from the 1950s matinee idols James Dean and Montgomery Clift, and who is based, in part, on Presidents Ronald Reagan and John F. Kennedy), a former actor elected to the vice presidency not for his political skills, which are nonexistent, but for his good looks. (*African American Satire* 171)

This is an interesting detail as such a practice is not to be found in Reed’s *Japanese by Spring* and *Juice!*, which include more examples of the explicit naming of their satirical targets.

(42), which is a comment even validated by Reed's later fiction (*Juice!*), which was penned after McGee's observation.⁴⁴

The titles of the novels are fashioned in the same way as some of Reed's characters whose names enable the readers to infer their personalities. Clearly, as Reed states in an interview with Henry, the novels are named after the ages at which young children are typically regarded as having limited control over their emotions. Reed even speaks of the "petulance of the people of the United States who are very fortunate, yet who are always perplexed and complaining about things like two-year olds" (Dick and Singh 217). Yet, perhaps more interestingly, Mvuyekure claims that this statement applies not only to ordinary citizens but "by extension, [to] their leaders" as well (*Dark Heathenism* 170). Following Mvuyekure's cue, one can fully evaluate the extent of Reed's social critique, whose level returns to that of *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* and *Mumbo Jumbo*, in which thinly-veiled attacks on presidents are frequent. In fact, when, in an interview with Nazareth, Reed complains about the situation of American society after the publication of *The Terrible Twos*, he appears to be directly blaming the political elite for not addressing these issues more sufficiently: "There are 38 million people who are not adequately fed. Who suffer malnutrition, who are below the poverty line. And there are ten million blacks ... who have just been written off—by liberals, by neo-conservatives. They're considered a permanent impoverished class" (Dick and Singh 198). Much like two and three year olds, the political elite is interested solely in its own purposes (instead of addressing some of the pressing issues facing the United States in the 1980s). This critique, however, also extends to ordinary Americans who elected their elites. Or as Dickson-Carr suggests: "The meaning Reed posits here is that American people have continually chosen such leaders as Reagan or Kennedy for the most superficial reasons, so obsessed are they with maintaining an intricate architecture of illusion" (*African American Satire* 171). Hence, Reed's satire aims at almost all classes and minorities, which is a feature which *The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes* share with his previously written novels.

Both the novels make use of Reed's trade-mark Neo-HooDoo aesthetics, which he slightly tinges with Calypso and Rastafarianism influences. Also, both novels share Reed's previous keenness for using everyday life as a source of art. However, there are three distinct features in which the novels are different from their predecessors. These are their diminished reception, the appearance of Nazism as a metaphor for monoculture, and the fact that the most satirised target of the novel (the composite character of many American presidents) is given the option

44 As is customary with Reed, there are a large number of intertexts to which these novels refer. Mvuyekure identifies as key among them: "Dickens's *Christmas Carol*, Christian myths of Black Peter and St. Nicholas and also: Rastafarianism and Calypso, aesthetics borrowed from the Caribbean traditions and used by several Caribbean writers (Orlando Patterson, V. S. Naipaul, Sam Selvon, Earl Lovelace, and Derek Walcott) into his Neo-HooDooism" ("American Neo-HooDooism" 215).

to reform. With respect to the first, Reed's novels have, since the early 1980s, become even more demanding of their readers, who need to match Reed's encyclopaedic knowledge of non-Western philosophies in order to understand some of their key concepts.⁴⁵ Since the ordinary reader is not typically endowed with such knowledge and (perhaps even more importantly) since Reed does not explain these aesthetics as fully as he does Neo-HooDoo in his previous novels, *The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes* are considered to be "probably the most misunderstood and unappreciated of Reed's novels" ("American Neo-HooDooism" 215). With respect to the second, Reed's three novels of the 1980s and 1990s rely heavily on Nazism as a convenient symbol for monoculture. This new addition to Reed's satirical vocabulary stems from his comparison of American media culture to that of 1930s and 1940s Germany. In an interview with Callahan, Reed objects to "just one kind of fact that gets presented in the national media" and which, according to him, is an example of "Monoculture. It's dehumanizing. Hitler was the great prophet of this kind of thing" (Dick and Singh 168). Finally, with respect to the third, the most satirised character of the novel, Dean Clift, is given a chance to thoroughly reconsider the paradigm under which he rules the United States.⁴⁶ Reed explains this novelty by the influence of Rastafarianism. As he says in an interview with Moore:

I read books on Rastafarian theory and I listen to their music. But it's a lot more than music. Rastafarians believe people are capable of change. In this new book, the hero—a white male—changes. He has a deep change of mind, tries to do better and becomes the book's hero. I think the United States can change, that Americans can change. I don't see that in too many other countries. (Dick and Singh 233)

Such an option is entirely new in Reed's oeuvre. In fact, the novels in which monoculture is represented by characters such as HARRY SAM in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, Hinckle Von Vompton in *Mumbo Jumbo*, and Drag Gibson in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* do not even entertain such a possibility. Another change of significant proportion is the fact that Reed thinks of the white Dean Clift as the main protagonist of the novel, which is again unprecedented in his oeuvre.

45 Mvuyekure is imperative in claiming that: "Given the sheer amount of images and symbols of Rastafarianism and references to Calypso, any reading of *The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes* must take into account Rastafarian theology and Calypso aesthetics" ("American Neo-HooDooism" 215).

46 This transformation is achieved via a dream vision in which, "President Dean Clift in *The Terrible Twos* is taken by Saint Nick to the President's hell, where he sees past presidents and would-be-presidents chained to their crimes against nature for not having had the courage to oppose dehumanizing actions: Eisenhower (Lumumba), Truman (Hiroshima), and Rockefeller (Attica)" (Nazareth *In the Trickster Tradition* 195). This has such a forming effect on Dean Clift that Mvuyekure speaks of a change of character whose magnitude, "is extraordinary; when he wakes up on Christmas Day after his journey into the American Hell, he is a different person" (*Dark Heathenism* 205).

Nevertheless, it takes some time before Clift's transformation takes place, which gives Reed many opportunities to satirise this character, as the following pages show.

The Terrible Twos and its sequel, *The Terrible Threes*, describe the mutiny of a group of ethnic individuals against corporations, whose quest for profit worsens the living conditions of all but the wealthiest. These two novels present a variation on Reed's traditional target (embodied by one or more powerful white Americans who oppress other minorities) by denouncing them for the damage they inflict on the environment. Both novels also rewrite the myth of Saint Nicholas and his black servant Black Peter by reversing their power dynamics: Black Peter is presented as the saint and Saint Nicholas as the sinner. These novels have also been interpreted as satirical. While commenting on Reed's literary output from the 1980s and 1990s, Dickson-Carr suggests that "the overarching gist of his novel's satire is a skewering of the new mean-spiritedness that has overtaken the American social and political landscape like an invading army of spite" ("The Next Round" 214). The novel is set in an alternative version of the United States of America where millions of its inhabitants are on the brink of poverty on account of buying non-essential items produced by corporations. Their unceasing production plunders the Earth (3) while ensuring that ordinary citizens remain financially insecure. Yet, such a state of affairs is both tolerated and implicitly sanctioned by the government (4). Reed's irony thus targets both the members of corporations and the government, with special emphasis placed on the character of the President, Dean Clift, whom it satirises by means of an ironic portrayal.

5.2.9 Contrast-based Irony in *The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes*

In his *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Booth suggests that, "If a speaker's style departs notably from whatever the reader considers the normal way of saying a thing, or the way normal for this speaker, the reader may suspect irony" (67). Many examples of ironic portraits have already been discussed; namely, Bukka in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (who is a victim of the system yet enamoured with it), Swille in *Flight to Canada* (who trusts his slaves too much), and Lincoln in *Flight to Canada* (who, as the president, fails to ensure his own protection). In *The Terrible Twos* such treatment is given to the character of Dean Clift, who in spite of being a president behaves in a quite un-presidential way.

As for the general understanding of the word president, Merriam Webster defines a president as "an elected official serving as both chief of state and chief political executive" (n. pag.). This chief position implies a considerably skilled individual capable of taking decisions for him/herself and for others. To satirise

the government, Reed contrasts this general understanding with Clift, who is presented as incompetent with respect to holding the presidential office at every opportunity. Clift is not only presented as vain, but more importantly as intellectually incapable of holding his office, which is revealed when he reminisces on how he became president in the first place:

“How did I get mixed up in this? There I was in Congress, doing all right. I didn’t have any ambition above that. I took the vice-presidency because nobody else wanted it. How did I know that the President would die in the office? Granted, he was ninety-one years old when they elected him, but he was in good shape” (49).

Clift’s attempt at justification is based on the apparent good health of the former president. However, by failing to take into account that the appearance of physical fitness is not a guarantee of everlasting life for someone so elderly, Clift comes off as intellectually feeble. The fact that he is not aware either of the demanding nature of the office or of the life expectancy of U.S. men reveals him to be the intellectual equal of Bukka Doopeyduk, Kingfish and Brown, and Jefferson Woodrow Wilson.

Furthermore, Reed intensifies his satire of the government by having the incompetence of the president be publicly known by the other characters in the novel. There are numerous examples in the novel, yet I find the ones concerning his wife as the most honest and pertinent. A telling case is his wife’s reaction to Clift’s wish to leave the office and go for a rather prolonged vacation:

“Now, Dean, you know what happened the last time you took that three-month vacation. There was an outcry from the public. They want you to be visible. They’ll start gossiping –you know, your reputation.”

“What reputation, Mummy?”

“Well, dear, the public doesn’t think you’re very bright.”

“I may not be an intellectual giant, Mummy, but I’m as smart as the next fellow. (50)

The quote strengthens the interpretation of Clift as a highly satirised character. First, the fact that Clift does not realise that a three-month-long vacation would prevent him from doing his duties provides further proof of his unsuitability for the position. Second, his not knowing what the public’s opinions are on the matter supports such a reading. And, finally, his feeble attempt at justification reveals what an incongruous choice he is for the role of a president.

A final comment on Clift’s ability to be “a chief political executive” is delivered once his wife dies and is revealed as the person who actually was in charge. While mourning the passing of his wife, Clift goes on to say the following farewell: “God! God!” the President cried, shaking his fist towards the falling snow. “Who

will do all the handshaking? Who will see to it that my socks are packed? ... And suppose I have to make a decision affecting the future course of human generations to come? Who will make it for me?" (98) Interestingly enough, none of the complaints against fate are related to their personal life as husband and wife: rather, they are all related to the office. This shows how much more Clift values his wife as an administrator than as a life companion, which hints at his dependency and thus again at his unsuitability for the office. Clift's first complaint ("Who will do all the handshaking?") suggests that he might not have been as vitally involved in leading meetings as is expected from a president. If a handshake customarily starts and finishes a meeting then it is clear that Clift was either not present at them or not in a position to lead them. Either possibility demonstrates his incompetence, which is further emphasised by his final lament on who will do the decision making for him. In sum, it is therefore ironic that such a candidate as Clift would command a country. Also, it is probable that readers would transpose their judgment of Clift onto the government as well since both are related. Consequently, satirising Clift thus, to certain extent, satirises the government as well.

Other examples of contrast-based irony in the two novels are related to Reed's usage of Nazism, which he pairs with the highest representative of American political life to again arrive at an incongruous and unexpected result. Although this feature is novel in Reed's satirical oeuvre and appears only from *The Terrible Twos* onwards, it nonetheless relies on contrast, a satirical principle with which Reed is already well familiar at this stage in his career. The examples of irony discussed up to this point stem from the fact that a president should be a capable chief executive (and the novels show him not to be). By the same token, it is incongruent if the American government openly expresses admiration for Nazi ideology and praises its former dignitaries. Yet, this is precisely what Reed has it do in the two novels—later using the same principle in *Reckless Eyeballing* and *Japanese by Spring*—in order to reveal the corrupt standards of the respective governments.

The Terrible Twos features a number of instances which document this incongruous pairing. In the novel, Clift, as the president of the United States, officially meets "the chairman of the American Nazi Party ... in the White House" (49–50), which a non-fictional president of the U.S could hardly afford to do. Further, it is revealed that "Congress has set aside an American holiday to celebrate the Führer's birthdate" (58) while the Führer himself is also given "posthumous American citizenship" (66). Such actions are incredibly incongruous because of the history of the United States of America in the last century. Since these actions confer approval on a reviled regime and ideology, it is very unlikely that they would ever happen in the real world behind the text. Thus, by allowing these actions to take place in the text, Reed weakens the moral standing of the fictional U. S.

government, as it is happy to approve of the Nazi regime and, by extension, of its atrocities.⁴⁷

Similarly, *The Terrible Threes* (1989) has the members of the government wear “black and white pinstripes, after the suit worn by Klaus Barbie at his trial at Lyons” (11). Such a voluntary modification of apparel shows that these politicians find inspiration in the real-life person who was responsible for the execution of several thousands of people during the Second World War. Further, the same politicians are shown to believe that Adolf Hitler was a “misunderstood genius, a sort of Knight of Christianity saving the West, defending the free world from the Mongolian hordes and Asiatic death” (18) and consult the ghost of Heinrich Himmler (147, 170). While this is not perhaps an especially subtle way of revealing character flaws, the listed examples suffice in documenting the incongruity between the involved characters (members of the U. S. government) and the situation (the voluntary association with Nazism). Since such a pairing is highly unexpected and incongruous it can be interpreted as ironic.

5.3 Argument-based Satire: Its Definition and Targets

This new type of satire relishes in discrediting characters not by revealing their vices or shortcomings but by revealing flaws in their arguments. The literature on satire and irony knows this type of irony as *reductio ad absurdum* and defines it as the exaggeration of a premise to such an extreme conclusion that its original mistakenness becomes apparent. Dickson-Carr claims that the technique shows the “foolishness of a concept or idea by taking it to its apparent logical – and most outrageous – conclusion” (*African American Satire* 26). In a similar vein, Feinberg believes this satirical technique to be “an extreme form of exaggeration” (112) and Muecke notes that “The *reductio ad absurdum* ends, by definition, with the destruction of the opponent’s position; but it begins as if the position were tenable at least” (58). Nonetheless, since the driving principle behind *reductio*—which is work with argumentation—is more meaningfully connected with current social changes in the United States (as chapter six documents), I prefer the term argument-based satire over *reductio ad absurdum*. Throughout the remainder of the book I thus only use the former and not the latter.

As for their construction, episodes of Reed’s argument-based satire typically consist of an exaggerated premise which can reveal the bias of its speaker (and thus lays the ground for the weakening of the speaker’s authority later on). If the premise is sufficiently farfetched, the sequence ends there as Reed can expect

47 The novel includes further examples where the U. S. government whitewashes the Nazi regime which I omit as they are based on the same principle described above.

his readers to recognise it as such. However, if the premise is somewhat less far-fetched, Reed allows the sequence to escalate (which typically takes the form of the speaker adding more exaggerated statements) and receive a reaction from one of the nearby characters, who juxtaposes the farfetched claims with commonly accepted knowledge and thus reveals them as invalid.

As for its representation in Reed's satirical oeuvre, argument-based satire co-exists alongside the previously described examples of irony in *Reckless Eyeballing*, though its occurrence increases exponentially in the subsequent novels. The following paragraphs examine this new type of satire, which Reed employs mostly by having his antagonist characters proclaim farfetched statements which are then dismantled either by the novel's narrator or by one of the supporting characters.

As the next section shows, *Reckless Eyeballing* is an important milestone in Reed's oeuvre because, from this novel onwards, characters in Reed's works are increasingly attacked with argument-based satire and not with contrast-based irony. I believe that this change in Reed's usage of satirical techniques is influenced by his wish to avoid misunderstanding; that is, his argument-based satire is more explanatory, which can have two benefits. First, it might be more easily recognisable as Reed provides his audience with more guidance as to which conclusions to draw. Second, it might be more persuasive, which is important due to the change in the understanding of racism which occurred around the time of writing *Reckless Eyeballing*.

5.3.1 *Reckless Eyeballing* in Context

Reed's seventh novel, *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986), continues to explore Reed's interests in everyday life, Neo-HooDoo, and the integrity of African Americans. More specifically, it asks the question of whether African Americans are willing to forsake their identity to become accepted by the dominant society and whether or how this might influence the art which they create. The novel explores these themes on the struggle between an African American writer and his feminist editors over the nature of his play. Much like *The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes*, the novel was not received well, largely for the same reason that Reed again expects too much knowledge from his readers. First, without a knowledge of some novels written by female African American writers, Reed's commentary on feminism is misunderstood as misogynistic instead of critical.⁴⁸ Second, the reader also

48 Mvuyekure argues that *Reckless Eyeballing* is far from being a misogynistic text because:

A close textual analysis reveals the opposite: in *Reckless Eyeballing* Reed rather signifies upon and pays homage to African American women's fiction by abrogating and appropriating the novels of Toni Morrison (*Sula*), Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*), Gayl Jones (*Corregidora*), Zora Neale Hurston (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*), Michele Wallace's unpublished work, Toni Cade

needs to know of Reed's disagreement with Gloria Steinem⁴⁹ over Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and his rejection of the novel's portrayal of African American men, which he perceives as stereotypically damaging (and made even worse by the film version directed by Steven Spielberg). Finally, the reader is typically not sufficiently endowed with an understanding of African philosophy in order to identify that the protagonist of the novel, Ian Ball, is not meant to be sympathised with. Since the general reader does not possess the vast knowledge necessary to understand all these intertextual strands of meaning, *Reckless Eyeballing* was received as "undoubtedly Reed's most controversial novel" (*Critical Response* xxi) and "the most misunderstood and misinterpreted of Reed's novels (*Dark Heathenism* 209). This in turn contributed to the overall diminished reception of Reed as a writer. For example, Dick speaks of "Reed's literary estrangement from a large segment of the reading public" (*Critical Response* xxxi) and literary critic Wendy Hayes-Jones mentions that this struggle has "overshadowed Reed's career" (23). Because this is a profound rewriting of Reed's position in the American literary canon, I would like now to address the last two points.

One could argue that at the core of the common misunderstanding of *Reckless Eyeballing* is a clash of two readings: the one assumed by readers and the other intended by Reed. Both are shaped by Reed's vocal denouncement of Gloria Steinem's positive evaluation of the stereotypical portrayal of African American men in Walker's *The Color Purple*, which Reed voiced, for example, in an interview by Csicsery:

She said, in the June 1982 issue of *Ms. Magazine*, that the men in *The Color Purple* represent all black men. Do I go to a movie about James Bond to extrapolate from his behavior the truth about all white male behavior? Or do I go to *Friday the Thirteenth* and say that Jason represents the behavior of all white men? That's class libel, the kind of thing they used to do in Nazi Germany. (Dick and Singh 325)

Reed describes such an assessment in another interview by Dick as a "mean-spirited attack on black men as a group" (Dick and Singh 347). His resentment of Steinem—and his dislike of her influence on African American women—might motivate his satire of two female feminist characters in *Reckless Eyeballing*, whose

Bambara (*The Salt Eaters*), and Paula Marshall, particularly by critiquing the way they portray black male characters and how the latter mistreat black female characters. ("American Neo-Hoodooism" 215)

Yet, Mvuyekure's defense of Reed also makes clear that unless the general reader is more than well read in African American literature, they can very easily brand Reed as a misogynist. Examples of such misreading are Michelle Wallace's "Female Troubles: Ishmael Reed's Tunnel Vision" and Michiko Kakutani's review of *Reckless Eyeballing* entitled "Gallery of the Repellent."

49 Steinem was a spokesperson of the American feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

relationship is similar to that between Steinem and her African American women protégé(s). The novel includes a white female benefactor and an African American protégé (in the novel called Tremonisha Smarts). This of course goes back to *Mumbo Jumbo* and its theme of stifling white patronage which constrains the creativity of the Harlem Renaissance (and also to *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* which contains the same message). It is therefore not surprising that: (i) *Reckless Eyeballing* contains the same message of the unworthiness of white patronage as *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*; and that (ii) many readers would presume that if Smarts is based on Walker then the novel's protagonist (and author of many chauvinistic comments) is based on Reed. Which is where the reading assumed by the general audience (and many literary critics as well) departs from the meaning intended by Reed, for once African philosophy is taken into the account the understanding of Ian Ball changes profoundly.

Nonetheless, it might appear that this is not the case. The novel is after all focalized by Ball and there is a long tradition of reader sympathy with the character who focalizes a novel. Further, the two feminist characters are satirized via their exaggerated connection to, and support of Nazism, while Ball is not. Yet, the opposite is in fact the case: while the white feminist character based on Steinem is lampooned till the ending of the novel, the African American feminist finally recognizes her limiting influence, stops writing fiction which misrepresents African American men, and starts producing a more authentic mode of art.⁵⁰ In this way, she resembles the fictional president Dean Clift who in spite of being criticized is given a change to reform. On the other hand, Ball is, at the end of the novel, revealed to be a schizophrenic who (unbeknownst to him) has been terrorizing women all along. He is also shown to be a racist, which is irreconcilable with all of Reed's values expressed in his fiction and non-fiction.

Yet, if the reader is not familiar with African philosophical lore and its explanation of "two-headedness," all of this is very likely never to be discovered in their reading. Mvuyekure explains it by saying that:

Throughout Reed's *Reckless Eyeballing*, it is clear that whatever Ian Ball says about black women and their collaboration with the enemy (white feminists and white men) is not to be taken seriously because he is a "double-headed" character (an Obeah woman hoodooed him when he was born), a Legba figure, who "has a way of talking out of both sides of his mouth, as though he were of two heads or two minds" (...) Ian Ball changes his mind and switches sides whenever it benefits him. Thus, overlooking the fact Ian Ball is a Neo-HooDoo trickster can only lead to a misreading of *Reckless Eyeballing*. ("American Neo-HooDooism" 216)

50 Mvuyekure points out that "Through Tremonisha Smarts, then, Reed demonstrates that a black woman writer does not need to denigrate the black male in order to write her female self" (*Dark Heathenism* 234).

Interestingly enough, Dickson-Carr suggests that Ball is an unreliable character and a schizophrenic because he buckles under the pressures that African Americans faced in “the overwhelmingly materialistic 1980s that indirectly caused black art and culture to suffer. The result is a black double-consciousness so pronounced that it forces the black psyche to become virtually schizoid” (175). Consequently, Ball can be compared to Bukka Dooney, who is also torn between keeping his African side intact and forsaking it in order to climb the social ladder. Nonetheless, without understanding the concept of “two-headedness,” the interpretation that Ball represents Reed is the easiest that the general reader can and probably will draw. And despite the fact that Mvuyekure suggests that “understanding Ian Ball and his attitudes toward women requires listening to his two minds, because not doing so does a disservice to his double-headed character. Thus, critics who label him a misogynist have listened to one mind” (*Dark Heathenism* 225), it seems unreasonable to expect Western critics to be equipped with this rather non-frequent and non-Western piece of information.

Unlike Ball, the character of Tremonisha Smarts is much better portrayed in the novel and therefore it is doubly ironic that Reed, in some circles, continues to be considered a chauvinist because of a novel in which the only happy ending is given to a feminist character.⁵¹ Hence, it is ironic that Reed needs to include himself in his next novels as a fictional character so that his intentions are easier to interpret. Yet, since this book examines intratextual irony only, let us now pay attention to the irony present in *Reckless Eyeballing*.

5.3.2 Argument-based Satire in *Reckless Eyeballing*

As a novel, *Reckless Eyeballing* intensifies Reed’s attack on feminist characters from *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. While in the former novel the fight against negative female characters was diluted with another plot line, *Reckless Eyeballing* deals solely with this topic. At the beginning of the novel, a deranged African American protagonist introduces his belief that the feminist movement is destroying the careers of African American writers and hence that individual feminists need to be punished by having their hair cut after the fashion of French women who collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War. The novel also attempts to influence its readers about the villainous nature of such feminist characters by allowing them to proclaim exaggerated statements about the death of a literary

51 The irony present in this denouement does not escape Peter Nazareth, who is one of the few critics not to misread the novel: “Feminists object to the central character of Reed’s novel, the playwright Ian Ball, a sexist womanizer,” says Maya Harris – in fact Reed is beginning his novel by showing us the lack of balance in his protagonist, Ian Ball, who needs to recognize his anima” (*In the Trickster Tradition* 205).

alter-ego of Emmett Till.⁵² This doubled intensity of Reed's attack might have a connection to the publication of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, which angered Reed with what he perceived as negative generalisations of African American men as cruel aggressors (Mvuyekure 209–34). In support of this theory, one can notice that the character of Tremonisha Smarts has a number of resemblances to Alice Walker, as has already been mentioned, and Reed thus might be attacking one via the other. Mvuyekure, however, notes that such an interpretation is in fact misunderstood. Even so, such a treatment of an iconic writer brought about negative reviews of the novel. For example, Michiko Kakutani condemned this and all Reed's previous novels with the following words: "This is Ishmael Reed's seventh novel and like much of his earlier fiction, it's a nasty idiosyncratic blend of invective, satire and social criticism" (164). However, despite the change of subject, Reed's motivation remains the same even in this novel: to attack a subject which reduces the complexity of the representation of African Americans.

Nevertheless, while Reed clearly disagrees with the portrayal of African Americans as brutes, he also refutes such a portrayal through argumentation and not by exposing those who spread it as lacking in ethical or moral qualities (as in the case of Swille, Gibson, and HARRY SAM). Increasingly, from this point onwards Reed's novels become more argumentative as illustrated by an African American male character from *Reckless Eyeballing*:

Nobody takes the crude and hateful white men like Hoss and Crow in Sam Shephard's plays and says that these men represent all white men. Has anybody ever said that Richard III represented all white men? That all white men raved to lock children in a tower somewhere for perverse reasons? Nobody ever said that Lady Macbeth or Medea represented all white women. (*Reckless Eyeballing* 130)

While the quote is not an example of satire or irony, it clearly uses argumentation and inference: the situation of all African American men is compared to a few

52 According to *Encyclopedia of African American History*, "Emmett Louis Till (1941–55), was a young Chicago native whose lynching in Mississippi helped galvanize the modern Civil Rights movement" (1054). Since Till's mother "decided to hold an open casket funeral and invited the press so that everyone could see Till's body ... Tens of thousands of people gathered at the funeral" (1054). Thus the injustice done to Till became public knowledge. *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History* adds that "Till's age, the innocence of his act, and his killers' immunity from retribution represented a stark and definitive expression of southern racism to many African Americans" (5: 2198). As such, the funeral drew attention to racial injustice deeply embedded in the South, which eventually led to beneficial outcomes for African Americans. *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History* claims that, "Outrage over his death was key to mobilizing black resistance in the Deep South. In addition, black protest over the lack of federal intervention in the Till case was integral to the inclusion of legal mechanisms for federal investigation of civil rights violations in the Civil Rights Act of 1957" (5: 2198). Hence, by downplaying the racism behind the murder of Till, the character of Kakutani also undermines the African American struggle for equal rights.

negative white female characters and a correct conclusion is drawn (i.e., it is not possible to judge a racial group based on too small a sample). This type of reasoning also influences Reed's satire and irony, which, since *Reckless Eyeballing*, employ argumentation and logic to question stereotypes along with the presentation of objectionable and oppressive behaviour. Since the dominant target of the novel is white feminist characters who turn African American women and men against each other, much of the argument-based irony in *Reckless Eyeballing* is aimed at them. The novel satirises these characters by having them pronounce exaggerated claims related to either the stand-in for Emmett Till or to Eva Braun, the spouse of Adolf Hitler.

Most readers of *Reckless Eyeballing* would agree that the act of murdering Emmett Till in 1955 for flirting with a white woman was the violation of an acceptable code of conduct. Yet, much of the argument-based satire in the novel stems from the fact that the feminist characters are shown not to think so. They are allowed to suggest that since Till's gaze trespassed on the privacy of the white woman at whom he looked, he was as guilty as "the men who murdered him" (17). His gazing was "tantamount to a violent act" in which he "murdered" the white woman "with his eyes" (77). Yet, the untenability of these premises is soon pointed out by an African American character who questions their validity: "How are they going to be in the same boat? How are some white woman and a lynched castrated nigger going to be in the same boat?" (25). By remarking that it is impossible to compare a physically unharmed white woman with a murdered African American boy, the character deconstructs the faulty logic behind these claims. He points out that considering the boy's stare an act equal to that of his murder is a very exaggerated proposition which should (because of the magnitude of the included exaggeration) be almost instantly decoded as such. Naturally, there is never certainty that a segment of a text will be read in one particular way by various readers. Nonetheless, those readers who are familiar with the case of Emmett Till—and with the photographs of his open casket taken during his burial are limited in their freedom to interpret these lines in a way that is different than that which Reed intends. Further, since Till's murder is a significant event of the post-war African American struggle for equal rights (and it can be presumed that many Americans are familiar with the case), the previous claims are highly likely to be interpreted as farfetched. Naturally, once the readers witness such exaggeration the feminist characters lose credibility as trustworthy or sympathetic characters.

Nazism as a source of irony has already been discussed in this book. However, in *Reckless Eyeballing*, it is also a source of argument-based satire, as Reed enables the same feminist who made the above claims to make further invalid pronouncements about Eva Braun. This is revealed during a discussion in which the feminist character portrays Braun as a positive role model for women, to the surprise of her discussion partner, Ian Ball. Braun's almost heroic position is portrayed as

justified for she “epitomizes the women’s universal suffering” (5). The objection that Braun was married to Hitler of her own volition, which does not entail suffering, is refuted by saying that “She was coerced. Just as all women are coerced into doing things against their will” (5). Since the last statement is an instance of questionable logic, Ball asks for clarification:

“Victimized? I don’t follow, Becky. I always thought that Eva Braun was a Nazi.” She jumped to her feet. She was shaking, she was so full of rage. “Just like you men. You rehabilitate the Waffen S. S. because they’re men. But Eva! No, Eva’s a woman! She was an innocent bystander in conflict between Jewish and German men! All of those women, victims in the war of male ego.” She took out a handkerchief and blew her nose. As she did, he thought of the newsreels showing the women crying into the handkerchiefs and squealing as Hitler’s motorcade passed, their arms raised in Nazi salutes just like everybody else’s. Women throwing flowers, screaming, breaking down” (49)

This episode relies on a different type of reader response to a seemingly closed matter. After all, there is only one dominant reading of Nazism at present, one which connotes it with atrocities and the suffering of millions. Yet, French does not subscribe to it and both characters are shocked by their different interpretation of the same movement and period in Western history. However, her outrage at the common understanding of Nazism leads her to make claims which satirise and discredit her at the same time. The first is the unfounded claim that “You rehabilitate the Waffen S.S.” For one thing, this has not taken place, either in the real world or in the fictional world of the novel. The other claim associates Ball with the rehabilitation which (apart from revealing that French is prone to generalisation) also shows her ignorance of current history. Ball indeed has nothing to do with the rehabilitation. Already by the second sentence uttered by French, Reed leads his readers to accept a picture of her as untrustworthy. The satirical coup de grace follows in the next sentence, where French says that Hitler’s wife was “an innocent bystander in conflict between Jewish and German men!” And while she might be right that male ego played an important role in the Second World War, it is difficult to agree with her reading of Eva Braun. The passage suggests as much by introducing another female element which provides a reality cross-check: the squealing and cheering women whose outpouring of emotion is voluntary. One can hardly imagine that anybody can force women against their will into “throwing flowers, screaming, [and] breaking down.” Yet, because Braun and the ecstatic women are the only females present in the episode, Reed again manoeuvres the reader to associate one with the other. If the women are there of their own free will, then so was Eva Braun voluntarily a wife to Adolf Hitler. This rules out the possibility that she was “an innocent bystander.” Hence, the episode

can be considered as a poster example of Reed's argument-based satire for it proceeds through all of its stages: through an initial farfetched claim, the adding of further similar claims, and a reality check which dismantles the credibility of such claims along with the moral standing and authority of their speaker.

5.3.3 Argument-based Satire in *The Terrible Threes*

Episodes of argument-based satire are scarcer in *The Terrible Threes*, as they reach their peak of representation in *Japanese by Spring* and *Juice!* Nonetheless, there are some. Since this book has already mentioned Michiko Kakutani, as an example of a critic who accuses Reed of misogyny, I will examine an episode of argument-based satire which targets this real-life American critic, whom Reed's novel shows to utter farfetched claims on the matter of the internment of Japanese American men during the Second World War. During a party, the stand-in character proclaims that:

I say that the United States did Japanese-American women a great favor. They removed them from homes in which they were brutalized by Japanese-American men. *A far greater imprisonment, next to which relocation or internment were minor inconveniences.* So instead of receiving \$ 20,000 in compensation, Japanese Americans should be donating that amount to our generous government." (4, emphasis added)

This attack has much in common with previously examined examples. The fictional version of Kakutani is allowed to discredit herself by describing the internment as "a great favour" to Japanese American women. Hence, this example shares common features with the ones already described because the statement does not hold up to scrutiny. First, one can note the sweeping generalisation according to which all Japanese American women were "brutalized by Japanese American men." Reed again allows a character to utter a statement that undermines their credibility. Second, the reader can notice the character's imprecise reasoning according to which women "were removed" from the men in their homes, which was supposed to prevent the men from harming the women. Yet one needs to wonder how this could have made their situation any better in the real world since Japanese American families were generally kept together in the interment centres. Further, since this claim is already built on a faulty premise (all men brutalized their women), it is invalid from the start. Finally, calling internment a minor inconvenience is in contradiction with the common understanding of the history of the Second World War. The scholar of American history Brian Hayashi describes the internment centres as "concentration camps" (1). In a similar vein, sociologist Wendy Ng speaks of "anti-Japanese sentiment from the early part of the twentieth

century” as one of the main reasons for the relocation of Japanese Americans into internment camps. Such descriptions are in stark contrast with the stand-in character’s likening of internment centres to “minor inconveniences.” After all, had they been truly minor, the government of the United States of America would probably not have felt the need to recompense Japanese Americans for their emotional and monetary losses on several occasions in recent history.⁵³ Interestingly enough, no one enters this scene to provide the necessary cross-checking piece of information. It can be presumed that readers already possess the necessary knowledge since this episode is based on not-so-distant American history, while this is not always the case with the previous examples. Having examined a representative example from *The Terrible Threes*, let us now proceed to the novels where argument-based satire occurs the most.

5.3.4 *Japanese by Spring* in Context

Japanese by Spring (1993) examines how African Americans in the 1990s negotiate the dilemma of whether or not they should forsake their interest in an equal society for personal advancement on the social ladder of Western hegemony. Should they do so, as the African American protagonist of the novel does, their choice involves supporting the racist status quo of the dominant society, which in turn compels them to harm other minorities and other African Americans. Reed thus returns to a theme which he has already explored in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* and *Reckless Eyeballing*, where the characters face the same dilemma. For example, the schizophrenic protagonist of *Reckless Eyeballing* is offered a promotion in exchange for writing a play that would show African American men as rapists. Perhaps because *Reckless Eyeballing* was critically one of the least recognized and misunderstood novels, Reed reopens this theme again in *Japanese by Spring*. Yet, this time he enters the novel as a fictional character as well, perhaps with the intention of making his opinions on this subject more easily apparent and less prone to misunderstanding. Interestingly enough, the novel was well received even despite Reed’s implicit message to the critics that they in fact do not know how to read his novels.⁵⁴

53 Hayashi notes that Japanese Americans “partially recovered their losses through the 1948 Evacuation Claims Act, a presidential apology in 1976, and another redress payment through the Civil Liberties Act in 1988” (2). Nonetheless, even taking this recompense into consideration, it is difficult to accept the stand-in character’s evaluation of the American government as “generous.”

54 As is typical of Reed, the novel relates to:

Hundreds of voices and references from Africa, Europe, Asia, South America, and the Middle East, not to mention literary and nonliterary names such as Rodney King, Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas, Colin Powell, Saddam Hussein, Shakespeare (whose Othello Putbutt reads

The novel also revisits Reed's traditional set-up of a struggle between the multicultural (which is represented by the fictional Ishmael Reed, who is present in the novel) and the monocultural (represented by a compromised African American academic called Chappie Putbutt). The protagonist faces the same problem as Reed's similar characters in his previous novels such as Bukka in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, Minnie in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, and Ian Ball from *Reckless Eyeballing*. Namely, they suffer from a lack of any African American core which would prevent them from becoming racists themselves who harm other African Americans and other minorities. Putbutt is therefore an interesting example of an African American because he does not mind expressing multiple apologies for racist behaviour targeted at African Americans and other minorities at the fictional campus where the novel takes place. These are very often nonsensical—in fact literary scholar Vogel speaks of “intellectual contortions”—as is the chosen mode of irony which Reed uses to satirise Putbutt and similar African Americans by extension.

To be more specific, Charlie Putbutt is based upon Shelby Steele, “whose book, *The Content of our Character* (1990), received lavish praise from innumerable conservatives and many liberals for its moderate stance on contemporary racial issues and its condemnation of Affirmative Action and other racial remedies” (Vogel 222). However, Dickson-Carr shows that such rhetoric is indeed beneficial for “Steele’s opposition to Affirmative action and most forms of black cultural nationalism eventually earned him an appointment to the Hoover Institute, a conservative think tank at Stanford University” (*African American Satire* 179). According to the literary scholar Rollins, Putbutt’s “search for self-identity is constantly fluctuating” (229) and he can thus be compared to Ian Ball as he is also constantly changing his philosophy and follows that which is the most profitable at any given moment. Such a character thus illustrates Henry Louis Gates’s concept of “official marginality,” in which “minority critics were accepted by the academy, but in return, they must accept a role already scripted” (*Tradition and the Black Atlantic* 80). Naturally, the nature of the scripted role needs to be supportive of the status

as racist), Arthur Schlesinger and his *The Disuniting of America*, Milton (after whom the racists and monoculturalists at Jack London College are named Miltonians), and Plato ..., just to name a few. (“American Neo-HooDooism” 217)

The novel is also inspired by Richard Wright, who at the end of his life experimented with Haiku as Reed states in an interview with Cannon et al., (Dick and Singh 371) and by Reed's own study of the Yoruban and Japanese cultures and languages. Mvuyekure adds that, “until *Japanese by Spring*, Reed had learned about Voodoo and HooDoo cultures second-hand via Haiti and then Africa. With this novel, however, he learns an African language and goes directly to African oral traditions of the Yoruba people” (“American Neo-HooDooism” 218). All of these sources are then mixed in accordance with Reed's jazz aesthetics. As he claims in an interview with Cannon et al., “I try to mix up stuff in *Japanese by Spring*—that's my style. So I do have Japanese in there, and like a Jazz musician, it ends in another key, so at the end, Yoruba” (Dick and Singh 371).

quo. On a similar note, Dickson-Carr notes that by having Putbutt contort himself intellectually, Reed “parodies and satirizes the wave of black neoconservatives that arose in the late 1970s and 1980s and their alleged modus operandi of crass careerism” (*African American Satire* 179). Mvuyekure adds that Reed enters the novel as a character also to “challenge Putbutt’s views against affirmative action, racism, multiculturalism, and ethnic studies on college and university campuses across America” (“American Neo-HooDooism” 218).

By having Putbutt change from being a follower of one trend to another, the novel argues that without personal philosophy there is no personal identity. For the duration of the novel, Putbutt changes from a masculinist into a feminist, from a black nationalist to an apologist of racism, and from a monoculturalist into a multiculturalist. Yet, without personal identity, as the novel shows, Putbutt is of little help to other multicultural characters in the novel. Instead, it is the character of Ishmael Reed who connects the novel’s readers to African-based philosophy (which can be interpreted as Reed’s latest version of Neo-HooDoo), which can prepare them to face current challenges in a more integral way than by following Putbutt’s constant changes of path. For Putbutt never finds himself and much like Ian Ball he is always torn between several options. In contrast, the novel posits African-based philosophy which, despite being centuries old, is portrayed as a pragmatic and beneficial mode of thinking for African Americans. On a similar note, Rollins suggests that “Reed understands that regardless of the location or time period, African Americans will always benefit from a connection to some form of African-centered philosophy” (236) and that the whole novel “is meant to serve as a Yoruba parable for those African Americans who suffer from or promote a lack of self-knowledge” (238). Ultimately, the novel claims that, despite the fact that there are characters willing to misuse any trend for self-profit (including multiculturalism), the United States is already multicultural – and that this process does not start with self-proclaimed prophets at universities, but with the everyday experience of ordinary Americans who are already multicultural.

5.3.5 Argument-based Satire in *Japanese by Spring*

The plot of *Japanese by Spring* bears similarities to *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*: the readers again follow a morally compromised African American character as he climbs up and down the hierarchical ladder of an institution. They thus meet Charles Putbutt, an academic who intends to secure a tenure at a Californian university by spreading ideas opposing multiculturalism and equal rights. Yet, since the novel has a strong affirmative message, most of its satirical targets are characters who oppose multiculturalism or misuse it for their own profit. However, while the reasons for satire are similar in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* and *Japanese by*

Spring, the modes of attack differ. The following examples show that argument-based satire not only highlights objectionable qualities but also explains why they are objectionable. Furthermore, this is not achieved through contrast but through an examination of the logical coherence of what the satirized characters say.

A case in point is the following discussion between two characters: the novel's protagonist, Putbutt, and his opponent, Poop, who expects to be fired from the university for spreading racist ideas. Yet, the dialogue proceeds in an unexpected way, much to the surprise of the racist Poop:

"You can't dismiss me."

"Oh yes we can."

"On what ground?" He paused. His face lit up. "Oh, I get it. My lectures about blacks. That's what you're against. You're using your influence ... to get even with me. For telling the truth."

"Not at all."

"Then why?"

"Well, if you believe that there is a correlation between brain size and intellectual capacity, then what are we to do with your small brain?"

"I don't follow." Putbutt handed him a paper. Poop examined it. He began to read. "... Sandra F. Witselson of MacMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, says that her autopsies of sixty-two brains found that as men age, the size of their corpus callosum ..." Poop gasped before continuing, "... gets smaller." Poop straightened up. He looked as though somebody had thrown some cold water into his face.

"You maintain that blacks have a smaller brain size than whites, so elderly whites such as you have smaller brains than young blacks or whites. One could say that young blacks are brighter than you are using your own theory, right? It's on account of your own theory that you're out of a job." (118)

Poop is a racist character who believes in phrenology, a pseudo-science according to which non-white races are not the equals of whites because of different measurements of their skulls and different brain sizes. Interestingly enough, the quote shows his evident eagerness to be a martyr of political correctness⁵⁵ by allowing

55 The phrase is borrowed from Henry Louis Gates, Jr. who says that in the contemporary United States of America:

The ironies abound. Freedom of expression, which once had been a reliable issue for the left, became a rallying banner on the right. Whereas once the academic left had stood accused of jockeying for victim status, we found that the right had taken over the vocabulary of victimization and oppression, depicting themselves as lonely martyrs to the jackal hordes of "PC." (*Tradition and the Black Atlantic* 125)

The character of Poop is thus an excellent example of such a trend of sophistry.

him to declare that he will be fired “For telling the truth.” However, some of the amusement of this satirical episode stems from the fact that Reed prevents him from enjoying this option. The remaining part of the satire arises from Reed’s compromising of Poop via the character’s own beliefs. While Poop maintains that different races have by default different sizes of brains (and thus some are by definition more intelligent than others), Putbutt complicates Poop’s racist certainty by adding the second piece of information on brain size being related to aging. Hence, even by believing that Poop belongs to a more privileged class of human beings, he nonetheless cannot argue with the fact that he is older than some African Americans. By extension, some African Americans must be more intelligent than Poop. At which point the racist statement does an ironic full circle and instead of attacking African Americans attacks its white originator. Interestingly enough, it is possible to imagine that if the character recanted his opinion he would be able to retain his job. Since he does not, the flaws in his argumentation cost him his position at the university.

The second type of irony stems from the fact that Reed does not allow Poop to be a martyr of a supposedly controversial truth. For Poop does not suffer for being a racist, he suffers for his poor logic. Using argumentation-based irony, Reed elegantly dismisses the portrayal of racism as a controversial truth and yet prevails over an openly racist character. This example shows that Reed’s irony in *Japanese by Spring* enters a new stage, one which not only satirizes characters who oppose multiculturalism (as does his earlier irony) but also reveals their arguments as invalid according to logical argumentation. By doing so, it provides more reason for readers to reject such characters and their ideas, and as such it is a more effective mode of satire for the post-racial era.

Even the novel’s protagonist is one of the targets of argument-based irony. This is because Chappie Putbutt is a thinly veiled literary alter-ego of Shelby Steele, an African American scholar whom Reed satirizes for publishing denigrating descriptions of African Americans in order to promote his own career in the right circles (*African American Satire* 179). In the novel, the character is satirized through his speeches delivered via the media. These are often used to make him appear contemporary and not interested in racial equality, which corresponds with the key notion of a post-racial society that there is no longer any need to support racial minorities, as everyone is already equal.

An illustrative example of such satire is Putbutt’s speech defending white aggressors who have severely beaten an African American character. Putbutt downplays the violent act by claiming that African Americans are at fault and admonishes them with the following speech:

They should stop worrying these poor whites with their excessive demands. The white students become upset with these demands. Affirmative action. Quotas. They

get themselves worked up. And so it's understandable that they go about assaulting the black students. The white students are merely giving vent to their rage. *This is a healthy exercise. It is perfectly understandable. After all, the whites are the real oppressed minority.* I can't think of anybody who has as much difficulty on this campus as blondes. (6–7, emphasis added)

The quote presents a stark contrast by having Putbutt equate mere African American existence with a provocation punishable with physical aggression. Hence, the first five sentences work as the initial premise of argument-based irony (and they in themselves could be considered examples of irony based on contrast). Similarly, having Putbutt declare that beating minorities is “a healthy exercise” which is “perfectly understandable” serves the purpose of establishing him as untrustworthy (since this is a statement which is incongruent with most readers' understanding of civilised behaviour). Yet, it is the tenth sentence (“the whites are the real oppressed minority”) which further strengthens the reading of the episode as ironic.⁵⁶ The tenth sentence functions as a trigger which enables the reader to perceive the previous claims as strongly farfetched overtures which climax in a grossly farfetched finale. Having Putbutt utter the tenth sentence, Reed casts doubt on Putbutt's previous claims, which are now seen as equally doubtful. Hence, what might be accepted by some is no longer acceptable to most by the tenth sentence, and Putbutt's statements are thus deconstructed, ironically, by his own doing.

Still, by focusing on the above examples of argument-based irony, I do not want to claim that they appear to the absolute exclusion of contrast-based irony. Reed's ninth novel does indeed include examples of the latter; however, even these are influenced by Reed's new emphasis on argumentation. For example, once Putbutt realizes that his anti-African American stance is unfounded, he switches to a radical pro-African American mode and deals with those academics who do not share his zeal. During one such example he scolds an academic who in the past has made disparaging comments about African literature. Since Putbutt is now in power, while the senior academic is not, it appears at first that Putbutt simply wants to punish him by having him teach freshman English. The senior academic in question rebels at the idea and refuses, as this is incongruent with his rank. However, since it would mean the end of his career, he reconsiders and comes back to Putbutt with the following words:

“Maybe I was a little too hasty, but it's been a long time since I taught freshman English.”

“Who said anything about freshman English? We want to teach freshman Yoruba.”

56 As the white citizens of the United States of America have not yet become a minority nor are they oppressed because of their race.

“Freshman Yoruba?”

Crabtree had written in one of those articles that if Yoruba would produce a Turge-
nev he would be glad to read him. Putbutt quoted from the article.

“In order to have made such a statement you would have required some knowledge
of the language.” (111–12)

As in the episode of the small brain argument, the targeted individual could easily find a way out of his predicament by admitting his previous opinions as biased, which would spare him from either losing his job or teaching a subject which he detested. Up to this point the satiric episode can be interpreted as contrast-based irony. Yet, even here, the statements and the conclusions inferred from them are vital (“In order to have made such a statement”), which shows again how Reed’s irony has changed over the years. Putbutt further inquires: “Being the scholar you are, you wouldn’t comment about a language of which you had no knowledge, would you?” (113). Yet, this is precisely the case, as it turns out that the senior academic has no knowledge of African language and literature. Therefore, as in the previous examples, he is satirized with the help of his own statements. Since, unlike Poop, he is not willing to terminate his career, this conversation, in another ironic turn, results in the existence of the university’s first Yoruba lecturer with no knowledge of Yoruba. Surprisingly, it turns out that Prof. Crabtree finds much value in African literature – which shows that argument-based irony enables satirized characters some space to grow (unlike irony by contrast). Yet, all of this is achieved with Reed’s new emphasis on argumentation.

In retrospect, argument-based irony provides the reader with more explanation as to why a type of behaviour or thinking may be objectionable than contrast-based irony. Being a type of satire, argument-based irony naturally includes the discrediting of characters, but this is no longer achieved by revealing a shortcoming in a character but via work with statements and logic. My final comments will examine how the changed social reality may have contributed to this change in the use of irony by Ishmael Reed.⁵⁷

5.3.6 *Juice!* in Context

The last section of this chapter examines Reed’s argument-based satire in *Juice!* (2011), a novel documenting the media portrayal of the trials of O.J. Simpson. Since *Juice!* is Reed’s most recent novel, it has not yet generated the same amount of critical response as Reed’s previous novels. Hence, this sub-section is shorter than the other sections on context for Reed’s previous nine novels. I should also

⁵⁷ For more information on the matter, see chapter six of this book.

make clear that these final pages do not seek to provide commentary on Simpson's guilt or innocence. Nor do they attempt to validate Reed's conviction that the acquittal of O.J. Simpson was correct ("Bigger and O.J." 169–96). Their sole purpose is to highlight Reed's use of argument-based satire and thus describe the final stage in the evolution of his satirical techniques.

After *Japanese by Spring*, which critically examined the state of multiculturalism in American tertiary education, Reed's last novel returns to one of his most constant themes: the endangered position of male African Americans. Like the previous novels, *Juice!* also examines a current theme by going back in time. It returns to the 1990s and to O.J. Simpson in particular, who was tried and eventually found not guilty of murdering his white wife, Nicole Simpson. The character of Ishmael Reed also returns; yet this time as an aged African American cartoonist who observes the trials and points out their many racially biased inaccuracies.

The novel differs from the previous ones in its composition. Where previously intertextuality was hinted at or mentioned in passing, *Juice!* includes many direct quotations from the trial, the media which reported it, and individual commentators. The amount of quoted material is unprecedented in Reed's oeuvre and the novel is also twice the usual length because of it. *Juice!* also devotes some space to a critique of minority characters who forsake integrity for social advancement and their redemption. Yet as Ludwig notes, the central focus is placed on the examination of the trials and the theme of "more responsibility in the media" ("When 'The Media Get Juiced'" 248), which Reed finds biased in its representation of the African American male.

Juice! examines in detail the changed fortunes of O.J. Simpson and the significance of such sudden reversals which can befall any other African American male. Before his first trial, Simpson was featured positively in the media, which was in accordance with his image of "the first black sports star to massively cross over from athletic hero to corporate spokesman and media personality" (Johnson and Roediger 199). Yet, Simpson lost the support of the media once his white wife was found dead and he was considered to be the primary suspect of the murder. He became the embodiment of the dangerous African American man stereotype and the media representation of his person changed dramatically. Toni Morrison summarizes it in her introduction to *Birth of Nation'hood* (1998) by saying that "contemporary 'readers' of the Simpson case have been encouraged to move from a previous assessment of Mr Simpson as an affable athlete/spokesperson to a judgment of him as a wild dog" (vii). A race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw Williams voices a similar view when she suggests that "the very ideological framework that embraced Simpson as a symbol of a color-blind ideal ... later spat him out as the embodiment of black criminality and irresponsibility" (98). Given that there is a consensus that the "the media coverage of Simpson's situation was an effort to fit Simpson back into the *all black men are violent and need to be feared* stereotype"

(Dashiel 160), it is understandable that Reed responds to such a stereotypical representation with his satire.

5.3.7 Argument-based Satire in *Juice!*

One of the stereotypes presented during the Simpson trial ridiculed the intellectual capacity of the largely African American jury. Since the jury ruled that Simpson should be acquitted, some media commentators doubted this result and attributed it to the jury's lack of acumen which could not correctly interpret the evidence against Simpson. Given that this opinion was used to question the aptitude of African Americans, the first example of argument-based satire in *Juice!* deconstructs the denigrating stereotype of the supposedly lower intelligence of African Americans by analysing two claims expressed by two media commentators:

Both Toobin and the late Norman Mailer, writing in *New York Magazine*, said that blacks are incapable of rational thought. Like members of many other species, blacks operate on the basis of instinct, they were suggesting. Blacks were non-Cartesian (They don't think therefore they ain't). (23)

Much like Poop, even the targeted fictional versions of Toobin and Mailer seem to operate within an ideology of a racist chain of being where whites govern the world from the top rungs while minorities inhabit its bottom rungs.⁵⁸ The opening line of the quote suggests as much and implies that if blacks are not capable of rational thought then whites certainly are. After all, Toobin's and Mailer's claim manifest their rational thought. The second sentence continues with this train of thought ("blacks operate on the basis of instinct") by aligning African Ameri-

58 American philosopher Arthur Lovejoy conceptualises a chain of being as a "descriptive name for the universe" and also as "a way of predicating of the constitution of the world." He adds that the concept is intrinsically linked with the notion of "value" (8). As such, one can see how easily the concept lends itself to be misused for racist purposes. A candid example is English biologist Thomas Huxley who in 1865 wrote in an essay that:

It may be quite true that some negroes are better than some white men; but no rational man, cognisant of the facts, believes that the average negro is the equal, still less the superior, of the average white man. And, if this be true, it is simply incredible that, when all his disabilities are removed, and our prognathous relative has a fair field and no favour, as well as no oppressor, he will be able to compete successfully with his bigger-brained and smaller-jawed rival, in a contest which is to be carried on by thoughts and not by bites. (66-67)

To be fair to Huxley, he adds that: "The highest places in the hierarchy of civilisation will assuredly not be within the reach of our dusky cousins, though it is by no means necessary that they should be restricted to the lowest" (67). It is ironic such an option does not appear to be presented in the thoughts of characters satirised by Reed almost a century and half later, as this chapter shows.

cans more with nature (and animals in particular) than with sentient and civilised Westerners who think with their heads.⁵⁹ Yet, Reed interrupts such a train of implication and insult by again introducing a new piece of information that complicates the neat racist thinking by connecting Toobin's and Mailer's implication with Descartes cogito ergo sum statement, which translates as "I think, therefore I am." Once this connection has been made, the commentator's claim and cogito, ergo sum are changed by Reed into one axiom: if African Americans are irrational then no African Americans exist. Yet over 12 per cent of the US population is African American. Given that there is no need to question the cogito ergo sum statement, Reed's argument-based satire shows Toobin's and Mailer's claim to be invalid and untenable. Similarly, if the axiom is not valid then Reed has by extension cast doubt on Toobin's and Mailer's racist evaluation of African Americans.

Further, given that the above-quoted passage is a rational refutation of the original claim, Reed also discredits it by providing his own example, which demonstrates a rationally thinking African American. In sum, the quoted passage exaggerates Toobin's and Mailer's claim to such a degree that it can no longer be considered credible. Yet, in contrast to the previously examined novels, it is the argument which is primarily shown to be foolish (and which is used to reveal the logical incoherence) and not the vices or shortcomings of its proponents, as in the case, for example, with Swille and Gibson.

The second presented episode of argument-based satire also deconstructs a stereotype regarding the worth of the African American jury. The example paraphrases a claim in which Christopher Darden—the African American prosecutor of the trial—expressed sadness that he could not convince the jury of Simpson's guilt despite the seemingly clear evidence of his culpability. According to Darden and an unnamed media expert, the jury ignored the evidence and acquitted Simpson because of the shared color of skin. Consequently, the second example deconstructs an attempt to show the African American jury not only as irrational but also as unethical:

Chris Darden elicits the sympathy of some of the white media experts with a real lachrymose spiel about how he wants to quit law and how the trial has been a disgrace, but he doesn't mean that the prosecution is a disgrace, oh no, not them, but the other people are a disgrace and one media expert says it's a shame that a black prosecutor can't prosecute a black defendant and black juries are so biased that

59 Crenshaw claims that during the post-racial era of the United States of America, "The triumph of the ideology of colorblindness has effectively rendered explicit racist discourse entirely unsuitable within mainstream political debate, a residual degree of racist sentiment among a substantial part of the white population remains amenable to appropriately coded racial appeals" (105). Despite their implicit nature, the paraphrased comments of Toobin and Mailer seem to fit well with Crenshaw's category of "appropriately coded racial appeals."

they can't convict a black criminal, yet the jails are full of black people, making me wonder who's putting them there. (155)

In the first half of the quote Reed manoeuvres the reader to accept that Darden inhabits the same position in real life as do Bukka from *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, Tremonisha Smarts from *Reckless Eyeballing*, and Chappie Putbutt from *Japanese by Spring*. All of these characters forsake their integrity in exchange for a better position in the white system. This is revealed by Reed's listing of Darden's emotions which are all sympathetic to the white status quo.⁶⁰ Darden's emotions remind one of Poop's willingness to be the alienated martyr of political correctness.⁶¹ Nonetheless, Reed ignores Darden as the real target of this episode is the unnamed "white media expert" and his claim that "it is a shame that black juries are so biased that they can't convict a black criminal." As in the previously described episodes, Reed deconstructs such a claim by introducing a reality cross-check: as of 2009, 80 percent of male inmates in US prisons were African American ("USA Quick Facts from the US Census Bureau" n. pag.). Given that not all juries are all white, some of them include African Americans. Consequently, African Americans do send other African Americans to prison. This train of argumentation rehabilitates the questioned ethics of black juries and also answers Reed's rhetorical question as to who is putting African Americans in jail. Also, by showing African American juries as capable of making ethical decisions, Reed's argument-based satire discredits the notion that the O.J. Simpson jury failed to meet the standard of white juries.

The final example of argument-based satire attacks the media's attempt to overemphasize the importance of the death of Nicole Simpson and thus empower the reading of O.J. Simpson as the archetypal dangerous African American man. The example objects to a claim which exaggerates the importance of the trial. The novel's protagonist finds the claim hard to accept, especially once he puts it in context with other important trials of the twentieth century:

When the press characterized the Simpson trial as the trial of the century, in a century in which the Nuremberg trials had occurred, were they saying that one blonde is worth more than all of the victims of the Nazis? That this trial was more important than tribunals for the murderers from Serbia and Rwanda? ... If Nicole is worth

60 Crenshaw suggests that Darden's involvement in the process must have been "difficult to negotiate, his position was not unlike that of any number of African American professionals subject to the demands of being a team player within institutions where the rules of the game seem to require a painful silence about the racial dynamics of the institutional project" (129). To rely on Henry Louis Gates, Jr. once more, it can be said that Darden received a position in the system yet, in exchange, what he can and cannot say is "already scripted" (*Tradition and the Black Atlantic* 80).

61 In this respect Crenshaw speaks of Darden's self-appointed role "as the lone black defender of justice" (128). Much like in the episode including Toobin and Mailer, one can note that Darden thus implies a sweeping generalisation in which all the other African Americans are wrong.

more than all the victims of the Nazis, this blonde has to be worth more than all of the women in Asia. (32-3)

This satirical episode exposes the skewed standards of the white press. Reed accuses it of being myopic because even though Nicole Simpson's death was undoubtedly a crime, the 20th century, unfortunately, had its share of much graver and more ominous crimes. Yet, Reed is not content with only calling a spade a spade. He also questions the premise on which it is built by putting it into the context of the history of the 20th century by mentioning the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides and the Nuremberg trials. What unites these genocides are their Eastern European, Rwandan and Jewish victims, who are apparently less important to the American press than one American. By using such a context, Reed again criticises the implicit concept of the racial chain of being according to which an American woman is simply more valuable than all the aforementioned victims combined. This not only shows the claim as invalid but also discredits the white media behind it. Further, Reed's usage of argument-based satire enables the reader to see the trial of O.J. Simpson in the broader context of it being just one unfortunate case in a plethora of similar unfortunate cases. Hence, by deconstructing the claim regarding the uniqueness of the trial, Reed weakens the reading of Simpson as the archetypal dangerous African American man. For if the trial is no longer seen as the trial of the century, then O.J. Simpson can be seen as a possible trespasser of the law instead of the confirmation of a stereotype that decreases the value of a whole race.