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# **Pragmatic Pugilist: the Social and Cultural Thought of Ishmael Reed**

Wendy Hayes-Jones

Thesis submitted to the University of Wales in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Swansea University 2013

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# Summary

## Pragmatic Pugilist: the Social and Cultural Thought of Ishmael Reed

This thesis examines the social and cultural thought of the acclaimed and controversial African American author Ishmael Reed. It explores the ideas that have informed Reed's essays and novels since the 1960s, placing his works within the American social and cultural contexts to which he responded. Reed often envisions himself as a prize-fighter, taking on the hypocrisy and racism which he detects within mainstream American journalism and in academia. But Reed is a pragmatic prize-fighter in the sense that he consistently varies his punches according to the contexts in which he finds himself, and in reaction to the different antagonists which are the targets of his critiques. By exploring how Reed grounds his work in controversy and paradox my study aims to reveal a complex cross fertilisation and synergy between Reed's novels and essays. To this end I consider the contrast between Reed's emphasis on the vitality of African and American oral and literary traditions, and his simultaneous declaration of war on the persistence of race and black and white stereotyping in the USA. He sets American cultural and political ideals in opposition to African American realities, thus allowing his writings to function as counter-narratives that foreground the racial tensions still inherent in American society.

My focus is on some of the central contradictions in Ishmael Reed's writings. This thesis is divided into three main sections which have allowed to me to analyse, within Reed's complex and interpenetrating prose works, some of the main thematic areas of his fiction and some of the key arguments developed in his essays. The first section explores the role of the intellectual and Reed's conception of his own vocation as a writer. The second engages with issues of race, ethnicity and multiculturalism, while the final section explores Reed's interventions in debates around gender. Rather than seeking to establish a single position that can be associated with Reed, I draw attention to the ambivalences and paradoxes within his thought and writings. Reed presents himself as the committed radical engaging enthusiastically with the complex relationships between ethnic groups, whilst simultaneously championing the Black community. Yet this self-image conflicts with the conservative and misogynist strains in his work. This thesis aims to explore, explain and understand such paradoxes and thus to shed a new light on one of the most fascinating writers of the last fifty years.

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## Abbreviations

(TFLP)—*The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 1999)

(YBRBD)—*Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 2000)

(MJ)—*Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Scribner, 1996)

(LDLR)—*The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 2000)

(FTC)—*Flight to Canada* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976)

(TTTW)—*The Terrible Twos* (London: W.H. Allen, 1990)

(RE)—*Reckless Eyeballing* (London: W.H. Allen, 1989)

(TTTH)—*The Terrible Threes* (New York: Atheneum Macmillan, 1989)

(JBS)—*Japanese by Spring* (New York and London: Penguin, 1996)

## Introduction: Locating Ishmael Reed

In 1999, Ishmael Reed recalled the aftermath of winning the 1975 Rosenthal Award, when an 'inebriated' Ralph Ellison shouted, 'Ishmael Reed, you ain't nothin' but a gangster and a con artist'.<sup>1</sup> On reflection Reed conceded that 'maybe I had it coming' because he was aware that Ellison had probably taken offence at a question he posed in the mid nineteen sixties. Reed enquired whether Ellison had ever written a great work or 'whether it was praised because Freudianism was the vogue'.<sup>2</sup> Although many years had elapsed, Ellison's insults evidently continued to irk Reed and, as his commentary unfolds, his reflection on the literary stature of Ellison during the black culture wars reads as a spirited retaliation:

Though he and his friends get called 'the New York Intelligentsia,' not one of them has contributed a single idea to world thought. Instead they have a history of paying blind obeisance to European hand-me-down theories and rewarding only those who share their values.

The Ellison Jrs. and the other members of the cult may find it difficult to believe but John A. Williams and John O. Killens wrote books that were just as good as *Invisible Man*. Both authors were more prolific [...] So why was Ellison lionized? There are a number of reasons. The New York Literary Establishment was afraid of the competition from a wave of young 1960s African American writers [...] And so part of Ellison's job was to keep the natives down, a designated role that he played for forty years. But Ellison's supporters also denied him the options they reserved for themselves. They could be separatists and integrationists, insiders and outsiders, ethnic and universal, whenever they pleased. Ellison could only be an American [...] I decided that in New York one could follow one of two models. One could surround oneself with groupies who followed the leader's path, that of coasting for a lifetime on little work and beating down the younger generation with sneers and one-liners, except for a handful of sycophants, or one could be a Langston Hughes, who encouraged and assisted the younger generation. One could write to please one's patrons or like John A. Williams, Chester Himes and John O. Killens tell the truth and be marginalized as a result.<sup>3</sup>

By any standards Reed's words are remarkably harsh and denigrate Ellison's exceptional literary achievement as the first African American to win The National Award in 1953, the

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<sup>1</sup> Reed received this award in 1975 from the National Institute of Arts and Letters for his novel *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. See *The Reed Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. xviii. Ellison's public accusation of dishonesty and conspiracy against Reed in 1975 was later re-fabulated and infused into Reed's 1986 novel *Reckless Eyeballing*, when an altercation takes place between two rival black playwrights: Jake Brashford and Ian Ball. I will discuss this at more length in chapter three.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. xviv.

first of many international accolades.<sup>4</sup> His critique of Ellison's artistic ascendancy in the nineteen sixties is largely based on the latter's embrace of European modes seen most vividly in his acclaimed novel *Invisible Man*.<sup>5</sup> This work was deemed to be highly experimental for African American novels at the time of its composition, for Ellison had drawn from a number of cultural strands associated with Modernist thought. The novel shows the influences of Existentialism, Surrealism, Freud and James Joyce in addition to numerous European classical literary antecedents including Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare and Voltaire.<sup>6</sup> Given Ellison's less than prodigious literary output Reed wondered why the author of *Invisible Man* and a few essays and short stories should be deemed the arbiter of taste for African American writing by the white establishment.<sup>7</sup> Reed hints darkly at betrayal and he implies that Ellison, to be symbiotic with white America, became fully American by adopting and selling out to a dominant monolithic conception of white culture and consciousness.<sup>8</sup> Reed alleged that Ellison heavily criticised the literary efforts of a young generation of blacks, and even earlier in the nineteen seventies Reed stipulated that Ellison's appraisal of black writers was based on his stock critique of their 'lack of "craftsmanship"'.<sup>9</sup> Reed questioned how qualified Ellison was to judge young writers given that he had not 'ever read many' of their

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<sup>4</sup> In 1969 Ellison received the Presidential Medal of Freedom and in 1970 he was made a Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts des Lettres in France. In 1985 he was awarded the National Medal of Arts.

<sup>5</sup> *Invisible Man* was published in 1952. The novel became a modern classic and received the National Book Award in 1953.

<sup>6</sup> The innermost structure of the novel is not linear but circular and the critic Yoshinobu Hakutani, classes Ellison as an African American modernist who, 'relies on the techniques of French writers like André Malraux and Paul Valéry' to depict the confusion of the protagonist and his search for meaning in human existence. Ellison appropriated European experimentalism and improvised this through blues rituals and jazz riffs to form a typically black form of expressive blues. See Hakutani, *Cross-cultural visions in African American Modernism: from Spatial Narrative to Jazz Haiku* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), pp. 9, 47. ; See also Mark Busby's discussion of Ellison and the European tradition in *Ralph Ellison* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), pp. 65-70.

<sup>7</sup> In an earlier interview in 1985 Reed claimed that the 'New York intellectuals [...] Saul Bellow and Alfred Kazin were instrumental in Ralph Ellison's getting the National Book Award'. See Mel Watkins, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1985, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed* ed. by Bruce Dick and Amrijit Singh (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), pp. 245-257 (p. 246).

<sup>8</sup> I draw here on W. E. B. du Bois's vision of 'double consciousness' that captured the complex racial and nationalistic components of being black and American. In the *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) he writes of 'the sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others [...] two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings'. See du Bois, 'The Souls of Black Folk' in *Three Negro Classics* ed. by John Hope Franklin (New York: Avon Books, 1965), pp. 209-389 (p. 215). Reed implies the dual nature of the African American consciousness has been suppressed in Ellison's case. ; Patrick McGee has a similar view for he comments that a black writer need not 'avoid the influence of "canonical" white writing' though when he/she feels 'obligated to distance themselves from Richard Wright or [...] Zora Neale Hurston, while aligning themselves with 'Eliot, Pound [...] they serve the canonical interests of a predominantly white critical establishment whether they intend to or not'. See Patrick McGee, *Ishmael Reed and the Ends of Race* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997), p. 106.

<sup>9</sup> Ishmael Reed, 'The Writer as Seer: Ishmael Reed on Ishmael Reed' 1974, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 59-73 (p. 66). Here Reed explains that Ellison's 'idea of craftsmanship is merely giving the synopsis of a Hemingway or Faulkner novel', a message that was performing a great disservice to young writers.

books, and though occasionally expressing ‘a high regard’ for Ellison’s work, Reed remains very unforgiving of Ellison even after twenty five years.<sup>10</sup>

I begin by citing this critique of Ellison because strategically in this thesis it begins to answer the important questions of how are we to locate the voice and artistic trajectory of Ishmael Reed, and how American literary culture is depicted and re-imagined in his work. Reed’s tone is often based on provocation and antagonism, embodying his reactions to social and cultural issues, a feature that led to his adoption of a, ‘*Writin is Fightin*’ persona.<sup>11</sup> Reed’s voice is resonant of his nascent self, outraged by the limitations placed on young black writers at the time of his own artistic beginnings in the nineteen sixties when he boldly stated that his job as a writer was to ‘humble Judaeo-Christian culture’.<sup>12</sup> As Reed ponders over the tense literary politics of that era he is unequivocal about the writers and models of artistic endeavour who win his approval. The advancement of new artists through a process of encouragement and mentoring, whilst preserving a sense of aesthetic truth in the face of a concomitant marginality, are presented by Reed as the most honourable and worthy courses to take. This discourse pinpoints his literary pathway as he makes clear his opposition to writing for white or black middle class patronage or to following those he terms as hyper-critical and often famous writers of little output and merit. Notably Reed champions Langston’s Hughes as the black mentor par excellence and applauds the lesser known and underappreciated John A. Williams, Chester Himes and John O. Killens because he argues they were overshadowed and neglected by the black cultural community.<sup>13</sup> This point exemplifies Reed’s tendency to champion the ‘under-dog’ or the dispossessed and he reveres these figures for what he deems to be their exceptional contribution to the development of black literature. Thus Reed profiles Himes in three of his essay anthologies as the best African American detective author, while Williams’s most famous work *The Man Who Cried*

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Crouch, ‘Interview with Ishmael Reed’ 1976, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 96-110 (p. 100).

<sup>11</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Writin’ is Fightin’: Thirty-Seven Years of Boxing on Paper* (New York: Atheneum Macmillan, 1990). When Mel Watkins, the New York critic, suggested that the quality of Reed’s prose was equitable with the youthful Muhammad Ali’s boxing ring style, Reed adopted Ali’s mantra, ‘writin is fightin’.

<sup>12</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (New York: Atheneum Macmillan, 1989), p. 133.

<sup>13</sup> Reed first met Langston Hughes in New York and he acknowledges Hughes’s generosity in introducing him to the editor who subsequently published Reed’s first novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, at Doubleday in 1967. Reed commended Hughes for continuing to live in relative obscurity in Harlem despite his literary fame. See Shamoan Zamir, ‘An Interview with Ishmael Reed, 1988’, *Callaloo*, 17 (1994), 1131-1157 (p. 1133).



*I Am*, is regarded by Reed as the ‘most important novel of the sixties’ for its ‘skill and control’.<sup>14</sup> I will discuss these authors later, in chapter three.

On further analysis Reed’s attack on Ellison is significant because it provides markers for identifying the two central arguments that I wish to pursue in this thesis. Firstly, Reed’s assertions are made within the context of racial tensions, both within the African American community, and in American society more broadly. Questions of artistic freedom for the Black artist are always raised by Reed within a tangled literary culture that relegates African American writing to the borders of the American canon. Indeed, Reed continually locates himself as an ‘outsider’, a self-description that I will analyse and discuss as this thesis proceeds. He is an ethnically and racially marked author remote from the ‘Western’ definition of a literary centre in the same way as Toni Morrison or Amiri Baraka but Reed has attempted to accentuate the notion of his marginality by refusing any alliance to the Black Arts Movement, Black Power and Black Nationalism. Reed upholds his place on the periphery whilst shifting beyond the prevailing polemic on racism and gender within the black community, to engage with the wider dynamics of hybridity and multiculturalism in contemporary America. I propose to show that there is something quintessentially ‘American’ about Reed’s claim to ‘outsiderness’. He is, after all, an American citizen who fundamentally accepts the core American democratic values of vigorous debate and freedom of expression that can result in criticism of all institutions and icons.

If Reed views himself as an outsider, he also imagines himself a pugilist. Reed’s inclination for polemics marks him as one who engages in vitriolic disputes where he eschews political correctness to continually clash with politicians, intellectuals, literary theorists, feminists and the media who might be black or white. His views often vacillate depending on the adversary

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<sup>14</sup> Reed dedicates his poetry anthology *19 Necromancers from Now* to the “‘The Great Mojo Bojo’: Chester Himes”, ed. by Ishmael Reed (New York: Double Day & Company, 1970), p. x. ; See also the dedicated chapters to Himes in Reed’s *Writin’ is Fightin’: Thirty-Seven Years of Boxing on Paper*, pp.123-131, and *Airing Dirty Laundry*, pp. 152-156. Chester Himes was more celebrated within French literary and intellectual circles, for his detective novels, and he resided in Europe but at heart he remained American. Williams never recovered after being rejected by the American Academy of Arts and Letters for his nomination to the Prix de Rome in 1962, but Reed felt that Williams was overshadowed by Richard Wright in the forties and fifties. See John Domini, ‘Ishmael Reed: A Conversation with Ishmael Reed’ 1977, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 128-143 (p. 133). ; Killens is not mentioned in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* though he has been the focus of critical attention for his 1971 satire, *The Cotillon*. He received two Pulitzer Prize nominations though no awards.

of the moment and on the volume of belligerence he need muster so that he might project his arguments more successfully. I argue that Reed's writings present a number of self-contradictory positions and can be visualised in terms of the pugilistic engagements of ducking and diving within the boxing ring of American culture. These mark him as the consummate pragmatist whose writing has a strong resonance with the system of American philosophical pragmatism. Pragmatism has been described by Cornel West, a leading African American academic and critic, as 'a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment'.<sup>15</sup> Reed's writing issues a constant stream of alternative critiques. For example, when commenting earlier on the rather contradictory freedoms reserved for Ellison's supporters, Reed could almost be talking about himself. He too embodies a number of key oppositions: insiderism v. outsiderism; multiculturalism v. Afrocentrism; political radicalism v. conservatism; Utopianism v. pragmatism, and social realism v. spiritualism. The point of these potentially endless dualisms is not to simplify Reed's thought into a series of fixed binary subject positions, rather I am interested in exploring the powerful counter currents at work in his writing. He has oscillated between all these stances with a voice that occasions a number of trenchant personal disagreements about the role and responsibility of American artists, politicians, academics and journalists both black and white.

It might be valuable, initially, to map Ishmael Reed's career as author, essayist and activist. His life and career were initially influenced by his experiences in Buffalo, where from a young age he became aware of the enforcement of segregation and police activities in the context of the Civil Rights Movement. For Reed this opened up the wider questions of American identity and his writing and journalistic career began here on the margins in the nineteen sixties. He served with the *Empire Star Weekly* where he had the opportunity to interview Malcolm X whom he credits with radicalising his style.<sup>16</sup> After moving to New York City in 1962 he edited the *Advance* newspaper in New Jersey and became instrumental

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<sup>15</sup> Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 5. West bases his ideas on William James and the American logician C.S. Pierce, whereby the assessment of truth or the validity of a hypothesis is measured by the rightness or usefulness of its practical consequences. James argued 'that if you follow the pragmatic method you cannot look on any such words as closing your quest. You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, as a program for more work'. See *Modernism: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Steven Matthews (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 150.

<sup>16</sup> Reed confirms that Malcolm X's 'way of talking changed [...his] style. My writing became more direct.' See, Wolfgang Binder and Harald Zapf, 'Ishmael Reed' in *American Contradictions: Interviews with Nine American Writers* ed. by Binder and Breinig (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1995), pp. 101-110 (p.104).

in founding the *East Village Other*, an underground, though national, newspaper. He became a member of the *Umbra* writers workshop where he came into contact for the first time with other black poets, but even more significantly, this affiliation was to a writers organization that was instrumental in creating the Black Arts Movement. Reed declared himself to be ‘the first patron’ of its ‘intellectual and aesthetic wing’ by financially supporting some of the writers from *Umbra*.<sup>17</sup> This proved to be a major catalyst in Reed’s thinking for he was immersed in the spirit and aspirations of this movement, defined by Larry Neal as ‘the spiritual sister of the Black Power concept’ proposing ‘a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconology’.<sup>18</sup> Reed was energised by African American artistic developments in writing and music and he classed the nineteen sixties as ‘the strident decade’, and as, ‘The Decade that Screamed’.<sup>19</sup> This was partly due to his increased activism and involvement with individuals from Black Power. However, his enthusiasm for this ‘screaming’ decade was soon tempered by a faltering support of the *Umbra* workshop in 1964 with his publication of a ‘Black Power’ article that resulted in the loss of friends because of his claim that ‘there were more black “Americans”, than black “Nationalists”’.<sup>20</sup> This assertion was instrumental in Reed’s alienation from *Umbra* since he implied that the proponents of Black Nationalism were only a minor influence, a factional minority in fact who did not speak for him or for African American people as a whole.

Moving to Berkeley, California in 1967, away from the central hegemony of East Coast publishing houses, seemed to spur on Reed’s creativity. He established and collaborated in a number of ventures: the *Yardbird* publishing company (1971), the Reed, Cannon and Johnson Communications Company (1973), The Before Columbus Foundation (1976) and I. Reed Books (1978). Multicultural publications were soon forthcoming in the form of the *Yardbird Reader* (1972 -1976), *Yardbird Lives!* (1978), *Yardbird* magazine (1978), *Quilt* magazine (1976), the *Calafia* anthology (1979), the *Mosaic* series (1995), and *Konch* magazine

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<sup>17</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (New York: Atheneum Macmillan, 1989), p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Larry Neal contended that, ‘The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from this community [...] As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic [...] The Black Arts and Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American’s desire for self-determination and nationhood. See Neal, ‘The Black Arts Movement’ in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, pp. 1960-1972 (p. 1960).

<sup>19</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p. 142. This was exemplified in his poem of the same name. ‘The Decade that Screamed’ is discussed in more detail in chapter two.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

(1990).<sup>21</sup> All these endeavours attest to what Robert Elliot Fox calls Reed's dedication 'to disseminating the others' sides of the story' in a way that challenged readers' ideas about what texts and authors should constitute the canon of American literature.<sup>22</sup> In California Reed was free to cultivate what he described as a 'colourful gumbo culture' which would establish a new centre of multicultural literature to challenge the New York literary fraternity.<sup>23</sup> He was spurred on to champion the vitality of African/Native/ Asian/Irish American and Chicano voices that would not normally find their way into national presses. Reed facilitated their publication as part of the densely woven multicultural tapestry of American textuality.

The range of Reed's publications proceeds apace in spite of the fact that he announced he was against 'big conglomerates because: they are stupid; they are dinosaurs without imagination [...] selling us crap in books and movies'.<sup>24</sup> *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967), *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1978) were published by Doubleday; *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974) and *Flight to Canada* (1976) were printed by Random House; and *The Terrible Twos* (1982), *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986), *The Terrible Threes* (1989), *Writin' is Fightin': Thirty-Seven Years of Boxing on Paper* (1990) and *Japanese by Spring* (1993) were published by Atheneum, Macmillan. This range of publication activity was reflected in the range of periods and issues addressed in his works: the differential and intensity of human suffering during the period of nineteenth century American slavery and the ghettoization of Jews in Eastern Europe pre-occupy *Flight to Canada*; racism, nationalism and the clash between Western and African culture pervade *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*; *Reckless Eyeballing* and *Japanese by Spring* are relentless in their exposure and deconstruction of racial and gender stereotypes; while *The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes* cogitate on the distribution of wealth and affirmative action in a vast multicultural nation. Moreover, all of Reed's novels are currently available in reprint editions from the

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<sup>21</sup> Five editions of *Yardbird Reader* were published over four years. *Mosaic* consisted of four separate anthologies of *Hispanic/ Asian/ Native and African American Literature* edited by Nicolas Kinellos, Shawn Wong, Gerald Vizenor and Al Young respectively. Each contained a generic 'Foreword' by Ishmael Reed himself.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Elliot Fox, 'Mumbo Gumbo', *Transition*, 0.67 (1995), 102-112 (p. 103).

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Henry, 'A *Melus* Interview: Ishmael Reed' 1982, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 205-218 (p. 217). Reed's Gumbo writing style can best be described as a metaphorical 'throwing into the soup of whatever ingredients one can find'. For Reed this means drawing on and synthesising a number of literary forms and sources that can transcend time, history and place.

<sup>24</sup> Cameron Northouse, 'Ishmael Reed', in *Conversations with Writers II* ed. by Richard Layma, and others (New York: Gale Research, 1978), pp. 212-254 (pp. 243-244).

Dalkey Archive Press which means that Reed is still very much in the market and an influential contributor to contemporary social and cultural debates.

This range of activity indicates that there is something rather paradoxical about Reed's claim to be speaking from the margins. The majority of Reed's essays were originally published as articles within leading and prestigious magazines, newspapers and op-eds such as *The New York Times*, *The New York Review*, *The Washington Post*, *The San Francisco Examiner*, *Playboy* and *Le Monde*. Later these pieces found their way into Reed's essay anthologies and together with his novels were printed by major commercial publishers. Reed observed that if he has 'a beef about newspaper coverage', he 'can always write a letter' which is 'to their credit' usually published.<sup>25</sup> He is frequently consulted by journalists from the *New York Times* or News networks such as NBC about the media representation of black people in America.<sup>26</sup> Yet conversely in 1978 Reed expressed surprise that mainstream organizations such as Doubleday published his novels at first, his position being that there are good editors who recognise good novels even allowing for the fact that they are not commercial.<sup>27</sup> Reed might dispute the power of corporations because of their interest in selling blockbusters for profit rather than publishing alternative fiction, poetry or drama, but on this occasion it would appear that he claimed to understand their principles, preferring pragmatically not to quarrel with Doubleday because he accepted that they publish his books. Reed nevertheless remains very active in alternative and small press publications. He remains sceptical about the domination of the East Coast literary movement but he is resolute in his belief that setting up a counter culture in California allows for a more individual artistic vision.

The paradoxical nature of Reed's stance may be summarised in his own description of his position: 'Here's the paradox. I live in a country that's been good to me but is also at war with me'.<sup>28</sup> Reed is self-aware of this contradiction for in his non-fiction he pathologizes the United States as 'a pig-out nation that dumps its slops on the entity known as the black community'.<sup>29</sup> In the following discussion I will seek to explore Reed's dialectic of 'outsiderism' and 'insiderism' bearing in mind that any discussion of margin/centre is

<sup>25</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry*, p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xi-xiii, xix, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Reed expresses a preference for the small, cottage industry press as it enabled publishers to take risks and keep control though he notes that his novels 'sell well in paperback' in the commercial press. See Northouse, 'Ishmael Reed', *Conversations with Writers II*, pp. 221- 222.

<sup>28</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Another Day at the Front: Dispatches from the Race War* (New York: Basic Books, 2003)p. xlv.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xl.

problematized because of the history of slavery in the African American tradition. Black slaves had to contend with an American hegemony that both commoditized and isolated them, and their peculiar position meant they were at once inside *and* outside a white culture with the status of being enshrined in a ‘centre’ of civilisation yet totally disempowered by it. Indeed Reed forges a deliberate link with this past,

People like me and a lot of others on the west coast are like outlaws [...] We’re like the old conjure men out on the edge of the forest who were not in the plantation system, who were removed from it, and that give us a certain amount of freedom.<sup>30</sup>

Reed’s words are provocative and draw on the visual framework of slavery and the plantation system so that he can position himself on the periphery. The conjure men were often ex-slaves who were believed to hold occult powers. They tended to offer consolation to other slaves and would generally obstruct slave-owners from separating slaves for relocation or auction.<sup>31</sup> Reed believes there is a natural continuum between his own antithetical writing and the conjuring practices of day to day racial opposition in the past.

Reed’s link to *Umbra*, the black writers’ guild, involved him in what can be typically defined as an outsider pressure group in the nineteen sixties. Here the artists tended to associate themselves with the violent potential of black activism to advocate for political change. When factions arose in *Umbra* magazine in 1963 over a decision not to publish a poem that critiqued President Kennedy, Reed and other ‘dissidents’ felt the publication should go ahead regardless of Kennedy’s assassination in the same year.<sup>32</sup> Since the poem had already been accepted for publication before the president’s murder Reed and similar minded black writers supported the move to publish the poem and he exclaimed proudly how ‘the new generation of Afro-Americans [...] will not be consigned to the cultural slave quarters as were our geniuses of the past’.<sup>33</sup> At this point Reed became engaged in what he later described as ‘a form of “cultural nationalism”’ which demonstrated his solidarity with other black artists

<sup>30</sup> Rebekah Presson, ‘Ishmael Reed Interview’ 1988, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 303-313 (p. 310).

<sup>31</sup> See Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the American Conjuring Tradition* (London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 15-16. In her fascinating history Chireau argues that the spirituality of Conjure men was drawn from a mixture of Christianity and supernatural beliefs and was an important psychological device for many African Americans. They supported the other slaves in their daily racial conflicts with white slaveholders, often protecting them from violent punishments.

<sup>32</sup> Reed notes that two out of the three editors argued that publication at this point would be in bad taste in the light of Kennedy’s death. The dissidents believed that any poem acceptable at *Umbra* had to be above any historical events. See Ishmael Reed, *19 Necromancers from Now* (New York: Double Day, 1970) p. xx.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.

because they supported the democratic principle of freedom of speech, but this soon gave way to a fear that this form of nationalism could become entwined with a specific aesthetic thus generating negative associations with fascism, separatism and censorship. Reed felt the dangers of black separatism not only in activism but also in literature where the idea of a distinctive black aesthetic separate from what Addison Gayle, Jr. called 'the polluted mainstream of Americanism' was anathema to him.<sup>34</sup> He became increasingly uneasy with political and cultural movements which called for a suppression of individualism and insisted on conformity. Reed thus came to resist the collaborative nature of the black arts enterprise and so while technically remaining inside the black community he stepped away from the movement to detach himself from what was, in his view, a prescriptive set of assumptions about blackness.

Reed blasted his concerns to black critics with the publication of his second novel, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* in 1969, when his disaffection for the black arts was made manifest. Loop Garoo, the central protagonist of the novel announces, 'what if I write circuses? No-one says a novel has to be one thing'.<sup>35</sup> Garoo, the shape-shifting black cowboy, regards himself as an outlaw artist who argues that fiction, 'can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o'clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons'.<sup>36</sup> As Reed's mouthpiece, Garoo represents the view that a writer's imagination should not be placed in a creative straightjacket. He argues that fiction may comprise surrealism, documentary and multiple forms at the behest of the author. Play and humour are foregrounded over realism and seriousness because Reed makes the astute point that everyone has different ideas about what the black aesthetic might entail. He did not subscribe to the black arts views about black artistic isolation and black responsibility and he disagreed with Hoyt Fuller's assertion 'that white readers- and white critics-cannot be expected to recognize and to empathize with the subtleties and significance of black style and technique'.<sup>37</sup> Reed believed that writers should feel free to borrow from other traditions, and that blacks should be free to criticise other blacks in the same terms as they would use when criticizing whites.

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<sup>34</sup> Addison Gayle Jr., 'The Black Aesthetic' in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, pp. 1870-1877 (p. 1876). The black aesthetic, as envisaged by Gayle, was to inspire black writers to feel like true African Americans and in liberating themselves from mainstream writings they should attempt to wage war against society. Moreover the black critic was encouraged not to think 'how beautiful is a melody, play, a poem, or a novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play, or novel made the life of a single black man'.

<sup>35</sup> Reed, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), p. 36.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Hoyt Fuller, 'Towards a Black Aesthetic' in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, pp. 1810-1816 (p. 1815).

Thus Reed rejected the black arts tendency to view all African Americans as having the same backgrounds, interests and goals and he resisted the idea of having one particular blueprint for literature, a feature which he described being 'closer to Nazism or super-race philosophies [...] than to the black aesthetic as it is perceived and experienced in this hemisphere'.<sup>38</sup> By the nineteen seventies Reed's resentment of mandatory rules about providing positive portraits of African Americans and negative portraits of whites had boiled over to the extent that he instigated a number of caustic feuds with the black aesthetic critics. He believed they were too urban and academic and he recommended that Addison Gayle 'should be run out of town' for 'thwarting innovation among Afro-American artists by posing as their guardian'.<sup>39</sup> In the ensuing war of words Reed implicated and publically charged Gayle and Houston Baker Jr., a leading African American critic, with entering into a conspiracy with the publishing companies. Reed expounded the view that 'there was a nonaggression pact signed between the traditional liberal critics and the black aesthetic critics' and claimed that this took place at 'the same time that Doubleday didn't renew' his contract.<sup>40</sup> Reed was convinced that a partnership of black and white critics had been formed to keep African American writers in their place by subscribing to a set of blueprints that would not allow for experimentation. Furthermore he implied that as a result of his failure to toe the line they contributed to the blocking of his own career with a national publishing company.

This discussion would appear to locate Reed at the periphery of cultural debates, even within the black community, but the notion of Reed as the 'outsider' cannot always be maintained. He seeks marginality because he believes that his independence will afford him the artistic freedom that is unavailable within literary black culture, but it is arguably the liberalism and heterogeneity of American society which allows Reed to experiment and allows him the space to engage in discursive critiques of Western values and to 'humble Judaeo-Christian culture'.<sup>41</sup> This opens up Reed to alternative traditions rather than locating his art solely in the black traditions of America. Thus in an 'act of literary defiance' Reed constructed his unique philosophy, *The Neo-HooDoo Manifesto* in 1972, to offer a totalising artistic system

<sup>38</sup> Shamoan Zamir, 'An interview with Ishmael Reed', *Callaloo* 17 (1994), 1131-1157 (p. 1153).

<sup>39</sup> Crouch, 'Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1976, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, p. 99; Domini, 'Ishmael Reed: A Conversation with John Domini' 1977, p. 135.

<sup>40</sup> Reed also argues that it was the East Coast Intellectuals and publishing houses who were determining trends in black writing from the nineteen fifties. See Reginald Martin, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed' 1983, <<http://aalbc.com/authors/ishmael.htm>> [accessed November 21 2008], p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p. 133.



to counter black critics and white western culture.<sup>42</sup> Written as a prose poem, the key lines pronounce that ‘Neo-HooDoo believes that every man is an artist and every artist a priest’ later followed by ‘Neo-HooDoo borrows from Ancient Egyptians [...] from Haiti Africa and South America / Neo-HooDoo comes in all styles and moods’.<sup>43</sup> This maintains that those who embrace the multicultural spirituality of Neo-HooDoo are Black Red [...] and occasionally White’, so artists can be found throughout the United States and beyond.<sup>44</sup> This points to Reed’s fascination for the unfolding of the American multiculturalist experience, which is a theme that perennially occupies many social and critical commentators. Undoubtedly Reed engages with this multicultural context wholeheartedly because he accepts America for what it is—‘the United States is unique in the world. The world is here!’—he exclaims throughout his writings.<sup>45</sup> Reed fundamentally embraces the view of America as being ‘exceptional’ in that the nation’s history of immigration has led to a society of unparalleled heterogeneity. This reveals the ‘insiderness’ of his constantly fluctuating insider-outsider position.

Even though Reed primarily dedicates himself to championing the African American campaign for equality, he thoroughly engages with the ideology of ‘America: the Multinational Society’.<sup>46</sup> He frequently makes the case that many white Americans have a mixed-ethnic and even black ancestry, a feature of the past that all too many, he claims, would find ‘sinister’ and would even subject this fact to a ‘southern denial’.<sup>47</sup> Reed revels in his multicultural contacts, describing himself as an ‘ethnic gate-crasher’ for above all Reed desires social harmony in America.<sup>48</sup> Since racial and ethnic injustice is the one issue that Reed foregrounds in all his writing, he goes to war with white politicians and the white infrastructure of law enforcement, to counter the views of white journalists and neo-conservatives who proclaim that the ‘typical welfare recipient is a lazy good-for-nothing dope-smoking black person, who [...] spends all of his time hanging out at welfare hotels’.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1993), p. 270.

<sup>43</sup> Reed, ‘The Neo-HooDoo Manifesto’ in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, pp. 2297-2301 (p. 2298).

<sup>44</sup> Reed, ‘The Neo-HooDoo Manifesto’, p. 2300.

<sup>45</sup> Reed, *Writin’ is Fightin’: Thirty-Seven Years of Boxing on Paper* (1990), p. 56.

<sup>46</sup> Reed discusses in detail the pattern of immigration into the United States from the nineteenth century. See *Writin’ is Fightin’* (1990), pp. 49-56.

<sup>47</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. 268.

<sup>48</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry*, p. 77.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197. This riposte is levelled against the white journalist and critic Pete Hamill, who formerly edited the *New York Post* and *The New York Daily News*. His columns tend to reflect the flavour of New York politics, crime and sport.

In his writings he generally strives to dismantle the idea of a stable and transcendent American identity and attempts to endorse black cultural affirmation while pronouncing a new sensibility towards racial empowerment through multiculturalism. His writings therefore always manifest a collision at some point with mainstream political and cultural issues. Reed embarks on disputes with American intellectuals and feminists and tackles key white politicians, critics and media celebrities such as Gloria Steinem, Hilary Clinton, Tipper Gore, Ronald Reagan, Nathan Glazer, Norman Mailer, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Don Imus. Reed's protests show that he maintains a distance from any militant fringe groups but as a polemicist he continues to question the presumptions and foundations of the mainstream cultural and political movements of America.

When creating outspoken fictional characters, Reed frequently invokes and identifies with the reckless cowboy figure living an unfettered lifestyle on the open range. The central character in his poem 'I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra' is 'Lord of the lash, the Loop Garou Kid'.<sup>50</sup> He is a heroic figure with noble black ancestry who specialises in confronting western values and white culture. Quintessentially the cowboy is a key figure in the American popular imagination, one who is also idealized as a masculine tough. Moreover, this character embodies Reed's fascination for representing an enduring and unconventional type from that lives on the fringe of society.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, this shows that Reed might be an active critic of America but he draws on American mythologies to mount his critique. This allows him to be outspoken because the nation's First Amendment endorsed and continues to protect freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly, and more importantly in Reed's case, the right to petition.<sup>52</sup> The liberal tradition in the United States is a breeding ground for those who attempt to cultivate 'outsiderist' positions, which means that there can be nothing more inherently American than one such as Reed who both criticises America while actively

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<sup>50</sup> This is the same Loop Garou as the black outlaw, the hero of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. He is a shapeshifter and in this transformation Reed draws on the pun of 'Lash La Rue', a former western movie star, from the nineteen forties, whose fame derived from the use of a fifteen feet bullwhip. Reed writes that 'in Buffalo, black kids like me learned about good and evil from cowboys like Larue and Roy Rogers.' See *The Reed Reader*, pp. xv-xvi. La Rue, born in Michigan in 1917, appeared briefly in films then carnivals and toured the south as an Evangelist.

<sup>51</sup> In film and television portrayals, actors such as John Wayne, Gary Cooper and Roy Rogers reinforced the model of robust masculinity.

<sup>52</sup> As a country of exceptional diversity, the U.S.A. was founded on the principle stemming from the Declaration of Independence in 1776 that people have the 'right of revolution', which means that not only do people have various rights, but when the government violates those rights they are justified in advocating change in that government. The Bill of Rights allows for no infringement on freedom of speech, or freedom of the press. Any citizen is allowed to petition for a governmental redress of grievances.

celebrating his marginality.<sup>53</sup> He is aware of the contradiction and writes that, ‘as a long-time critic of American institutions, I know, based upon my experience in other countries, that the United States, despite its problems, is still one of the most creative, experimental, and dynamic societies in the world’.<sup>54</sup> He knows that in spite of a number of racist instances America affords him the freedom to fight back and to dedicate his life to his writing.

The question of Reed’s location within cultural and political debates is rarely clear cut. His work may be seen to be informed by a form of pragmatism which I define, following Cornel West, as a practical alternative to theoretical reasoning, where an individual will be moved to act from a sense of democratic contingency. Thus Reed often contradicts his own assumptions to issue the most efficiently hard hitting responses in order to provoke adverse reactions from any critics of the black community. Even creatively Reed is a pragmatist for his fictional characters are vehicles for expounding the various statements and ideologies that Reed wants to communicate at given moments. Certainly within his discourse there is no one overarching voice though there may be some consistency in the themes that pre-occupy Reed. His scorn for the media, his repudiation of racial profiling, feminism, academicians, and his fervent advocacy of multiculturalism resurface throughout his writings because he holds these to be the most insurgent issues for the African American male today. Corresponding to whom Reed is confronting in argument, the reader may encounter a range of tones, which switch from the didactic to the parodic and from the polemical to the ironic.

In the nineteen eighties Reed summed up the inconclusive aspects of his writing:

I don’t have a predictable, computerized approach to political and social issues in a society in which you’re either for it or agin’ it. Life is much more complex [...] I’ve been criticised by the left, and for my sympathy with some “left-wing” causes I’ve been criticised by the right, though from time to time I’ve noticed that there doesn’t seem to be a dime’s worth of difference between the zealotry of the left and the right. I think that a certain amount of philosophical scepticism is necessary, and so regardless of the criticisms I receive from the left, the right, and the middle, I think it’s important to maintain a prolific writing job, as long as my literary legs hold up, because during these bland and yuppie times there are issues worth fighting about.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 89.

<sup>54</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. 52.

<sup>55</sup> Reed, *Writin’ is Fightin’* (1990), pp. 5- 6.

The shifting directions of Reed's indeterminacy are evident and whether left, right, central or peripheral they show that he is fixed at the hub of protest. Reed is never quiescent and it is unsurprising that Reed's critics have attempted to place him as a representative of certain ideologies only to find that his views have vacillated according to whom he is battling with. Penmanship therefore is conceived as a jabbing performance and Reed cultivates the literary profile of the erudite pugilist, punching out words and texts and 'sparring with impersonal opponents' as he encounters what he describes as the 'rudeness and hostility that a black male must confront in the United States'.<sup>56</sup>

A number of contradictions appear throughout Reed's work. For example, in a 1983 interview that focused on black artistry and the black critics, Reed appeared to change his mind regarding his tendency to provoke heated disputes. He revealed almost timidly,

[...] they know I don't go out to get controversies they come to me. For example a person recently hit me very hard in a magazine, made a lot of personal attacks on me, and when I replied, they said it was overkill. I thought my reply was very delicate.<sup>57</sup>

Reed's claim seems to be a volte face considering that he conceptualised his non-fiction as a series of instalments from the 'continuing autobiography of the mind', which he conceives as controversial enough to, 'stir things up a bit' and 'wake America from its easy chair and can of beer'.<sup>58</sup> Far from backing down from controversy, Reed is most usually consistent in his assertion that, if 'some of these disagreements will become vehement, I welcome this'.<sup>59</sup> He admits that his essays are 'direct and controversial to some, so much so that people threaten me with violence'.<sup>60</sup> Usually with the hope of challenging and reimagining American society and culture, Reed constantly invokes an evolving set of tensions between his political perspectives and personal artistic agendas.

Furthermore, in the nineteen sixties Reed had an aversion for the militancy of black nationalists and commented that they 'felt they had the right to tell people how to write and

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>57</sup> Reginald Martin, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1983, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 235-244 (p. 243).

<sup>58</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*, pp. 6, 7-8.

<sup>59</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. xliv.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. xli.

how to think'.<sup>61</sup> In 1990 he reverses his thinking entirely and exclaims 'I sort of miss the nationalists now because the feminists have more power [...] I don't plan to yield to this new crowd.'<sup>62</sup> By 1993 Reed profiled several former black nationalists very positively, including Elaine Brown and Bobby Seale, for bringing 'power to the people', and Eldridge Cleaver for the 'growth and beauty' of his 'genius'.<sup>63</sup> This was at the same time that Reed targeted feminists as the new recipients of his caustic critiques, and for being 'one of the most serious threats to black male well-being since the Klan'.<sup>64</sup> On another note Reed proclaims himself as the ardent champion of multiculturalism, taking pride in his African American, Cherokee and Irish ancestry.<sup>65</sup> However he appears to harbour resentment towards Asian Americans and Hispanics for their apparent seamless integration into the United States and for their hostility to African Americans. Reed takes this allegation very seriously even claiming that 'there may come a time when African Americans will wax nostalgic about the good old days when white racism was their only concern'.<sup>66</sup> He also demonstrates a fear of the consequences of further immigration because of the possibility that 'people of other colors may join the forces of white racism, which is how preceding generations of immigrants received a "whiteness" upgrade'.<sup>67</sup> His overriding concern is for the black community and he shows his dismay at the rate of ethnic assimilation and particularly the election when '70 per cent of American Muslims [...] voted for the Republicans'.<sup>68</sup> This is 'a party' that Reed claims is 'hostile to the interests' of African Americans.<sup>69</sup> Reed is self-aware of his contingent approach to other ethnicities, arguing that 'this statement may come as a surprise to those who have associated me with "multiculturalism", but just because my associates and I have been connected with writers and artists of different ethnic backgrounds since the 1960's doesn't mean that such intellectual camaraderie can be transmitted to the street level'.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Janice Edward Jenkins, 'Interview with Ishmael Reed on Rap' 1990, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 339-343 (p. 339).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), pp. 92, 103. See Reed's discussion of Brown, Seale and Cleaver pp. 87-94; 95-103. He gives great consideration and weight to their contribution to Civil Rights in the late nineteen sixties.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>65</sup> Reed writes of how he discovered his mixed ancestry in an essay appositely titled, 'Distant Cousins'. See *Airing Dirty Laundry*, pp. 267

<sup>66</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front: Dispatches from the Race War* (2003), p. x.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

Reed's polemics, by necessity, work in harmony with his own form of contextual pragmatism. Reed describes himself as 'a born muckraker', perennially on the side of justice for the black minority, investigating and attacking the vagaries of political and social institutions.<sup>71</sup> Yet surprisingly he does not wish to be considered as an embattled writer but as one who makes an effort to connect with his audience through writing. His solution is to approach 'life as mysterious, holy, profound, exciting, serious, and fun' claiming that the 'so-called 'humor' which appears in [...his] work is affirmative, positive. It teaches people, institutions, and me to be humble, not to take ourselves too seriously.'<sup>72</sup> But when describing his tendency to exacerbate heated disputes Reed explains,

I think it's probably my size. Somebody told me that if I were really petite or slight, I'd have made it in the literary world. But I look like a heavy weight boxer and I'm writing and doing lots of other things.<sup>73</sup>

Reed accentuates what some might regard as his physical unapproachability, but this is a feature that he actually savours. When Mel Watkins, the New York critic, compared Reed's prose with the fighting style of a youthful Muhammad Ali, Reed without question adopted Ali's mantra as poet of the ring, 'writin is fightin'.<sup>74</sup> Reed's essay style particularly attests to an adversarial literary spirit, which can be humorous, but caustic too. Reed's deliberate cultivation of the boxer-author metaphor is doubly significant in African American culture since the sport of boxing was a central part of black social and cultural history offering a route out of the ghetto for the black community. Also it provided the 'ability to persevere in the face of overwhelming odds', the means to transcend oppression, and, to facilitate racial uplift and pride.<sup>75</sup>

In Reed's case, the boxer paradigm also manifests the tensions between insiderism and outsiderism. For Gerald Early, in his critical survey of boxing, noted that,

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<sup>71</sup> West, *American Evasion of Philosophy*, p. 4. ; Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p.187. Reed uses this term quite self-consciously to refer to a group of American investigative reporters, novelists and critics from the late 1800's to the early 1900's, who investigated and exposed societal issues such as the appalling conditions in slums, prisons, factories, mines and child labour.

<sup>72</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), pp. 3-4, 6.

<sup>73</sup> Martin, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1983, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, p. 243.

<sup>74</sup> Boxing was one of the few sports to have a considerable black presence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Reed's publications *Writin' is Fightin': Thirty-seven Years of Fighting on Paper* and *Another Day at the Front: Dispatches from the Race War* are centred on the principle of fighting for justice and freedom in the black community.

<sup>75</sup> Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 332.

the boxer [...] symbolizes, in some respects, the individual in mass society: marginalized, alone and consumed by the very demands and acts of his consumption. Bruising is a kind of dumb play of the human crisis of identity in the modern society.<sup>76</sup>

However, the black boxer, from an already marginalized constituency, is exceptionally poised to revoke his marginality, establish a clearly defined persona, take on white America and fight back against prejudice on an international scale.<sup>77</sup> As a literary trope Reed deploys the boxer metaphor both to illustrate and undercut the dominant power of the centre, and, at the same time this is a perfect image to symbolize his pragmatism as he takes a range of different punches, jabbing away at anyone who criticises him personally or African American men in general. The inscription of his persona as the black literary 'tough' dominates Reed's texts but Early believes this practice is actually a form of 'persistently preposterous theatre' where the writer feels he 'is involved in a life-or-death struggle of considerable relevance for himself and his audience'.<sup>78</sup> Early also alleges that Reed is misguided in assuming that his actions are 'in some blatant way, courageous' because he 'sees himself as heroic in almost self-consciously adolescent terms'.<sup>79</sup> If Reed romanticises his own marginality, even as a cultural insider, he is consistent in his desire to contest those 'issues worth fighting about', especially the racial profiling and disempowerment suffered by all classes of African Americans but which affects the poor in particular.

The notion of the author as a marginalised literary pugilist informs many of Reed's texts culminating in 2008 with his essay collection, *Mixing It Up: Taking on the Media Bullies and Other Reflections*.<sup>80</sup> Nowhere is Reed's penchant for parodic contradiction more self-evident than in the fascinating illustration on the cover of this text. The African American figure in the lower right foreground could be a veiled representation of Reed himself. Here is a black figure expressing cultural hybridity through a motley dress code. His marginality is to some extent revoked by the wearing of the Stars and Stripes flag, thus centrally rooting him in Americanness. The woollen hat announces him as the plain speaking 'man in the street'

<sup>76</sup> Gerald Early, *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prize-fighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture* (Ontario: Ecco Press, 1994), p. xiv.

<sup>77</sup> See Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), pp. 178, 181. In this work Boddy profiles the careers of Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali to name but a few, and discusses their cultural development and social ascendancy.

<sup>78</sup> Early, p. 22

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Mixing It Up: Taking on the Media Bullies and Other Reflections* (Philadelphia: De Capo Press, 2008).

possibly speaking on behalf of all the underprivileged while the tunic hybridises a loose African robe and one worn by a boxer, though the boxer's boots and cuffs confirm a prize-fighter. The chequered trousers and the pose indicate the boxing promoter on the street corner advertising the forthcoming battle. The figure is superimposed on a barely discernible outline of a clock whose obscurity now becomes clear. Such a depiction is intentionally ironic but can be perceived as Reed's visionary and artistic attempt at self-representation showing a complex balance between his individual self and his community. After fifty seven years of boxing on paper here is Ishmael Reed, still standing at the end of the fifteenth round, still 'Mixing it up' throwing several punches and exchanging blows vigorously and aggressively. The issues that Reed began to complain about in the sixties are still tangled issues for African Americans and by continuing to challenge and expose the bullying tactics of white and black high profile media personalities he expresses the hope that his example will 'encourage members of the underclass to do the same'.<sup>81</sup>

Using a range of Reed's published work as the basis for this thesis (nine novels, seven anthologies selected poetry) I intend to focus on three perennial themes. Chapter One examines Reed's disaffected relationship with black and white intellectuals and considers his critique of the status of the intellectual and intellectual thought in the United States. I elaborate on his attempts to re-define the notion of an independent intellectual from past and contemporary culture and how these clash with the current perception of academics as the dominant authorities in American intellectual culture. There will be a discussion of Reed's critique of black academicians as he develops his own extra-institutional form of black pragmatism. Chapter Two explores Reed's subject position on race and ethnicity and his exposure of the ethnic stereotypes and generalisations that pervade literature and the media. While Reed advocates and defends the African American community he veers towards a Nationalist and an Afrocentric perspective even though he has long been an enthusiastic exponent of finding a workable definition of a common, inclusive culture within the ever changing ethnic dynamic of the United States. He is forced to wrestle with the contentious issue of forging an identity in a regime where individual identity is not simply a case of looking to one's blood relations or claiming one's historical roots or cultural tradition. Rather, one's identity is constructed against the norm of privileged white Anglo hegemony. This leads to a consideration of Reed's rejection of the notion of a post-racial America and a

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p.11.



discussion of why he adopts a model of the 'Cultural Mosaic' where all ethnicities can be recognised for their own unique traditions. Reed's troubled relationship with feminists and black female writers is the subject of Chapter Three. Here his literary pugilism is coupled with his personal drive to re-establish black masculinity in the face of oppression from white male patriarchy. I argue that Reed does not attempt to accommodate women and their feminist struggles with any conviction. Rather Reed, the outcast who dedicates himself to the critique of white hegemony in much of his writing is ironically very close to the American mainstream when it comes to questions of gender.

In this series of substantial chapters I hope to be both critical of Reed's blindnesses, and appreciative of his remarkable achievements. I believe him to be one of the most fascinating writers to have emerged following the social and political unrest of the 1960's. His works amount to a consistent struggle against the misrepresentation of African Americans in contemporary American culture. In bringing African American realities up against American ideals the writings of this pugilistic pragmatist function as counter-narratives which foreground the tensions still inherent within American culture.

## Chapter One:

# 'The Independent Afro-American Intellectual is neither Left Wing or Right Wing ... We're Independent': Reed and the American Intelligentsia

## Introduction

When Ishmael Reed asks why the phrase “American intellectual” has become an oxymoron’, even on a global scale, he raises a central issue in contemporary culture and society.<sup>1</sup> What constitutes the role of an intellectual? Who should receive this title and should the role be entirely reserved for academics? Should the role be in the ‘public’ domain? Who really has the authority to speak of culture and politics? These questions are of particular relevance to developments in American intellectual life in the late twentieth century. One well-noted phenomenon is that most intellectuals (regardless of ethnicity) have become almost exclusively associated with the academic world, and intellectual activity is therefore perceived as taking place principally within universities.<sup>2</sup> The author Joyce Carol Oates observes that the term ‘intellectual’, has become ‘a very self-conscious one’, so that even to ‘to speak of oneself as an “intellectual” is equivalent to arrogance and egotism, because of the implication that there is a category of persons who are “not intellectual”’.<sup>3</sup> In the African American community these issues are heightened further. The black spokesperson Cornel West reports that, ‘in addition to the general anti-intellectual tenor of American society, there is a deep distrust and suspicion of black intellectuals’, not only because of any perceived haughtiness, but because of ‘the widespread refusal of black intellectuals to remain, in some

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<sup>1</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Another Day at the Front: Dispatches from the Race War* (2003), p. 103. ; On examining the evolution of the term, ‘intellectual’, the cultural critic Raymond Williams noted both the persistent social tensions surrounding its usage and its continuous associations with the possession of ‘intelligence’. Opposition to those engaged in ‘intellectual’ pursuits emerged because they tended to seek independence from ‘established institutions’ such as the church or politics. By the mid twentieth century Williams observed that the term designated those with wide ranging interests, as opposed to specialisms in universities, and those who are the ‘direct producers in the sphere of ideology and culture’. See *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976, rep. 1984), pp.169-171.

<sup>2</sup> See Helen Small, ‘Introduction’, Edward Said, ‘The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals’; Stefan Collini, “Every Fruit-juice Drinker, Nudist, Sandal-wearer...”: Intellectuals as Other People’, in *The Public Intellectual* ed. by Helen Small (Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 1-18, 19-39, 203- 223.

<sup>3</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, ‘What Good are Intellectuals? : 44 Writers Share Their Thoughts’ in *The Public Intellectual* ed. by Helen Small (Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2002), p.1.

visible way, organically linked with African-American cultural life'.<sup>4</sup> Reed's view of intellectuals has been strongly influenced by the fact that he is a black American freelance writer, poet and novelist and he prides himself on his connection with the black working class as well as the artistic community. Reed's fluid sense of interaction between both sets of constituencies means that he is not particularly disposed to accept the authority of those marked out more traditionally in American society by their possession of what he perceives to be a white Anglo-Saxon cultural background, or even the influence of those intellectuals who have tenure in the university system. This chapter will focus on Reed's counter claims that the current definition of intellectuals in America is too narrow, and that a number of black intellectuals have substituted concern about quotidian African American life for furthering their self-interest in pursuit of celebrity status.

Reed is scathing about why black intellectuals are remote from his sphere of influence, noting that,

My office is not on some big university campus like these Afro-American intellectuals who sit on the sidelines, criticizing things and talking about politics. I can't think of anything politics has ever done for me, but they've spent ten years talking about politics [...] But these intellectuals try to dismiss things from the world.<sup>5</sup>

In this quotation Reed clearly associates the term intellectual with the role of an unworldly black academic, who remains anchored within the university walls, and who is noticeably detached from what he sees as the urgent issues of black poverty and race. He believes this is the direct consequence of polarising the distinction between specialized academics and the general public, raising the prospect that those within the university walls will only be able to communicate in a very limited way with those outside. Reed claims that black academics occupy their time with mere theoretical discussions of political issues that do not actively engage with the everyday exigencies of 'the common man [...and] the people on the street'.<sup>6</sup> He also confronts some of the questions raised above with the belief that as a racialized and marginalized subject the African American has a limited voice, because of the lamentable absence of speaking platforms for this community in a hegemonic society.

<sup>4</sup> Cornel West, 'The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual', *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2 (1993-4), 59-67 (pp. 60-61).

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Crouch, 'Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1976, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed* ed. by Bruce Dick and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), pp. 96-110 (p. 102).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

One might assume that Reed would feel a certain detachment from university intellectuals given his self-acknowledged lack of university education, and given that as a writer he enjoys the freedom to compose in experimental styles and different forms. Yet he involves himself thoroughly in cultural politics and he has spoken of the pressure from ‘black and white critics [...] to be conservative, that is, to write conventional novels’.<sup>7</sup> He is also sensitive to the ambivalence surrounding the prominence of contemporary intellectuals and what scholarly undertakings they might occupy themselves with, even to the point, contradictorily, of claiming the role for himself,

And let me add that the independent Afro-American intellectual and writer is neither left wing nor right wing, nor even in the middle. We’re independent. There isn’t any place in American politics for us. A fact that is proven election after election. Blacks are just used and betrayed [...] In the Sixties the left wing media used them by appointing black gurus and black spokesmen.<sup>8</sup>

Far from locating African American intellectuals merely within universities Reed advocates the presence of an independent thinker who claims an intellectual autonomy through impartiality and separation from mainstream politics. He also implies that the definition of an intellectual can only be legitimized if it is extended to comprise a range of diverse individuals who are drawn from all professions and who are not lured into taking particular political sides. Reed’s words may be contextualized with reference to the British intellectual historian Stefan Collini, who argues for understanding the term ‘intellectual’ in ‘a cultural sense’, so that it allows for multivalent definitions rather than fixing an individual into ‘an occupational category’, or a ‘socio-economic classification such as “teacher” or “writer”, or with ‘an evaluative characterization such as a “great mind” or “genius”’.<sup>9</sup> This standpoint allows for a greater flexibility for the role of the intellectual. Reed critiques the notion that there should be singular African American intellectuals/spokespeople who can speak for the entire black community. Diversity is necessary, Reed argues, for no one representative can embody the sheer diversity of views within the black community. The notion of a single ‘black spokesperson’ reinforces the assumption that blackness and black issues are monolithic.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Helm, ‘Ishmael Reed: An Interview’ 1978, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 144-160 (p. 146).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 52.

This chapter will explore Reed's discourse on the American Intelligentsia in three parts. My first aim will be to examine Reed's conception of intellectual independence since it shows a distinct dialectic between 'outsiderness' and 'insiderness'. He predicates his separation from the white majority through his African American identity. But he also assumes an outsider's position in relation to black culture by drawing attention, for instance, to his own lack of political correctness in critiquing prominent African American spokespersons. Yet his involvement in key political and cultural American issues and his cultural heritage nearly always draw him into the community as an insider. Reed hinges his case on, firstly, critiquing what he believes to be an intellectual lobby who on the whole promote a monocultural outlook; and, secondly, on championing the non-academic route to intellectualism through artistic and political endeavours. In fact I hope to show how Reed determinedly and continually confronts these issues as an insider, whilst still professing independent intellectual status himself. It becomes clear that he promotes and understands this marginality somewhat differently to the analysis offered by Collini, who marks it as a 'truth [...] that no-one can escape "attachment" in this sense: freedom from one kind of dependence (on a patron or a government) is only achieved by another kind of dependence (on a public or a family)'.<sup>10</sup> Collini repudiates the notion of independence in the intellectual sphere by insisting that every individual is located within an institutional and/or a familial context. Therefore, according to this perspective, Reed could neither be regarded as independent nor apolitical, for he champions his African American heritage and constituency, however peripheral these may be to mainstream American culture. I will argue that Reed's many engagements on the subject of intellectuals address central issues in American thought: the academic monopoly on intellectual life, the media representation of intellectuals, and the matter of government sponsorship. I will also consider the question of whether his professed dissidence, as the solitary pugilist, may indeed be a form of romanticised self-promotion.

Having explored Reed's stance it is also important to analyse how his polemic against the American intelligentsia in general and the African American intelligentsia in particular, is conducted in his habitually combative style. He has not always propounded a coherent ideology rather, as the pugilistic pragmatist he *reacts* to particular issues and situations according to whom he is writing about. This leads at times to contradictions in his work. I will attempt to show how, in his exposure of what he believes to be the inflated and

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<sup>10</sup> Stefan Collini, "'Every Fruit-juice Drinker, Nudist, Sandal-wearer...': Intellectuals as Other People', in *The Public Intellectual* ed. by Helen Small (Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 203-223 (p. 213).

underserved status of the intellectual, Reed adopts different positions in response to different contexts. With this in mind I intend to draw on the writings of Cornel West and the work of the neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, as a useful lens for exploring and understanding Reed's shifting positions. Both critics discuss the mobile nature of pragmatism as a form of cultural criticism developed by intellectuals to respond to specific social and cultural crises. Indeed, whilst teaching at Berkeley University himself, Reed attacked African American intellectuals for living within an 'ideological cloud' and for their elitism and academicism.<sup>11</sup> Reed purports to be an intellectual though he is also known to decry the very idea of intellectualism. He has lambasted his black intellectual critics for daring to scorn his lack of an academic degree, yet later he manifests a tangible pride at the sheer volume of black academic achievements against all the odds. He has questioned the colour-blind assumption of mainstream liberals while he has himself thrived on espousing what the literary critic Lionel Trilling has described as the 'variousness' and 'complexity' and 'contingency' of the liberal tradition.<sup>12</sup> Reed questions the combination of academia and the authority of the media, but he is himself an academic who has made use of many types of media in his communication. In the light of this I argue that Reed is the ultimate pragmatist whose critiques often reflect an awareness of the contingent relationship between his position as an independent intellectual and his refusal to conform to society's expectations of intellectual production. Reed is constantly on the attack, but curiously his own claims for intellectual integrity and neutrality are not so very far from Stefan Collini's model of the modern day thinker, entwined with mainstream cultural politics.

In tracing the questions and issues that Reed raises about the intellectual climate of America I propose to explore his profiling of past and contemporary black individuals and intellectuals who he has variously valorized and critiqued. Ultimately, his agenda seems based on a desire to celebrate those who he believes have made a truly intellectual contribution to the progress of the African American community, such as Booker T. Washington and Harold Cruse, and to attack and undermine those who he regards as having qualities that weaken the original

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Nazareth, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed', 1979 in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 181-195 (p. 191).

<sup>12</sup> Lionel Trilling, 'Preface' in *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950, repr. 1981). In the beginning of this work, Trilling expressed concern that liberalism had become 'the sole intellectual tradition' of America, and he issued a reminder that there was a danger of oversimplifying human life and allowing ideas to become 'stale, habitual, and inert'. He argued that the task of the critics should be 'to recall liberalism to its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty'. Trilling's point was that life in all its elements is often subject to 'subtlety', 'ambiguity', 'paradox', and 'ambivalence'. See pp. 33, 88, 208, 262.

ideals of the dedicated campaigners for black advancement. In this respect he is particularly critical of Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cornel West. Reed registers a sense of alarm at the national rise in individuals claiming the title of intellectual in America. He has denounced them all as ‘the McIntellectuals and their black and brown Talented Tenth auxiliary’ implying that all prominent intellectuals in the USA have become part of a globalised market economy driven by the lure of capitalist greed.<sup>13</sup> The ‘Talented Tenth’ is a concept derived from possibly the most pre-eminent black statesman W. E. B. Du Bois. In 1903 he proposed that the most ‘exceptional’ ten per cent of male African Americans should be educated at the very highest level in order to become race ‘leaders of thought and missionaries of culture amongst their people’.<sup>14</sup> Appalled by the brutal treatment and segregation meted out to his people at that time, Du Bois maintained that this small body of men could save and elevate the Negro race. While this concept can be viewed as outwardly altruistic Reed believed it embodied elitism and chauvinism by identifying and championing only a select number of intelligent young men. It is this view that informs his attack on the ‘Tenters’. There are two main areas of contention for Reed, firstly he disputes the legitimacy of certain intellectuals to hold that status, and secondly he questions the celebrity status of certain prominent black intellectuals who he believes work only in their own self-interest. I will argue that Reed’s negative stance towards the contemporary talented tenth is propelled by the inspiration of the much-maligned Booker T. Washington. Washington lacked an academic degree, advocated a pragmatic approach to Black advancement, and claimed an organic connection to black people. Reed drew on these qualities to insist that those thinkers (and by extension himself), who are independent of academic and party politics, who do not succumb to the whims of the media, are the ones that achieve more for black cultural and progressive values.

## Reed the Outsider

The term ‘outsiders’ generally refers to those who locate themselves outside a prevailing tradition, culture, or infrastructure. Yet intellectualism in America does not follow this pattern and Stefan Collini, from his perspective in Cambridge UK, observes that ‘the

<sup>13</sup> Reed, *MultiAmerica: Essays on Cultural War and Cultural Peace* (New York and London: Viking Penguin, 1997), p. xvi

<sup>14</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967, Orig. 1903), pp. 156-157. For the first half of the twentieth century Du Bois was the most famous African American spokesperson. To a great extent his concept of the Tenters implied some opposition to Washington’s strategy of economic self-determination through a technical and industrial education.

perceived flight into the academy' has given an added significance to 'the trope of inside/outside'.<sup>15</sup> A dimension arises equating 'intellectuals (i.e. academics) with "inside" and "public intellectuals" (i.e. academics who also sometimes reach a non-academic audience) with "outside"'.<sup>16</sup> Thus although 'outsidership' in the intellectual domain traditionally may be said to refer to individuals who contribute to intellectual debate from a position outside the academy, a number of intellectuals, even if they are funded by the state through universities or think tanks, often think of themselves as outsiders. Amid the ensuing culture wars this trope of insider/outsider has been dynamically reviewed by black writers and intellectuals but agreement on this is rarely found. In the context of African American culture the social critic, Harold Cruse, claims that the black intellectual has a special role for he/she deals with both 'the white power structure and cultural apparatus, and the inner realities of the black world'.<sup>17</sup> The result is that functionally, this individual 'cannot be absolutely separated from either the black or white world'.<sup>18</sup> Cornel West, on the other hand, argues for an entrenched marginality which is unavoidable. He believes that black intellectuals are placed in the double bind of, 'either continued intellectual lethargy on the edges of the academy and literate subcultures unnoticed by the black community or insurgent creative activity on the margins of the mainstream ensconced within bludgeoning new infrastructures'.<sup>19</sup> Either way West sees the same result, so that black intellectuals occupy a 'peripheral' territory, in relation to the black community.<sup>20</sup> For West the black intellectual is inherently an outsider, while Cruse sees the black intellectual as identifying to various degrees with both white and black cultures.

Reed has a particular vision of who he believes are the real outsiders and he counts himself among them. In the pages that follow I will discuss examples of Reed's projected outsidership based on his political sensibility, his critiques of intellectuals and his views on multiculturalism. Yet in each case I will argue that there is strong evidence of Reed's insiderism. Indeed, paradoxically, we might claim that an alleged 'outsiderness' is one of the characteristics which define an intellectual. Consider, for example, Reed's reflections in the

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<sup>15</sup> Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*, pp. 238, 240.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>17</sup> Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* in 'The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual', p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> West, 'The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual', p. 60. West differentiates between those who choose the life of the mind through the academy and those who find their avenue through art, culture and politics. The latter he terms as the 'literate subcultures'.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.



essay, 'The Battle of San Diego', based on attending an MLA conference in 1994.<sup>21</sup> He considers this organisation's attempt to bolster multicultural programmes in the face of conservative sceptics. Encouraged by the fact that the '*Chronicle of Higher Education*' criticises 'the growing influence of public intellectuals' Reed quotes the view of a journalist Theodore Lowi, who reports that, 'some of the recent attention to public intellectuals can simply be attributed to journalists who are themselves public intellectuals of a sort, welcoming bad news from academe'.<sup>22</sup> This view suggests that the public domain of intellectualism in America does not belong wholly to academia, but also to a media focused world that can be accessed by journalists and independent writers alike. As further food for thought Reed expounds,

Our public intellectuals often sound like crass talk-show hosts, those at the scavenger end of ideas, when characterizing the intellectual and political climate of American campuses. For example I've noticed that after every MLA convention a public intellectual gets a sensational article published, mocking some of the titles of the panels or casting the MLA as a den of revolutionaries with tenure. (One of those who has ridiculed the MLA's attempt at inclusion is James Atlas, a writer for the *New York Times*. On February 12, 1995, Mr. Atlas wrote a puff piece about those whom he described as the Opinion Elite: "young, brainy, adversarial, who are winning the war against liberalism." Though Atlas attempted to portray himself as an outsider, the February 20, 1995, *New York Observer* revealed that he had received a grant from the conservative think tank, the Manhattan Institute, to fund a biography of Saul Bellow. Bellow's son, Adam Bellow, publisher of *The Bell Curve*, was placed at the center of the elite, in the cover picture accompanying the article).<sup>23</sup>

Reed records his disdain that public intellectuals, far from being 'genuine' scholars ensconced in learning and research for their own sake, can now be identified as fame-seeking academics articulating sensationalist opinions for the purpose of publishing their views in various national media formats. He is keen to emphasize that they are themselves journalists, who on sensing some potential scandal produce articles based on exposing what they deem to be the radical political correctness of academic conferences. Reed is bemused by the moral panic manifested in the idea that the MLA could be envisaged as an outsider organisation harbouring a number of political insurgents. Also Reed has always believed whites or white intellectuals and academic organisations to be insiders because of their links to the

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<sup>21</sup> Ishmael Reed, 'The Battle of San Diego' in *Another Day at the Front: Dispatches from the Race War* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), pp. 5-38.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

establishment and mainstream culture. In fact his whole *raison d'être* for writing this essay was to expose the sham political correctness of an organisation that is ultimately devoted to preserving a Western classic monocultural canon, rather than absorbing the works of ethnic cultures.

The other issue in question here, bewailed by Reed above and a number of critics including Helen Small, Stefan Collini and Edward Said, is that 'profit and celebrity' have acted as 'powerful stimulants', where the possibility of 'appearing on television or being interviewed by journalists', has been the major impetus in determining opportunities for the role of intellectual on the public stage.<sup>24</sup> Reed denounces the absurdity of right wing journalist James Atlas, for affecting outsidership whilst choosing another traditionalist from the 'Opinion Elite' as his topic. Reed's view is partly confirmed by Russell Jacoby, who notes that 'once intellectuals were outsiders who wanted to be insiders. Now they are insiders who pretend to be outsiders – a claim that can be sustained only by turning marginality into a pose'.<sup>25</sup> Reed does not accept that there can be any other form of minority outsidership other than ones based on racial or economic grounds, for he maintains that it is those who are disempowered by race and class who have more cause to bring pressure to bear on governments. The idea of a white conservative claiming radical outsidership is anathema to him.

Reed nevertheless uses this report to his advantage by attempting to identify the traditionalists in academia and he almost engages in some undercover reporting himself as he exposes Atlas for complicity with the right wing publishing family of what many believed to be a sinister, racist publication. In 1994 the controversial book *The Bell Curve* argued that by genetic disposition there are racial differences in intelligence, and that those with high intelligence, the 'cognitive elite' (namely, the white population), were effectively becoming separated from those of average and below-average intelligence (envisaged as the black population).<sup>26</sup> The term *élite* here may be said to affect a sense of the marginal, given that few of the population might belong to such a group. However, because of the term's

<sup>24</sup> Edward Said, 'The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals' in *The Public Intellectual*, pp. 19-39, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>26</sup> *The Bell Curve* reported that 'African-Americans typically earn IQ scores 'one full standard deviation below those of white Americans' and that this aspect is reflected across all levels of socioeconomic status. The book also attempted to intervene in social policy by recommending that, since 'Blacks have been overrepresented in white collar and professional occupations relative to the number of candidates in the IQ range from which these jobs are usually filled' there should be 'a color-blind affirmative action, giving preference to members of disadvantaged groups when qualifications are similar'. See Brian Beatty, 'Human Intelligence: The Bell Curve', *Indiana University*, 2008 < <http://www.indiana.edu/~intell/bellcurve.shtml> > [accessed 7 January 2011]

association with the notion of 'chosen' and 'elect', Reed believes it is more representative of dominant and centrist white groups and the prospect of scientific racism. Thus Reed attempts to expose and indict the partiality of public intellectuals and the excessive attention paid to them by the media for waging a war on diversity that he later rejoins will particularly rejoice to 'see black or a black behind society's social and cultural woes'.<sup>27</sup>

Issues of scholarly neutrality and intellectual culpability have occupied Reed more intensively in the last fifteen years, but his first fictional representation of the collusion between the public intellectual and the government was curiously prescient, when it appeared in his debut novel *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* in 1967.<sup>28</sup> Primarily this is a satire of white assumptions about racial superiority, but there is a substantial focus on the absurdity of university life and research. Reed targets the figure of U2 Polyglot, the dean of the college of 'HARRY SAM', as he spends his time researching for an article in 'an English literary quarterly, entitled 'The Egyptian Dung Beetle' in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*'.<sup>29</sup> Polyglot conducts this investigation experientially by lodging 'his nose in the ball of manure and with aplomb and correctness began pushing it down the street' (*TFLP*, 51). Comedic and scatological elements abound as Reed ridicules the specious impracticability of this research while also obliquely commenting on the isolation of academia and its irrelevance to public issues. When Bukka Doopeyduk the young naive black protagonist is subjected to a HooDoo spell transforming his appearance into the semblance of a were-wolf, Polyglot comes to his assistance by temporarily removing the curse with the aid of a mysterious potion. Polyglot does not offer his help for free, however, and he gravely confides in Bukka 'These piddling allowances from the state for projects in the humanities, such as the one in which I'm now engaged', and 'the grant I received for pushing this goddam ball all over Europe is not enough to keep me in good pipe tobacco-so I've taken to a little hustlin' on the side' (*TFLP*, 49). A faux academic footnote accompanies this speech which informs the reader that

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<sup>27</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), pp. 36-37.

<sup>28</sup> Reed, at this time, was undoubtedly influenced by the Black Power movement as a means of forcibly accessing human and civil rights and gaining freedom. Riots had erupted in Los Angeles and the university campuses at Fisk, Nashville, and Jackson State and Newark in 1965, culminating in rioting in Detroit in 1967

<sup>29</sup> Ishmael Reed, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999), pp. 4-5. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically after quotations within the text. The name 'HARRY SAM' is a parody of Uncle Sam, and therefore America. Reed's reference to the dung beetle is pertinent for Polyglot's actions mirror the rolling movements of this insect. The ability of the beetle larvae to climb out of a dung ball led to a symbolic association with ideas of regeneration, resurrection and transformation that so interested ancient Egyptian culture. The reference to Kafka's short novel links to the protagonist Gregor Samsa, who wakes one morning to find himself transformed into a gigantic insect. Presumably Reed manoeuvres Polyglot into mistakenly believing that he could transform American culture as a result of his research.

Polyglot is 'quite adept at the use of slang', because he is 'Chairman of the Department of American Studies' (*TFLP*, 49).

Reed's satire of this comic character is actually underpinned by a more sinister implication that points to the view that white insiders who attempt to infiltrate all corners of society are dangerous. Polyglot's name, as befits his academic position, is partly derived from his role as linguist and interpreter, even of the black vernacular, but his first appellation U2 stems from the famous spy plane used by the CIA in the nineteen sixties. He is an undercover agent who bears 'some officious-looking papers bearing the greenish-brown seal of HARRY SAM' as he works on 'a top-secret project' (*TFLP*, 50). The Dean is a mercenary who 'de-HooDoo's' Bukka so that the young black student will not pose any threat to established authority. When Bukka eventually exposes the corrupt malevolence of the government he is punished and 'hung by meat hooks' in a surreal parody of the crucifixion (*TFLP*, 154). Yet when the Free-Lance Pallbearers arrive after his death, they are unable to remove his body because of the enormous physical manifestation of Polyglot's achievement: a 'great ball of manure suspended above Klang-a-Lang-a-Ding-Dong' is 'Held down by spikes and rope' (*TFLP*, 155). As a result of its travels around the world the dung has grown to such proportions that it prevents Bukka's passage into the HooDoo spirit world. This is of course Reed's concluding point: that metaphorically the 'ball of shit' represents the weight of erudition with little to no benefit for the population. The Government has in fact sponsored a public intellectual to pollute the world, as an agent of tyrannical white power, so that by the end of the novel America is mired in its own collective shit.

Though humorous in many respects this novel is an extremely serious exploration of the oppression of black Americans. The white intellectual is represented as a pretender in two senses: he is an insider by spying for the Government and he is an academic, whose abstract, even futile, research is intended to suggest that the nature of university scholarship can be sinister and mercenary. Reed's view, that it is the college professors who are largely complicit in impeding the progress of African Americans, is expressed even more robustly thirty years later. He opines that academia is composed of an 'army of intellectual sluts' living in an 'intellectually and culturally confined world' where, often at the behest of politicians, 'they are programmed and manipulated' and paid 'by think tanks to recycle the

same old lies about African Americans'.<sup>30</sup> This is tantamount to expressing the view that white intellectuals have prostituted their art and profession in order to perpetuate a position of insiderism through recommending conservative and monocultural policies and viewpoints. Reed believes, however, that he is justified in reiterating his own claim to outsidership, derived from the fact that he is self-taught, and has set up an alternative court by dislocating himself from academia and even the black middle class. His independence stems from an inability to continue with his university studies for financial reasons. Instead he nurtures a place among other writers and musicians, emerging, in Cornel West's terms, as a 'black intellectual- to-be'.<sup>31</sup>

Reed's vision of independent creativity includes seeking alternatives. In an early interview he exclaims that, 'part of my responsibility as I see it is to raise new and fresh ideas', because 'the so-called black intellectual mainstream needs new ideas'.<sup>32</sup> His attempt to counter the stagnation of the black scholarly world began as early as 1968 when Reed had been very recently allied to the Black Arts and Power movements through the *Umbra* poets workshop. His vision took him away from these and other left wing causes since he felt that black people could be led astray by the 'intellectual dishonesty' of communists and those who advocated riots and physical violence. Reed argues that such radical ideologies beguiled people to nurture impossible hopes for economic advancement, and he claimed they 'have died in the streets clutching unredeemable coupons and refuse from ugly shop windows'.<sup>33</sup> He criticised the importation and use of highly charged terms, like 'cultural revolution' from China, aware of the iron fist response of Communist regimes towards their writers and artists.<sup>34</sup> Drawing on the postmodernist zeitgeist of pulp art, kitsch and surrealism, Reed's suggested alternative is to usher in a black renaissance of the arts and to predict that the decade of the nineteen seventies would be a time 'when spirit and imagination enter the streets', a time that would 'belong to black people, Indians, cosmic creatures, and anyone else who wants to climb aboard'.<sup>35</sup> He believed this future was already being partly realised by those Americans, 'from coast to coast—white, black, Indian', who 'keep on writing poems'.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), pp. 62, 67.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Rebekah Presson, 'Ishmael Reed Interview', 1988, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 303-313 (p. 310).

<sup>33</sup> Walt Shepperd, 'When State Magicians Fail: An Interview with Ishmael Reed', 1968, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 3-13 (p. 10).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 13, 9.

Although he objects to the lexis of insurgency proffered by left wing movements, protesting that ‘much of the thinking of a black intellectual comes from Marxism’, his vocabulary paradoxically is grounded in dissidence.<sup>37</sup> He interweaves this with a curious mix of bohemian, hippie and avant garde derived from the west coast subculture of the nineteen sixties, but also his extremist individualism is evident as he exclaims, ‘that’s why I’m an anarchist’.<sup>38</sup> When his interviewer asked him where all these actions were leading, Reed, in full revolutionary mode, responded ‘I think we’re going to overthrow the government [...] and [...] what we’re going to see emerge is a co-operative of autonomous groups who are going to come up with new ways of making America work’.<sup>39</sup> Though Reed envisaged this takeover as a ‘bloodless coup’, he nevertheless oscillates between the hippie counterculture’s belief in peaceful, communal co-existence, where multicultural artistic experimentation could flourish, and putting the revolutionary thinking of Marxism into practice.<sup>40</sup>

Reed tends to offer cultural solutions to social problems and he represents himself as a romantic hero leading an improbable counter insurgency towards a participatory democracy. His concerns are those of an artist and metaphorically in his vocabulary the intellectual hero is always the poet on the periphery. In fact Reed represents himself as the lone outlaw or frontiersman so beloved in the American popular imagination, because these figures epitomized individualism or freedom from the oppression often associated with urban societies. Stefan Collini argues that the claim of ‘the intellectual stand [...] “outside” society’ is a ‘piece of pure romanticization, often implicitly involving self-romanticization’, and retaining a certain ‘glamour’.<sup>41</sup> He disputes the association of intellectualism with dissidence or opposition and marginality, because they are terms that are ‘not intrinsic’ to the concept of an intellectual.<sup>42</sup> Collini understands the intellectual’s role to be a broad one, achieved through ‘partially overlapping spheres of publicness’, where his/her appeal would be to a wide audience, who would only be responsive if the intellectual’s topic of communication was of value and of significant interest to them.<sup>43</sup> Intellectuals, writes Collini, should focus on ‘the question of whether thought, enquiry and imagination, pursued to the highest level, issue in any wisdom about how we ought to live’, therefore he is very sceptical

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*, pp. 61, 63.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

about attempts by intellectuals to self-dramatize their marginality.<sup>44</sup> To deflect these tendencies Collini advocates the ‘sheer ordinariness of the role of the intellectual’, because this involves so many varied but commonplace actions.<sup>45</sup>

For Reed, however, the intellectual as activist is not ‘ordinary’, but exceptional. He focuses on highlighting a series of what might be regarded as alternative intellectuals, and one senses that he deems their independence to signify a more honourable approach to the life of the mind, as opposed to those who developed their intellectualism through traditional scholarly pursuits. Reed values the creative writer in opposition to the academic establishment; to his mind, the former will sustain the spiritual and cultural health of the nation, and so much that, ‘when the state magicians fail, the unofficial magicians become stronger’.<sup>46</sup> In his fiction, two of Reed’s key protagonists—Papa La Bas in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), and Nance Saturday in *The Terrible Twos* (1982) and *The Terrible Threes* (1989)—assume this role of unofficial magician. They stand outside the academy and political infrastructure. La Bas works through voodoo as the metaphysical detective but he is also described as a ‘fugitive hermit, obeah man [...] a descendant from a long line of people who made their pact with nature a long time ago’.<sup>47</sup> He is therefore party to a secret knowledge that he attempts to pass on to Freud, on the psychologist’s first visit to America in 1909. However La Bas is told to ‘take the back elevator’ by a number of ‘Professors of New York University or people from Columbia University’, who ironically ‘prided themselves on their liberalism’ (*MJ*, 45). Nance Saturday is the Rutgers law school dropout, who becomes ‘wannabe detective’ and heroic outlaw by micro-managing national crises and giving back time and money to his black community.<sup>48</sup> By foregrounding these individuals Reed contrives to demonstrate that by operating undercover each is driven to usher in a new period of cultural and social equality. His fictional detectives function as alternative intellectuals, allied with the working class on the outside of white power, but the point is that they never stray from *inside* the black community.

*Mumbo Jumbo* can be placed in the genre of detective fiction and in some respects the novel follows an archetypal pattern where a crime is committed, a seemingly omniscient detective

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> Collini, “‘Every Fruit-juice Drinker, Nudist, Sandal-wearer...’: Intellectuals as Other People’, p. 206.

<sup>46</sup> Shepperd, ‘When State Magicians Fail: An Interview with Ishmael Reed’ 1968, p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), p. 45. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically after quotations within the text.

<sup>48</sup> Reed, *The Terrible Threes* (New York: Atheneum Macmillan, 1989), p. 2.

investigates, and the puzzle is solved through superior logical reasoning.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, in Western literature the detective figure is invariably depicted living an exclusively intellectual life as one who employs scientific methods in reasoning and induction. Conventionally therefore, Reed's novel includes La Bas, the detective on the trail of a murderer, as well as a missing text. Unconventionally La Bas is 'a private eye, practicing' in his 'Neo-HooDoo therapy centre', qualifying as 'a jacklegged detective of the metaphysical' (*MJ*, 211-212), who employs 'Knockings [...] ultra ultra high frequency electromagnetic wave propagation' (*MJ*, 25) to initiate his investigations. This means that La Bas does not altogether use scientific procedures and deductive reasoning to solve crimes, for he is also a trickster figure. The name Papa La Bas evokes the name of Papa Legba, the Haitian variation of Esu Legbara, the Pan-African deity, and he is representative of the spirit of communications.

La Bas is a detective who works against Enlightenment reasoning and is therefore accustomed to operating on the borderline between humans and the loas (Haitian deities) that he worships in his headquarters, 'Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral' (*MJ*, 49). He has to merge cosmic communication on the one hand with 'whodunit' skills on the other. While the murders are real enough the search for a text is both mystical and material. This text takes its cue from the phenomenon of 'Jes Grew' (*MJ*, 4), an irrational spirit of music, song and dance sweeping through America that is actually, '*seeking its words. Its text*' otherwise it '*will evaporate as quickly as it appeared again*' (*MJ*, 6). However where this is located and what form it might take is the central mystery of the novel. The original appearance of the textual Jes Grew in America is made possible by the white Atonist Hinkle Von Vampton, who sends this out to fourteen Jes Grew carriers 'scattered throughout Harlem [...] as a chain book' (*MJ*, 69).<sup>50</sup> One of these carriers passes this work to the black Muslim Egyptologist Abdul Hamid to translate. Fearing that this would result in the permanent and authoritative residence of Jes Grew in American culture, Von Vampton and his deputy Hubert Safecracker Gould, demand that Hamid should return the anthology. When he refuses they murder him though he manages to leave behind a cryptic note for La Bas. Thus the detective initiates his

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<sup>49</sup> Put into context, crime fiction came to the foreground in the mid nineteenth century in the fiction of Edgar Allen Poe, especially with the acclaim of his first detective story, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. His protagonist, C. Auguste Dupin, paved the way for the development of a new intellectual literary hero, portrayed as a reasoning and detecting machine. This figure came to be known as the 'genius detective', with the extraordinary analytical abilities so favoured by Western logic. See John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 39.

<sup>50</sup> Reed deploys the term 'Atonist' for mono-culturalists who see Western/European values as the epitome of civilisation. Hinkle Von Vampton is a probable caricature of Carl Van Vechten, a white patron of the arts during the 1920's Harlem Renaissance.



investigation for the location of this text and for the murderers who commit a number of subsequent crimes.

This genre of detective fiction demands that the mystery has to be explained and the culprits confined. Therefore, there is a disclosure scene in a party at the Villa Lewaro towards the end of *Mumbo Jumbo*. LaBas assembles a crowd of key characters including black artists, intellectuals, wealthy white patrons as well as the murderers, to piece together and solve the crime. Together with his partner Black Herman, La Bas confronts the guilty perpetrators, but before he can officially arrest the two men the art critic, Hank Rollings, insists that he must 'explain rationally and soberly what they are guilty of' (*MJ*, 160). At that point and, unlike the classic genre, the crime becomes vastly enlarged as a 'history of Jes Grew' (*MJ*, 160), beginning in Egypt in which the missing text is named as the 'Book of Thoth' (*MJ*, 178). This thirty page mythological digression from the murder mystery is effectively transposed as a master conspiracy by Judaeo-Christian civilization and 'Atonist' Americans to retain white supremacy and suppress ethnic traditions. This explanation is disruptive in terms of La Bas's detective work although he does eventually indict Von Vampton and Gould for murdering Hamid, but the crime is not completely solved, because the party guests demand that he provides some 'sound empirical fact' (*MJ*, 195) for the text's existence. When La Bas produces a box, 'recovered from beneath the Cotton Club dance floor' which supposedly contains the work, he discovers it is empty because it transpires that Hamid had burned the anthology. The mystery of Jes Grew remains open ended.

La Bas is unable to provide any direct evidence proving the guilt of the murderers, but the party is invaded by a number of black women and children who accuse Von Vampton and Gould of stealing their culture from them. At this point La Bas shows his indifference to Western notions of proof, but as a detective he metes out justice anyway. Although he and Herman are 'jacklegged detectives' without 'a license from New York authorities' the murderers are turned over to the 'jurisdiction [...they] have in Haiti' (*MJ*, 197). According to Terre Haute, 'instead of adhering to white America's sense of justice La Bas looks outside the parameters [...] and in the process calls into question the entire notion of Atonism (the one way) as well as the idea of the master detective (the sole authority).'<sup>51</sup> For Reed, La Bas is also a crusader for his defence of the moral order and he provides a challenge to western

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<sup>51</sup> Terre Haute, 'Crossing Western Space, or the HooDoo Detective on the Boundary in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*', *African American Review*, 36 (2002), 611-628 (p. 615).

notions of intellectual procedure though of course he does 'have to rely heavily on his ability to deduce and reason, to sort detective-style through a string of clues'.<sup>52</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr. goes further and perceives La Bas to be 'the figure of the critic in search of the text, and decoding its telltale signs in the process'.<sup>53</sup> In one sense *Mumbo Jumbo* can be envisaged as an alternative text book, and in a swipe at scholarly conventions, Reed provides footnotes and a 'Partial Bibliography' (*MJ*, 219-223) containing some accurate historical sources, but also some of a more spurious origin. These could be satirizing social and historical documentarians, but they also underscore his belief that his creative work should be taken seriously since it demands scholarly research in order to be decoded.

*The Terrible Twos* and its sequel *The Terrible Threes* depict the economic and political situation of America in the nineteen eighties and nineties, satirising particularly the conservatism of the Reagan and Bush administrations.<sup>54</sup> Nance Saturday appears in both novels as a crusader against fraud and corruption. He is eventually revealed to be the 'brightest guy in the law school class' (*TTTW*, 25), but drops out after concluding that 'there's no such thing as law in America. Only power' (*TTTH*, 35). In *The Terrible Twos* we see his detection powers at work when he is employed by two gangsters to firstly discover the identity of the authentic Santa Claus rather than the imposter set in place by the trickster figure Black Peter. Secondly he is to recover their lost money. Unlike La Bas, Saturday does not resort to HooDoo techniques, but approaches a case 'as a romantic would. He would read material. He would study all the trivia connected with the case and all the facts he could sew together and usually the solution would come' (*TTTW*, 119-20). He is appreciative of fine art and legends and researches both the historical and mythological evidence of Saint Nicholas. By bribing the sect of 'Nicolaites' with a feast across town he searches 'Nicholas House' for evidence, 'taking notes and flashing pictures' (*TTTW*, 83, 122-123). Arguably Saturday is methodical in his approach to detection, though he is more of a parody of the hardboiled sleuths of American crime fiction given that he is one of a 'generation', who 'believed in Santa Claus until they were at least twenty-one' (*TTTW*, 119). Nevertheless Saturday is the one to expose the fake trickster, Black Peter, and his plot for snatching Santa and replacing him with a dubious imposter allows Saturday to pocket a large financial reward.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 618.

<sup>53</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., 'Ishmael Reed' in *Afro-American Fiction Writers After 1955*, Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 33, ed. by Thadious M. Davis and Trudier Harris (Michigan: Gale Research, 1984), pp. 219-232 (p. 225).

<sup>54</sup> Reed, *The Terrible Twos* (London: W.H. Allen, 1990); Reed, *The Terrible Threes* (New York: Atheneum Macmillan, 1989). Further references to these editions are given parenthetically after quotations in the text.

In the sequel *The Terrible Threes* Saturday uses this money to set himself up in business with a small black limousine company. However, unlike his middle class associates, he establishes an alternative law practice in ‘his “office”’ in a direct satire of the power wielded by the ‘Oval Office’ at the heart of government (*TTTH*, 109). When Saturday accidentally rescues Bob Krantz, the opportunistic presidential advisor, he provides him with a hideout while the political storm about a sinister plot, ‘Operation Two Birds’, is exposed (*TTTH*, 107). This conspiracy was designed to consolidate power for an elite group of white men by decimating the world’s population of ‘surps’ or people of colour (*TTTH*, 107). While Saturday is appalled by the plot this does not prevent him from accepting a great deal of money from Krantz to hide him, and, while undercover, the latter notices the processions of people who come every day to consult the detective. In the ensuing dialogue, Saturday and Krantz debate the difficult situation of black people in America:

‘I’m the king of this block. You’ll notice that in the other neighbourhoods the streets are filthy, and dealers are openly selling dope; this street is clean and orderly [...] I deal with downtown for them. I put pressure on the crack dealers [...] I call the Health Department [...] If this block is the eye of the hurricane, its because I keep I keep it that way [...] I’m a freedom fighter [...] We have a neighbourhood alert program here, and look out for women and the kids [...] I see that old people on the block get their Social Security checks. I help these people stave off bill collectors.’

‘That’s irresponsible, Nance [...] People should be responsible for their debts.

[...] ‘Your’re smart Nance. You should have finished law school. You would be a judge or something by now’.

[...] ‘I like what I’m doing. A jack of all trades. I live by my wits’ (*TTTH*, 121-123).

Saturday is a criminologist with a difference: he draws on his legal knowledge to run a legal rights surgery for impoverished and oppressed ethnic minorities. His alma mater is the University of Life, where on a practical day to day basis he fends off the drug cartels and establishes law and order. He is both an independent and an unconventional intellectual, who utilizes his talents freely, and by not being affiliated to the left or right, he remains wedded to the contingent realities of his black community. When Krantz points out that technically he is behaving recklessly, Saturday retorts, ‘if the landlords don’t keep their buildings up to code, I instruct my clients not to pay the rent’ (*TTTH*, 123). He adopts a pragmatic course of action, and by showing Krantz that his strategies are based on hand to mouth survival, Saturday exposes the corruption at the other end of the scale, revealing that the government is just as guilty by incurring huge debts by carelessly handing out defence contracts.

Saturday belongs to the romantic tradition of literature as a Robin Hood figure, the legendary rebel, who takes money from the wealthy in order to feed the poor. In some respects Saturday is also partly modelled on Reed, who has stated, 'I am an ordinary black person living in the ghetto'.<sup>55</sup> Reed highlights his choice of living within a social reality underpinned by poverty, deprivation and violence, in order to lay claim to his outlaw image on the margin of society dispensing his energies towards the black working class. Reed affirms his contribution: 'I have been involved in serving the community in which I live. People at the bottom of the ladder who take abuse from the elite and the self-satisfied can do the same and do it without a doctorate or even a bachelor's degree'.<sup>56</sup> Reed's point is that, like Saturday, an academic qualification is unnecessary for the independent thinker to strike back at injustice, which means that far from being an outsider Reed is involved in representing the interests at the heart of his community, which comprises mainly African Americans but also other cultures. He is the self-appointed 'Neighbourhood Watch' captain in his own residential area of Oakland, California.<sup>57</sup> He writes of 'living in an area in which a crack den, smokehouse [...] is in operation', and wherer the locality is negatively transformed to resemble the situation of, 'living under military rule'.<sup>58</sup> In order to deal with this situation Reed describes 'using writing to organize' neighbourhood projects and how he coordinated a group of local homeowners into passive vigilantes in peaceful defiance against the crack dealers.<sup>59</sup> He describes being 'angry as hell' and points out that he does not consider himself 'to be left or right, or in the [...] middle, though you visit the left more than you visit the other positions [...] you have to catch yourself'.<sup>60</sup> Although Reed has continually declared himself to be unattached to any political stance he does tend to present himself as the 'lone ranger' working to the ideological left of American politics by confronting, in this case, issues of law and order in his residential community. However he is hardly an outsider, for as a thinker, writer and practical organizer he is very much connected to what Harold Cruse described as 'the inner realities of the black world'.<sup>61</sup> These realities call for a variety of forms of address and

<sup>55</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up: Taking on the Media Bullies and Other Reflections* (Philadelphia: De Capo Press, 2008), p. 144.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>57</sup> Shamoon Zamir, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed', 1988, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 271-302 (p. 297).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*; Reed, *Writin' is Fightin'* (1990), p. 30.

<sup>59</sup> Zamir, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed', p. 297.

<sup>60</sup> Reed, *Writin' is Fightin'* (1990), p. 36.

<sup>61</sup> Cruse is discussed in more detail later in the chapter. See pp. 50-56.

engagement and Reed is often prepared to modify his views in order to silence the critics of African American intellectuals within or outside the academy.

## Pragmatism and the Black Intellectual

What does it mean to be a pragmatist? I intend to employ this term to identify an individual who is not necessarily interested in philosophical stances but one who is willing to discard abstract ideals by acting practically and flexibly in response to particular situations. Cornel West has identified this type of activity as characteristic of the 'small-scale intellectual renaissance' in the American tradition of pragmatism, where an 'impatience with theories and philosophies' has led to a pre-occupation with discourses about power, identity and politics.<sup>62</sup> He believes it is an evasion of philosophy firstly, because it concentrates on social structural relations and power rather than just pure reasoning or deliberating. Secondly, he maintains that pragmatism tends to be applied to the human subject only, so that practical considerations come to the foreground, which can be defined as 'constraints that reinforce and reproduce hierarchies based on class, race, gender, and sexual orientation'.<sup>63</sup> Indeed Reed's shifting perspectives manifest themselves when he adopts different positions in response to different contexts only to later contradict himself. Such pragmatists, according to West, are 'organic intellectuals' who participate 'in the life of the mind, who revel in ideas and relate ideas to action by means of creating, constituting or consolidating constituencies for moral aims and political purposes'.<sup>64</sup> This means that organic intellectuals are not merely talkers or theorists; rather they have grown and evolved, for example, in African American culture as more practically-minded community organisers in churches, education or the media. Indeed West's reasoning has been influenced to some extent by Richard Rorty, who has outlined the merits of a post-epistemological culture where the 'current institutions and practices' would be subject to 'redescription'.<sup>65</sup> Rorty believes this is made possible by invoking different 'vocabularies' which can be utilised by individuals to help them cope with different situations at different times. To his mind, vocabularies are sets of 'alternative

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 3, 5.

<sup>63</sup> Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 45.

metaphors' that encourage the reader to develop them as tools for the particular purposes they may serve.<sup>66</sup>

Both sets of ideas show a kinship with Reed's stance. From having been rooted in the soil of the black community, Reed grew to be an activist, driven always by fighting against the social and political injustice he saw and continues to see. Regarding himself as one of the 'independent intellectuals', Reed does not visualize himself in traditional terms. This implies being separate from his community, but Reed does detach himself to a certain extent by working more pragmatically with the concerns of critics and political parties. Reed's articulation of justice appears on many cultural levels, and he attempts to absorb the emotions and experiences of the African American community in order to speak out for many in a constituency that would not do so for itself. His writing is discursive and fuelled by a 'Gumbo' approach with the result that his fictional and even non-fictional writing is open to the possibilities for endless metaphorical combinations that synthesise numerous forms and sources.<sup>67</sup> The fictional children of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* speak for Reed when they ultimately insist on the right 'to create our own fiction'.<sup>68</sup> This means that the novel, in his view, is really an instrument to conduct 'artistic guerrilla warfare' against the 'establishment and those who specialise in propaganda and racism'.<sup>69</sup> Reed's writings are therefore his tools for re-inventing and re-cycling his vocabulary, according to whom he is attacking or defending.

At the heart of Rorty's vision is a 'liberal utopia', where 'ironism, in a relevant sense', is 'universal', and where the ideal citizens would be 'liberal ironists [...] who had a sense of the contingency of their language of moral deliberation, and thus of their consciences, and thus of their community'.<sup>70</sup> In this ideal society 'the ironist is the typical modern intellectual', since he/she is more likely to live with radical contingency by being open to a flexible vocabulary

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>67</sup> Reed borrows the term 'Gumbo' from the New Orleans style cuisine so that his aesthetic proverbially resembles the practical course of 'throwing into the soup whatever one can find'. He comments that this 'is like a metaphor for my writing style'. See Gaga [Mark S. Johnson], 'Interview with Ishmael Reed', in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 51-58 (pp. 53-54).

<sup>68</sup> Reed, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), p. 16. The right to create one's own fiction is the central motif of this second novel, particularly the right of disempowered minorities to retaliate with their own publications.

<sup>69</sup> John O'Brien, 'Ishmael Reed', 1972, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 25-40 (pp. 36-37).

<sup>70</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, pp. 61, xv.

that admits change.<sup>71</sup> Rorty conceives that intellectuals would not be merely focused on scholarly pursuits, ‘nor would they look to literary critics as moral advisers’.<sup>72</sup> In his terms they would draw on their own common sense and would participate in a climate of what I will term pragmatic exchange. Their public role, therefore, ‘would include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease’.<sup>73</sup> Rorty paints a compelling portrait of the intellectual as an ‘ironist’, because such people, in his view, are ‘always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves’.<sup>74</sup> Indeed in 1993 Reed claimed that ‘to live in a racist society is to live in a situation of comic absurdity [...] a situation of irony and paradox’.<sup>75</sup> This statement is partly misleading because it suggests flippancy on Reed’s part whereas his discourse is generally underpinned by a seriousness that is politically and ethically grounded. On the issue of race and ethnicity Reed’s irony will occasionally dissipate, and this is where the application of Rorty’s philosophy is more questionable. Rorty might assume that it is only non-ironists and non-intellectuals who do not wish to re-describe their language, and who ‘want to be taken on their own terms—taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk’.<sup>76</sup> However Reed has argued that ‘a racist society will often force you to engage in “essentialism”’ showing that he is championing and defending a minority with the belief that he is minimizing pain and working for the common good.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless the fixed point, if such can be deemed possible, is precisely Reed’s sense of pragmatic exchange where, in order to seek his ideal of the common culture made up of distinctive cultural groups, he will adopt a set of shifting perspectives when he needs to.

Launching into a scathing invective against the intelligentsia, with ever deepening intensity, has been one of the consistencies of Reed’s writing career, spanning from the sixties to the present day. But he has never been clear about the issue of who could be deemed a ‘genuine’

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>73</sup> Rorty distinguishes between the realms of public and private in the sense that in the latter citizens can do ‘as they please as long as they do it in their own time—causing harm to others and using no resources needed by the less advantaged’. See Rorty, p. xv.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>75</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. 135.

<sup>76</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 89.

<sup>77</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. xliii. Reed employs a form of ‘strategic [...] essentialism’, which is a term that Gayatri C. Spivak coined to denote the necessity of adopting a hard-line nationalist perspective in order to outwit one’s opponents and detractors. I discuss this concept in more depth in Chapter Two (pp. 102-103).

intellectual in his eyes. Reed relates that in the nineteen sixties Malcolm X ‘taught’ him that ‘an intellectual life could be exciting, not just an activity in which one spent one’s time harvesting footnotes’.<sup>78</sup> This was possibly the catalyst for launching Reed’s dim view of academia and seems to consolidate his negative view of intellectuals in the nineteen seventies. His denouncements of black intellectuals, when being interviewed by the black critic Stanley Crouch, were generally grounded in the claim that ‘there’s a great gap between what average Afro-American people believe and what the intellectuals believe. On a lot of issues’.<sup>79</sup> While Reed is evasive here about whether he himself might actually be an average African American, he claims to have spent more time with the average black person than the academic, thus implying that he is more worldly wise and knowledgeable about the needs and viewpoints of the black public. Nevertheless, Reed referred to the era of the *Umbra* poets, as a time of ‘all us intellectuals living together’ in New York.<sup>80</sup> By 1975, however, he repudiated even the notion of the artistic community,

If you live [...in] Soho, or East Village in New York, or someplace like that, the only people you communicate with are in the arts, or people who profess to be artists and that gives you a limited view of what’s happening in the world [...] That’s a mistake, which happens to intellectuals in this country. Black intellectuals live on campuses, and think the whole world is a campus.<sup>81</sup>

Reed criticises the very idea of belonging to an exclusive group largely because it implies a separation from the public and it induces of a form of myopia shared by black academics in intellectual circles. While West noted the ‘problematic’ emergence of black intellectuals through ‘the academy or the literate subcultures’, in the quotation above, Reed even shuns the latter.<sup>82</sup> This suggests that he is split between decrying intellectualism altogether, and the limits he fears that could be imposed on the cultivation of his image as an independent writer with working class associations. He is a self-declared intellectual, yet he condemns others for performing the role albeit in a different mode.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>79</sup> Crouch, ‘An Interview with Ishmael Reed’ 1976, p. 106.

<sup>80</sup> Cameron Northouse, ‘Ishmael Reed’, in *Conversations with Writers II* (New York: Gale Research, 1978), p. 217.

<sup>81</sup> Ruth Abbott and Ira Simmons, ‘An Interview with Ishmael Reed’ 1975, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 74-95 (p. 75).

<sup>82</sup> West, ‘The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual’, p. 59.



Reed may be seen to demonstrate what Stefan Collini described as, ‘that most unlovely and least defensible of inner contradictions, the anti-intellectualism of the intellectual’.<sup>83</sup> To many thinkers Reed could indeed be deserving of Collini’s charge of unloveliness not so much for ‘the anti-intellectualism of the intellectual’, but for the anti-academicism of the intellectual. Indeed Collini also speculates that any professed separation is merely a pretext for achieving the kudos of daring to attack intellectuals in academic posts for their alleged conservatism and prudence.<sup>84</sup> Reed’s displeasure with what he calls ‘academicism’ derives from his experience of arrogance from ‘professors who think that to understand and know things in life you have to have a Ph.D.’, and from his dislike of their use of academic ‘jargon’ that specialises in ‘isms’.<sup>85</sup>

Reed’s disapproval of academic condescension is represented throughout his fiction when both black and white scholars with doctorates are ruthlessly parodied. As we discussed earlier the white Dean, U2 Polyglot, conducts his absurd research experiment to spy on the black community.<sup>86</sup> In *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, the black feminist activist, Minnie the Moocher, ‘is enrolled in the University of California at Berkeley in Rhetoric (they have a Ph.D. program)’ (*LDLR*, 16). She eventually writes an article ‘in the *Moocher Monthly* magazine on the morphological, ontological and phenomenological ramifications in which she will refute certain long-held contradictory conclusions commonly held by peripatetics entering menopause’.<sup>87</sup> Minnie is generally hailed by her followers as an inspirational leader and speaker on the grounds ‘we need her’ (*LDLR*, 72), but Big Sally, with her ‘Ph.D. in Black English’ (*LDLR*, 67) derides Minnie’s contribution exclaiming, ‘we don’t need no ontology, we needs some grits [...] Ain’t no ontology gone pay our light bill [...] We need someone who knows how to get down’ (*LDLR*, 73). This dialogue parodies the Black Power militants and their disagreements about how to galvanize the black community into actively mobilizing dissident activity, but more germane to this argument, is the point that Minnie’s philosophic rhetoric is hopelessly impractical and far beyond the understanding of the black masses. Moreover, while Big Sally might articulate her speech in the black vernacular,

<sup>83</sup> Collini, “‘Every Fruit-juice Drinker, Nudist, Sandal-wearer...’: Intellectuals as Other People’, p. 206.

<sup>84</sup> See Collini’s discussion about the independent intellectual and the romanticization of the role. *Ibid.*, pp. 212-214.

<sup>85</sup> Abbott and Simmons, ‘An Interview with Ishmael Reed’ 1975, p. 85.

<sup>86</sup> Reed, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, p. 5.

<sup>87</sup> Ishmael Reed, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, 1974, (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), pp. 16, 72. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically after quotations within the text. I shall return to the characterisation of Minnie the Moocher in more depth in chapter 3.

insisting ‘upon her “oppression” to all who would listen’ (*LDLR*, 67), her hypocrisy is mercilessly exposed. Far from locating herself as, ‘just one of the people’ or ‘plain prole’, she owns a ‘300 ESL Mercedes’, and ‘although she was always “addressing myself to the community”, she spent an awful lot of time in Sausalito, the millionaire’s resort’ (*LDLR*, 67-68). *Flight to Canada* portrays the mulatto slave Cato the Gruffado, who is really the son of the millionaire plantation owner Arthur Swille. The former believes he has a higher status than the other slaves, because Swille awards him preferential treatment by sending him to school and as evidence he exclaims proudly, ‘they gibbed me a Ph.D’.<sup>88</sup> This is a sham for in Cato’s limited understanding this means that he ‘knows the Bible by heart’, and ‘things like “standards” and how to pronounce “prolegomenon”’.<sup>89</sup> This comic wordplay mixing the terms ‘proletariat’ and ‘phenomenon’ is meant to highlight the possibility that even lowly slaves can be educated to a high degree, though in the nineteenth century this was unusual. In actuality the knowledge Cato gleans is a mask for spying on and betraying his fellow slaves. The point is that all these fictional individuals with doctorates are identified by Reed as being detrimental in some way to the black community. Their academic learning has either enabled them to work undercover for oppressive white officials or it has endowed them with generally impractical skills and facts.

In the light of such negativity Reed’s narrative of his own experience of university seems deeply ironic. He foregrounds his precocious talent in creative writing which won him a place at the University of Buffalo and claims that he ‘discovered the academic game very early’.<sup>90</sup> He notes that because he worked in the library he was ‘ahead of some of the professors’, because he devoured any ‘new literary criticism that had arrived’.<sup>91</sup> According to this account in 1972 he became,

Bored of university and found that I did some of my best work outside it [...] in the middle of my junior year, 1960, I dropped out of college. This was the best thing that could have happened to me at the time because I was able to continue experimenting along the lines I wanted.<sup>92</sup>

Reed accentuates his youthful passion for independence and subversity, and, consoled by the fact he was able to continue with his experimental writing, he reveals that after six months of

<sup>88</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), p. 53.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> John O’Brien, ‘Ishmael Reed’, 1972, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 25-40 (p. 28).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

full time attendance he left academia behind because of the inflexibility of its curriculum and, to his mind, the putative nature of academic rigour. Yet this sharply conflicts with an interview he gave over twenty years later which strongly implies that his exit from the 'the university after two and a half years' was based on financial grounds.<sup>93</sup> There may be a pragmatic reason for such a disclosure, for the more recent interview was conducted by two German scholars who asked Reed about the ethnic, political and cultural characteristics of Buffalo. In response Reed recounted how his stepfather refused to sign the papers offering him a scholarship since he 'came from an old southern tradition where people are reticent about signing documents'.<sup>94</sup> Therefore in this ethnographic context Reed offers a rather different timescale and reason for leaving the academy thus again showing the arbitrary and contradictory nature of his thinking, and his tendency to offer mutually contradictory accounts in different contexts.

The majority of interviews featuring Reed's attacks on academics in the nineteen seventies have to be understood in the light of two factors. Firstly, one senses that though pride is evident in his admission that he is 'self-taught', this is swiftly followed by the bald statement, 'I never got my degree'.<sup>95</sup> In spite of his attempt to differentiate his own claim to intellectualism independently from the academic route, he expresses 'regret' over his decision' not to complete this qualification as a result of the treatment meted out to him from fellow blacks,

I've gotten some of the most racist and horrible things said to me because of this. It has come from black academicians who kind of hate people who don't have degrees. Even those who say they are nationalists and blacker than this or that [...] they still put degrees next to their name as an indication of where they are in this culture [...] with blacks it's a kind of pathology<sup>96</sup>

The sense of outrage at academic pretentiousness is evident here and this has to be borne in mind in respect to the second factor within his critiques. Since 1967 Reed has taught at a number of universities and though he claimed in 1972 that he 'did not 'want to be a slave to what someone else was going to use as a career as a way of gaining tenure' he found himself accepting an offer of a permanent post in the English department at Berkeley in California in

<sup>93</sup> Wolfgang Binder, and Helmbrecht Breinig, *American Contradictions: Interviews with Nine American Writers* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1995), pp. 101-110 (pp. 103-4).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>95</sup> Abbott and Simmons, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed', 1975, p. 85.

<sup>96</sup> John O'Brien, 'Ishmael Reed' 1972, p. 28.

1975.<sup>97</sup> The interview, 'The Great Tenure Battle of 1977', conducted by Jon Ewing, reveals that though this offer of tenure was passed for review with Reed's blessing in 1976, he was denied the post in 1977.<sup>98</sup> Ewing reveals the controversial aftermath of this event in which allegations of racism were aired alongside revelations about Reed's teaching ability and his personal life from other departmental members. Reed himself became 'irritated with what he felt were inaccuracies and misstatements'.<sup>99</sup> The whole episode ended in much embarrassment for the English department with Reed concluding that the tenure review had been intrusive and a personal inconvenience to him.

While Reed's interest in intellectualism was largely inspired by the choice to dedicate his life to creative writing and publishing, often for the political enhancement of black people, the experience of suffering academic haughtiness and his tenure rejection from Berkeley undoubtedly alienated him from the American university system. Reed's consequent attacks on academics for their 'conservative' and 'European' values, followed by his more inflammatory statements that, 'in some areas I'm more sophisticated than some of the people in the English department', found him no allies in this field.<sup>100</sup> Ewing's hints about Reed's 'temperamental' nature and the insecurity of 'academic scholars reacting to [...] a celebrity' may also have counted against him.<sup>101</sup> Reed's general view has been to extol his separation from academics, arguing that he writes 'mostly out the heart' and that 'there is a big difference in a novelist teaching writing and a scholar teaching writing'.<sup>102</sup> Yet Reed still felt inclined to insist that he 'had scholarly work published' proving his eligibility for a university post. In spite of this Robert Elliot Fox, who is one of Reed's most established and affirmative critics, identified Reed as 'an activist, not an academic'.<sup>103</sup> Even so Reed insisted in 2008 that,

When a mostly self-taught, degree-less intellectual from the projects like me can debate representatives of powerful interests like the Manhattan Institute, ABC News, NBC, CNN, and the creator of *The Wire*, what ideas does this put into the heads of the thousands of underclass intellectuals, across the nation who, like Malcolm X use the prison library [...] The fact that only 8

<sup>97</sup> These include the University of Washington, the State University of New York, Yale and Dartmouth. See Gates Jr., 'Ishmael Reed' in *Afro-American Fiction Writers After 1955*, p. 221.

<sup>98</sup> Jon Ewing, 'The Great Tenure Battle of 1977' in *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*. See pp. 219-236.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>102</sup> Northouse, 'Ishmael Reed', in *Conversations with Writers II*, p. 236. ; Jon Ewing, 'The Great Tenure Battle of 1977' in *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*, p. 228.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.; Robert Elliot Fox, 'Mumbo Gumbo', *Transition*, 0 (1995), 102-112 (pp. 102-3).

per cent of poor people are able to attend college does not prevent them from arming themselves for intellectual combat. I am living proof that the lack of a degree doesn't deprive one of a rich intellectual life. When I wanted to learn Japanese, I hired a tutor, which cost me \$25 [...] cigarette money for many, one hour per week, for ten years. I studied Yoruba the same way.<sup>104</sup>

Typically Reed blasts back at academics by noting firstly that there are budding intellectuals in all classes of society, and that it is the motivation for self-improvement and the courage to speak up, that are paramount in determining the great minds of the future. Secondly, Reed is adamant that the most significant 'intellectual' pursuits take place outside the walls of the academy, without any recourse to academic programmes.

Actually these perspectives are not new for Reed. He first explored the possibility of the underclass intellectual in *Mumbo Jumbo* with the complex character Abdul Hamid. The latter is a Black Muslim and the editor of a serious black magazine who believes that LaBas' avowal of voodoo is 'holding back our progress'.<sup>105</sup> Hamid shows exasperation with the contagious spread of Jes Grew, exclaiming, 'Cut out this dancing and carrying on, fulfilling base carnal appetites. We need factories, schools, guns. We need dollars' (*MJ*, 34). His nationalist rhetoric desires a transformation for black people in the same way that he was transformed in prison after serving nine years for stabbing a black landlord. The critic Donald Hoffman points out that while he is an inflexible character his exposure by LaBas, as 'Johnny James Chicago South Side' (*MJ*, 36), can evoke some sympathy: 'Like the archetypal Muslim convert, Malcolm X, Abdul has reinvented himself in prison [...] and] the result is an intellectual coat of many colours'.<sup>106</sup> Indeed Hamid the former gangster appears to be loosely based on Malcolm X, who also converted to the Nation of Islam in prison on the understanding that this would ultimately result in black self-reliance and freedom from Western domination. During his prison term Hamid develops his own code of pragmatism discovering that 'these people with degrees going around here shouting that they are New Negroes are really serving the Man who awarded them their degrees' (*MJ*, 37). To avoid this Hamid found he could 'learn in a few weeks' what others learnt during 'four years of university', by stripping knowledge, 'of its terms and private codes, its slang' (*MJ*, 37). He reveals how he 'proceeded like a quilt maker [...] a patch of knowledge here a patch there',

<sup>104</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up: Taking on the Media Bullies and Other Reflections* (2008), p. 36.

<sup>105</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, p. 34. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically after quotations within the text.

<sup>106</sup> Donald Hoffman, 'A Darker Shade of Grail: Questing at the Crossroads in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*' in *Callaloo* 17.4 (1994), pp. 1245-1256 (1252).

hungrily devouring ‘the intellectual scraps and leftovers of the learned’ (*MJ*, 37-8). This does not prevent LaBas and Black Herman however from berating Hamid about his monotheistic beliefs, which they viewed as misguided and intolerant. Yet the novel reveals another more flexible dimension to Hamid, for he builds his own intellectual system and admits to ‘borrowing’ from Religion, Philosophy, Music, Science and even Painting’ in order to adapt these to ‘something people will understand’ (*MJ*, 38). It is his intention that the eventual synthesis of his brand of learning together with the eclecticism of America will create a new sense of ‘griffin politics’, and a ‘chimerical art’, that ‘will survive’ (*MJ*, 39) spiritual cults. Hamid is almost apocalyptic in prophesising his own death and presenting his vision of someone (Malcolm X) ‘with the red hair of the conjure-man’, who is ‘coming’ (*MJ*, 39).<sup>107</sup> He wishes the others to leave the old world behind so that ‘one day all of us shall be able to express a variety of opinions, styles and values’ (*MJ*, 201). In this portrayal Reed shows his interest in the intellectual catalyst and process for transforming those who are unschooled into great leaders, and we see his subtle though complex rejection of both the Black Nationalist and Black Arts movements as a way of defining a multicultural future.

If the attack on academia is one consistent thread of Reed’s thought there are also examples of cases that seem to contradict this dominant position. In 1985 when Reed was expressing an interest in literature that depicted blacks’ multi-racial ancestry he felt moved to defend it against white reviewers such as the cultural critic Benjamin DeMott, who,

criticized black leaders for not imparting intellectual ideas to the masses. I hit the ceiling when I read that. Doesn’t he know that W. E. B. Du Bois had a Ph.D., that Huey P. Newton—who can hold his own in a discussion of phenomenology—has a Ph.D., that Martin Luther King had a Ph.D., etc.? [...] Well he may not be stupid but he certainly is inaccurate. Proportionately, Afro-American leaders probably have more Ph.D.’s among them than white leaders.<sup>108</sup>

Reed leaps to the defence of the very idea that he earlier attacked, namely, that a formal education should now carry some gravitas. The question of whether or not black leaders actually disseminated intellectual ideas to the whole community has been a thorny issue for Reed, but that point becomes almost an arbitrary one in some respects here. Reed attacks

<sup>107</sup> Malcolm X was given the moniker of ‘Detroit Red’ because of his reddish hair, which he is said to have inherited from his Scottish maternal grandfather. See Bruce Perry, *Malcolm: The Life of the Man Who Changed Black America* (New York: Station Hill, 1992), p. 2.

<sup>108</sup> Mel Watkins, ‘An Interview with Ishmael Reed’, 1985, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 245-257 (p. 252).

DeMott's superficial understanding of black advancement and simultaneously counters the premise that there can be no such a thing as an African American intellectual. On a contingent note he cites those black scholars who have emerged from traditional academic route and achieved doctorates in the American university system, as well as Huey P. Newton, who gained his qualification in the University of California after a spell in prison. With superb irony Reed unites 'the Renaissance man of African American letters', a distinguished Nobel peace prize winner and one of the original members of the Black Panther party to mount a defence of black intelligence and academic achievement.<sup>109</sup>

The contradictions within the doctoral and intellectual process in the American university system are embodied in Reed's novel, *Japanese by Spring*. The narrative opens with the central figure of Benjamin 'Chappie' Puttbutt, a black junior professor struggling to achieve tenure in the English department at Jack London College in San Francisco. It soon becomes apparent that he is a relentless shape-shifter, who constantly seeks self-advancement:

When the Black Power thing was in, Puttbutt was into that. When the backlash on Black Power settled in, with its code words like reverse discrimination, he joined that. He'd been a feminist when they were in power. But now they were on the decline, unable to expand beyond their middle class constituency and so for now he was a neoconservative, but since a split had developed among the financial backers of the neoconservative and between the new conservatives and the old conservatives, that might be over too.<sup>110</sup>

This character firstly dispenses with his youthful radicalism and his involvement in black consciousness movements since they caused him to be labelled 'as a troublemaker' (*JBS*, 4), thus dashing his hopes for career progression. During the years of 'commuting between the African-American Studies department [...] and the Humanity department' (*JBS*, 4) he attempts to ally himself with a number of feminists by declaring he is a 'recovering misogynist' (*JBS*, 59) in the hope of support in his battle for tenure. Furthermore with the onset of middle age and no friends Chappie espouses a fashionable neo-conservative position.

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<sup>109</sup> See 'W. E. B. Du Bois' in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, pp. 606-609 (p. 606). He was a pioneering scholar and intellectual during the first half of the twentieth century. As a Black Panther activist, Huey Newton was involved in medical and social programmes in Oakland, California. After much harassment from the police in several major cities he was caught up in an exchange of fire in which he was wounded. He was then charged with killing a police officer. Much later after being released from prison he renounced violence and concentrated on socialist community programmes. He gained his Ph.D. in 1980 though he was later shot while walking along a street in Oakland in 1989

<sup>110</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Japanese by Spring* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1996), pp. 48-9. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically after quotations within the text.

This meant he ‘studied the classics’ (*JBS*, 70), denounced affirmative action, and published a book, *Blacks, America’s Misfortune* (*JBS*, 43). Above all he is an intellectual opportunist who believes that all he ‘had to do was to string together some quotes from Benjamin, Barthes, Foucault, and Lacan and you were in business’ (*JBS*, 49).

Chappie puts his own ambition of acquiring tenure first, to the point of becoming an apologist for European philosophical and postmodernist perspectives, even though they clash with his favoured position as the department’s ‘New Critic’ (*JBS*, 49). The novel shows how Chappie opts for short term solutions to deal with the various situations he finds himself in, though it has been his long term plan to study Japanese ‘in order to take advantage of the new global realities’ (*JBS*, 5). Therefore he studies Japanese with a tutor who promises him results ‘by spring’ (*JBS*, 5). Chappie is eventually denied tenure, but then, in a bizarre reversal of fortune, he is dramatically appointed to become the chief advisor to the new Japanese President of Jack London. We see him shift to a position of dominance where he abruptly reverses his earlier stances. His father rails against him,

When you thought your tenure was automatic, you preached against affirmative action, but when those white people whom you thought were your colleagues denied you tenure, you turned against them and sided with Dr. Yamato in an effort to humiliate them. You don’t have no convictions, Son. You’re all over the place. A product of this age (*JBS*, 180).

This scenario is thinly veiled as Reed’s own tenure battle at Berkeley in the nineteen seventies, though, unlike the author, Chappie is so entrenched in global gamesmanship, he has lost touch with his ethical and political grounding. Leon Lewis believes that Reed sees Chappie with a:

mixture of sympathetic understanding and exasperated disappointment; sympathy based on mutual experience as an African American intellectual in a hostile university setting and disappointment at the failure of black men like Puttbutt to work beyond the necessity for defensive wrath and reclusive avoidance toward a life-enhancing vision.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Leon Lewis, ‘The Resurrection of Olódmare: Ishmael Reed’s Vision of Renewal in *Japanese by Spring*’ in *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed*, ed. by Bruce Dick (Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 201-206 (p. 201).



Chappie is indeed Reed's anti-hero, who has to resort to a number of intellectual entanglements to make his way into a white academic world. He suppresses his black heritage to the point of self-alienation.

If the reader is uncertain of Reed's thoughts on such matters, he attempts to clear this up by appearing in the novel as the character, Ishmael Reed. The latter gives Chappie a wide berth, as the negative reviewer of his 'apocalyptic series—*The Terribles*', and in typical anti-academic mode Reed condemns Chappie's book for being too full of 'critical jargon and Victorian diction [...] All about binary this and that' (*JBS*, 129). Reed is bemused by Chappie's opportunism and wonders how, 'this man who was a one-man black relations department on behalf of Western civilization was now a big Asia booster' (*JBS*, 131). But the novel is more than Reed's way of dealing with his grudge against academics, for it is the system's adherence to traditionalism, formulaic criticism and Western canons that also irks him. Reed portrays himself as a writer and visiting lecturer, who counters Chappie at every point. Reed studies Yoruba rather than Japanese, not for career advancement, but for the 'great charm, beauty and poetry' (*JBS*, 120), of the language that had 'no perceivable role for the critic' (*JBS*, 122). Intellectually, spiritually and culturally, Reed brings together the past and the present, and unlike the self-serving academics, he proceeds with the aim of raising awareness of broadening the academic curriculum and the cultural marketplace. As Chappie fades out of the narrative with a proficiency in Japanese, in another ironic twist, it is Professor Crabtree, the former 'leader of the traditionalists' (*JBS*, 17), who has the temerity to suggest that teachers should be more flexible and 'be the ones to lead our students to new intellectual frontiers' (*JBS*, 155).

Reed's sense of irony about black intellectuals is matched by his assertions about the shortcomings of white intellectuals. In 1973, Reed condemned the 'New York "liberals"' because of what he perceived to be their intolerance and lack of neutrality.<sup>112</sup> Reed felt they were in cahoots with the media and were responsible for perpetrating stereotypes, so that, 'Mugger is now a liberal euphemism for blacks'.<sup>113</sup> He argues that while such people had a former predilection for liberalism they were steering themselves towards more neo-conservative positions and were therefore undeserving of the accolade of 'liberal'. In an essay of the same name he re-labels them 'gliberals', because to his mind they could only be 'glib'

<sup>112</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p. 34.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

or duplicitous and insincere in their approach to intellectual matters.<sup>114</sup> Reed records his disappointment with uniform and defamatory declarations by commenting, ‘I always thought that liberalism, classically, had something to do with the ability to reason, as well as “freedom from prejudice or bigotry,” as the dictionary adds’.<sup>115</sup> He names the ‘gliberals’ as, ‘Goldwater and Buckley [...] The Stevensons, Kennedys and Humphreys [...] Thomas Jefferson, the founding Gliberal, a slave owner who insisted that the Bill of Rights be added to the Constitution’.<sup>116</sup> This list of former presidents, a vice president, senators, and a state governor all emerge from the heartland of American government and politics, and whether as intellectual proponents of the conservative movement or of liberalism, Reed perceives them as interlinked clans who specialize in the preservation of white culture.

Finally Reed cites ‘the heavyweight champeen gliberal, Norman Mailer’, who much to Reed’s exasperation ‘wrote in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, “I’m tired of Negroes and their rights”’.<sup>117</sup> Reed offers the explanation that Mailer’s apathy was generated presumably, ‘because one black preacher didn’t show up for a press conference on time’.<sup>118</sup> In spite of being a writer and journalist with close affinities to the artistic process, Reed critiques Mailer in 1968 for dismissing the very real concerns of the black community at a time that saw a turning point in race relations. Reed writes that black Americans ‘did not prevent the Democrats from holding a successful convention in Chicago’ at that time, but he is clearly incensed that Mailer lacked any empathy with Civil Rights. Mailer had previously expressed an interest in African American culture, particularly black manhood, and I will discuss this point in a later chapter. The influence of the ‘gliberals’ spans from the early nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries and they are all denounced by Reed, for what he perceives to be their contentment with propaganda and their lack of critical reasoning when engaging with the truth about slavery and black oppression. He regards them as people, who because of their

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-35.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 35. Mailer’s work, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, was based on the Republican and Democratic National Conventions in the summer of 1968, set in a time of great unrest due to the Vietnam War and Civil Rights uprisings. Also that year Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy had been assassinated. Riots ensued outside the convention centre that mainly consisted of anti-war protestors but the Black Panthers and other civil rights leaders planned to have representation in Chicago to press forward with their complaints about racism in American policies and politics.

status and education 'are able to flit from one position to another' without thinking about the consequences.<sup>119</sup>

Pointedly Reed critiques the 'gliberals', because their social and intellectual status is assured in a white hegemonic culture that also values material success. Reed comments on their conservatism and their championing of monocultural values, rather than the liberal ones he believes they ought to espouse. However his indictment is curious in some respects, given that Reed himself has the freedom to mount a critique of those he classes as 'gliberals'. Indeed Reed functions rather similarly to the figure Rorty defines as an 'ironist', for this is a role that can only be occupied in liberal societies where there is freedom of speech. This raises the question of how others view Reed, and whether white intellectuals would feel that he is serving the greater public interest by attacking those conservative values which promote the assimilation of all cultural groups. Reed can afford to be outspoken in the USA precisely because the nation's constitution allows for that, but, as Rorty points out, 'it is tempting to infer that ironists are naturally antiliberal' and that their credibility arises from 'awareness of the power of redescription'.<sup>120</sup> In fact Rorty's analysis goes some way into revealing the weaknesses of such figures. While intellectuals such as Reed want to make an impact on political and social issues and be taken seriously as morally responsible individuals, their use of irony often alienates them and leads them there under the cover of redescription. We have seen how Reed changes his subject position when he needs to, a feature that Rorty sees as causing '*special* resentment', because such figures attempt to disguise their redescription under 'the cover of argument' rather than in 'straightforward, unselfconscious, transparent prose'.<sup>121</sup>

By 1990 Reed was convinced that most of the tensions 'between different races and people of different backgrounds, come from the media'.<sup>122</sup> Three years later he researched the print and electronic media's biased coverage of black people for an essay collection entitled *Airing Dirty Laundry*. He lays a large proportion of the blame for racial conflicts at the door of the public intellectuals,

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>120</sup> Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 89.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., pp. 90, 89.

<sup>122</sup> George Paul Csiscery, 'The Many Battles of Ishmael Reed', 1990, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 314-338 (p. 335).

One would think that intellectuals would inject a tone of reason into this public discussion, but in the United States, the intelligentsia often sell their intellects to the highest corporate bidder.

In the old days, muckrakers like Lincoln Steffens used their talents to fight big steel, big oil, and big meat; today's intellectual goes after welfare mothers, the homeless, and the hungry [...] They might hire out their talents to places like the Heritage Foundation or the American Enterprise Institute, outfits with apparently unlimited access to the television networks.

This group of think-tankers, op-eders, television commentators form the chief impediment to black progress. In the words of Carl Rowan, they have brilliantly used the media to "out-propagandize" the group they perceive as the enemy.<sup>123</sup>

Reed's denouncement is focused generally on academics, who seem intent on disseminating their views through various media channels such as editorials, television presenting and government think tanks. Not only does he want to suggest, like Small, that it is doubtful 'whether an academic can plausibly be an intellectual, especially when the institution providing him or her with financial support seeks in some measure to define the kinds of work undertaken'; he also hints that public intellectuals are engaging in a dual trading system: academics achieve their public outreach, and thus authority, through the media who beam out their views globally, while in return the media and government sponsored think tanks use these scholarly views to castigate those who may be black, and those, who, for various reasons find themselves at the mercy of the state.<sup>124</sup>

Edward Said also claims that 'there is no shortage of partisan policy intellectuals who are organically linked to one or another political party, lobby, special interest, or foreign power'.<sup>125</sup> Reed later reveals more detail about the white intellectual propaganda that associates 'blacks with spousal abuse, drugs, child abandonment, and illegitimacy', so that he can foreground his point that 'pictures of blacks are associated with social pathology, while whites are represented as society's stewards'.<sup>126</sup> He envisions this as an academic betrayal. Bearing in mind that a 'public' intellectual can be defined as one who 'from an academic or creative base addresses a non-specialist public on matters of general concern', Reed attempts to undercut the effectiveness and authority of white public intellectuals by trying to show that

<sup>123</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. 6.

<sup>124</sup> Helen Small, 'Introduction' in *The Public Intellectual* ed. by Helen Small, p. 2.

<sup>125</sup> Edward Said, 'The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals' in *The Public Intellectual*, p. 22.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), pp. 6-7.

the idea of a genuine public audience whom one could address on such issues has to be totally fragmentary.<sup>127</sup>

Fundamentally Reed indicts public intellectuals for demonstrating what he believes to be a complete lack of integrity. In order to underline his point he compares contemporary intellectuals with the 'muckrakers' of the early twentieth century. As a group of investigative journalists and critics he considers them to be more philanthropically focused than contemporary careerist academics and reporters.<sup>128</sup> In Reed's view, the former wore a badge of honour because they targeted the oppression of corporate institutions and capitalists on behalf of the impoverished classes. Presumably this is why he has modelled himself on this journalistic style, thereby declaring in 1989, 'I'm just a born muckraker that's all'.<sup>129</sup> Reed highlights Lincoln Steffens for two reasons: firstly, because during his nine years of New York City newspaper work, Steffens discovered more evidence than anyone else of the corruption of politicians by business men seeking special privileges. Secondly, Reed attempts to demonstrate that since muckrakers generally uncover fraud and corruption in all sectors of the population they work in the public interest. Reed thus seeks to contrast the mercenary profile of contemporary commentators with the original muckrakers.<sup>130</sup> If by this Reed intended to present a prototype of an honourable public intellectual with the hope that this would inform the contemporary media, then the American historian Gabriel Kolko, thinks very differently. He argues that 'all too many prominent muckrakers were journalists rather than thinkers, with commonplace talents and middle class virtues, incapable of serious and radical critiques. A few, at least, were opportunists'.<sup>131</sup> Yet Reed is convinced that the print

<sup>127</sup> Collini, 'Every Fruit-juice Drinker, Nudist, Sandal-wearer...: Intellectuals as Other People', p. 210.

<sup>128</sup> The term 'muckraker' was coined by the politician, Theodore Roosevelt, in 1906. At that time 'it was not a term of endearment' for Roosevelt was attempting to 'curb the worst excesses of America's Industrial Revolution and while still preserving [...] the capitalist system'. He identified a new risk-taking type of journalist who would carry out investigations that, when published, would agitate the general population. He worried about how to protect the honest business man from the ire of the mob. See Mark Feldstein, 'A Muckraking Model: Investigative Reporting Cycles in American History', *Press/Politics* Vol. 11, Issue 2 (2006), 1-16 (1). < <https://www.gwu.edu/~smpa/faculty/documents/Harvard.pdf> > [accessed 30 August 2012] (p. 1). Reed uses this term quite self-consciously to refer to a group of American investigative reporters, who in their heyday (1902-1912), exposed societal issues such as the appalling conditions in slums, prisons, factories, mines and child labour. Steffens was one of the most influential practitioners of the 'muckraking' style and by the end of 1901 he discovered abundant evidence of the corruption of politicians by business men seeking special privileges.

<sup>129</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p. 187.

<sup>130</sup> Reed appears eager to forcefully publicise his own view that contemporary journalists hold a dubious intellectual status because their driving motive is not to unearth corruption at all costs, but to promote their talents in a competitive marketplace where business men and conglomerates will offer them financial rewards.

<sup>131</sup> Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Re-Interpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (New York: Free Press, 1963; repr. 1977), p.161.

media would learn something from adopting an altruistic approach, which would mirror his own early experiences in journalism, and presumably would offer a strong validation of his own muckraking style in his avowal to defend the black minority against the racial machinations of an oppressive white culture.

I noted earlier that in 1978 Reed bewailed the lack of platforms available for African American intellectuals within the political sphere. This allowed him to underline his much vaunted position of 'outsiderness', but by 1993 he announced that, 'as long as I have a platform, I think that I have an opportunity to combat the slander and libel aimed at blacks as a group'.<sup>132</sup> In fact he has used the media to counter the 'outpropagandization', to work against its dominant values from within. For Reed's writing career was founded on his connection to print journalism, and during his career he worked for three various press agencies. Ironically the major recipient of Reed's habitual literary punching has been and continues to be the media. Pragmatically Reed admits that his 'house is full of magazines and newspapers. I treat them seriously as I treat books', and even more revealing is his point that, 'much of my data is garnered from the very newspapers and television news shows where think tank operatives discuss crime, drugs [...] as predominantly black problems'.<sup>133</sup> Though he condemns intellectuals for using the media Reed is not above doing the same thing by recycling the same material and sources from media articles for inclusion in his essays and fiction.

Reed is also not above using fellow intellectuals in an offensive against the media's continued indictment of African Americans as the source of all America's social problems. Reed disclosed how he galvanised himself into action and organised a month's boycott of the television network news in 1991. Bolstered by the support of writers' organisations such as 'PEN Oakland' and the 'Before Columbus Foundation', and by networking with other 'writers, and scholars and artists' in ten American cities, Reed headed a committee that organised 'town meetings, panel sessions, poetry and fiction readings, to deal with the lack of balance in images of blacks and Latinos'.<sup>134</sup> He recounts how this event proliferated, attracting local and national media attention. His contributions included penning a controversial article in the *New York Times*, appearing with the East St. Louis group on the

<sup>132</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. xliii.

<sup>133</sup> Northouse, 'Ishmael Reed', in *Conversations with Writers II*, p. 252; Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p.

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<sup>134</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p.26.

CBS '60 Minutes Overtime' programme and a one-hour radio show in Florida with phone-in participants. As a result Reed was pleased to report that 'even the right wing callers agreed that the picture of African Americans on television is not balanced.'<sup>135</sup> This event is symptomatic of how Reed attempts to create a dialogue between global corporations and a particular social group.

Throughout his nonfiction Reed often refers to his numerous appearances on radio programmes and television shows: he attempted to reverse the 'suburban legends' about blacks and drug consumption in a broadcast on Pacifica network, he appeared on *Nightline* in 1993 to discuss black crime, and he has favoured the *CounterPunch* website to forward his views about black education.<sup>136</sup> He runs his own magazine, *Konch*, and he makes the point that 'whenever I want to express an opinion or promote a book or play, I can always gain access to KPFA's airwaves'.<sup>137</sup> There are a number of You Tube clips of Reed which variously depict him reading his poetry that has often been set to music, reading excerpts from his essays, discussing his fiction, and contributing to discussions about American literature.<sup>138</sup> On a political note there is a You Tube recording of Reed being interviewed in the aftermath of the fatal shooting of the young black man Oscar Grant in 2009 in Oakland, California. Reed uses this recording in a bid to expound his views on police brutality against black men, and he charges police officers with terrorism against African Americans since the time of Emancipation.<sup>139</sup> Therefore utilizing a range of media formats is essential to Reed's position. Edward Said pointed out that,

there are independent intellectuals who actually form an incipient community, physically separated from each other but connected variously to a great number of activist communities shunned by the main media; but who have at their actual disposal [...] a range of opportunities offered by the

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>136</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up: Taking on the Media Bullies and Other Reflections* (2008), pp. 143, 26

<sup>137</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), pp. xiv, xxxvii.

<sup>138</sup> See Reed 'Conjure Sky Diving', 2009 <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=np8sVlwOm20](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=np8sVlwOm20)> ; Ishmael Reed: 'Beware: Do not read this poem', 2009 <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExKTcjz6k9I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExKTcjz6k9I)> ; Ishmael Reed reads from 'NeoHooDooism: A Reading from the "New and Collected"', 2010 <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=6A3vqjA1zH8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6A3vqjA1zH8)> ; George Galloway interviews Ishmael Reed on Huckleberry Finn Censorship, 2011 <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYDUuoG4hXw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYDUuoG4hXw)> [accessed 31 August 2012]

<sup>139</sup> Ishmael Reed On The BART Shooting, Oakland & Police, 2009 <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFF4Lh-s8DA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFF4Lh-s8DA)> [accessed 31 August 2012]. Reed vents his wrath against the white police officer who shot Grant unlawfully and the policemen all over America who are perpetrating crimes and evading justice. In this case Grant was unarmed and was not resisting arrest. Eventually the guilty police officer was sentenced to two years imprisonment by the U. S. Justice Department in a civil rights case.

lecture platform, the pamphlet, radio, alternative journals, the interview form, the rally, church pulpit, and the Internet.<sup>140</sup>

Said positively encourages any independent intellectual to be resourceful, to take advantage of any form of media available. On this pragmatic basis, therefore, Reed could not afford to deny himself from using the various forms of media at his disposal. He is vitriolic about the media, and at the same time, he remains actively associated with journalism and the networks using the coverage to manipulate and publicise his controversial views.

Reed's final word on the issue of the media and intellectuals is defiant and characteristically militant:

Perhaps it is time for a new intellectual army? Black and Latino men and women need a media army of academy trained as well as outside intellectuals, men and women who are on unemployment and welfare, as well as those who view their doctorates as an excuse for pulling what they call 'rank' on us or viewing themselves as members of an exclusive 'club' [...] We need project dwellers to form Internet cafes and chat rooms to take on think tanks, which even though they have millions of dollars behind them, are staffed by intellectual cowards and bullies. We need an underclass media army to respond to the black and white columnists who are always on their case.<sup>141</sup>

By mingling academic professors, those with doctorates, independent intellectuals drawn from ethnic groups and those who are unemployed but skilful and intelligent, Reed envisages his army as having the potential to break down the barriers of academic exclusivity and fight back against the propaganda of the media. To his mind this collectivist scenario will create a number of opportunities for retaliating against those who are critical of underprivileged minorities. Whilst railing against the dominant media and its power Reed nevertheless intends to draw on its resources because he sees the opportunities to be gained for minor and marginal communities.

In the spirit of Rorty's liberal ironism Reed's pragmatics have evolved over time to deliver contingent responses according to which intellectuals he is writing about. These take the form of cultural critiques to decry how the meaning of America's social and cultural crises is being developed and derived from intellectuals who are usually salaried to the Government. Reed's

<sup>140</sup> Said, 'The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals' in *The Public Intellectual*, p. 29.

<sup>141</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up: Taking on the Media Bullies and Other Reflections* (2008), p. 40.



shifting perspectives range from self-declarations of intellectualism, which are then repudiated in favour of maintaining links with ordinary black people, to attacking academics for having degrees and for spreading what he considers to be the disease of white America values or 'collective shit'. Surprisingly on occasions he turns aside from this to applaud the range of doctorate professors drawn from the African American community. As an African American Reed has the freedom to speak to the public about many different issues, and also to adopt the most personal and most practical course of action, while issuing protests to counter certain individuals and institutions, though there are moments when he disparages the very liberality upon which America was founded. Reed's inconsistencies nevertheless present one unchanging view, also omnipresent in Stefan Collini's writing, that intellectuals can be and are actually 'ordinary' people; thinkers, writers and speakers, from all walks of life who need not hold an academic or a politically engaged status.<sup>142</sup> Indeed Reed has a primary interest in mobilising an awareness of those who could be regarded as alternative intellectuals drawn from all classes and cultures. Despite his claim to radical 'outsiderness', it could be argued that Reed belongs to the mainstream tradition of American pragmatism. This standpoint leads him to critique not only white culture, but also those black academics and thinkers who have criticised his own writings, and who to his mind, work only for an enhanced media status rather than black equality and opportunity.

## **At the Front: Reed and Black Intellectuals**

In focusing on black intellectuals and the prospect of an intellectual life it is pertinent to ask where Reed drew his inspiration from. Certainly Malcolm X the auto-didact, who fought against adversity to become a leading black activist, receives Reed's approbation early in his writing career, while again figures such as Booker T. Washington and Harold Cruse merit even more praise. This is noteworthy because these figures, like Reed, are distinguishable by their lack of academic degrees and for not wholly embracing academia or assimilating the values of the black middle class. The same cannot be said for Reed's attitudes to those black authors, artists and academics who he believes belong to exclusive organizations,

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<sup>142</sup> Collini, "Every Fruit-juice Drinker, Nudist, Sandal-wearer..." : Intellectuals as Other People', p. 210.

While my New York and Cambridge critics were eating French food and drinking whiskey at the Century and Harvard Clubs and generally enjoying a moveable feast and having a joke about my “half-baked” ideas [...] I have been building institutions in the West [...] involved in serving the community in which I live. People who live at the bottom of the ladder and who take abuse from the elite and the self-satisfied can do the same and do it without a doctorate or even a bachelor’s degree.<sup>143</sup>

This critique denounces a range of individuals who are totally institutionalized and therefore marginalized in Harvard, private clubs and other Ivy League establishments in America’s north-east. In Reed’s terms this group closet themselves away in ivory towers enjoying what he deems to be a decadent lifestyle. Though he claims they regard his discourse as unsound, he counters this by ironically suggesting his life in the west and his key involvement in his locality, whether it be through the arts or through civic issues, is central in terms of the black infrastructure. In spite of Reed’s profession of outsidership, he declares that such a commitment is possible regardless of any academic qualifications from the academies.

There is a strong likelihood that among the academics suffering the brunt of Reed’s ire are those belonging to the present day Talented Tenth. Arising at the beginning of the twentieth century this concept identified the importance of educating a prospective black leadership contingent to form an ‘aristocracy of talent and character’.<sup>144</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois implied that they would be awarded special privileges for their dedication to ‘leavening the lump and inspiring the masses’, and he anticipated that the ‘Tenth’ would drive through a political and civil equality for African Americans.<sup>145</sup> However, Reed is convinced that this label lacks any practical currency and he remains contemptuous of the group’s achievements. Indeed Reed’s collection of essays entitled *Another Day at the Front* (2003) is devoted to a metaphorical battleground where he habitually punches against injustice, where he champions those intellectuals he identifies as race warriors of the past, and where he critiques others who betray his sense of striving for racial and cultural progress on behalf of the black community. Therefore this section will analyse the differentiation between those whom Reed privileges, such as Booker T. Washington and Harold Cruse, and those whom he attacks, namely the well-known contemporary ‘Tenthers’ Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Cornel West. I propose to

<sup>143</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up: Taking on the Media Bullies and Other Reflections* (2008), pp. 36-37.

<sup>144</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, ‘The Talented Tenth’ in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes Today* (New York: 1903), pp. 33-75 (p. 45) <<http://archive.org/details/negroproblemseri00washrich>> [accessed 16 March 2011]

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 63.

consider Reed's definition of intellectualism and to show how his sense of pragmatism is again prominent in countering the tide of opinion from other critics. He directs this by profiling Washington and Cruse as key intellectuals in African American social history while trenchantly attacking West and Gates for their scholarly shortcomings.

If the contemporary Talented Tenth have their mentor and intellectual champion in W. E. B. Du Bois then Reed almost certainly locates his in Booker T. Washington, the African American educator and political leader. Most of Reed's views on Washington can be found in the essay, 'Booker Versus the Negro-Saxons', written in 2003.<sup>146</sup> This purports to focus both on the state of race relations between 1861 and 1910 and on attitudes to African American progress. Yet Reed structures the work as a sustained dichotomization of Du Bois and Washington to the point that it becomes both a spirited defence of the latter and a diatribe against the Harvard enclave. Although Reed attempts to self-consciously adopt a tone of neutrality his acclamation of Washington is soon evident and it is only towards the end of the essay that he admits that this work is a 're-assessment' of Washington, 'unfettered by the bias of Northern elitist African American intellectuals and comfortable white radicals'.<sup>147</sup> Reed honours Washington for two reasons. Firstly, for personal and anecdotal reasons, Reed acknowledges how his family survived poverty and starvation due to the training 'Ishmael Hubbard', his mother's cousin and namesake, undertook as a tailor at Washington's establishment, Tuskegee Institute. This craft was duly passed to his uncle, Emmet Coleman, who was then 'able to go to his job at Miller's Brother's department store clean [...with] Shoes shined, well-tailored suits, and sometimes wearing a rakish straw hat'.<sup>148</sup> For Reed, the prime consequence was that, 'in a sense [...] Washington was responsible for there being food on our table'.<sup>149</sup> Against the various sneers by academic theorists Reed credits Washington with 'common sense and experience', whose writing was 'full of anecdotes about blacks who knew abstract theories but didn't know how to raise vegetables or maintain a house'.<sup>150</sup> From these statements Reed manifests a visible pride in his roots, particularly demonstrating how his family infra-structure was supported by Washington's industrial programme. In his estimation Washington is the African American pragmatist par excellence, a remarkable

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<sup>146</sup> Reed, 'Booker Versus the Negro-Saxons', in *Another Day at the Front* (2003), pp. 76-91.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxi.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

individual who provided training that would go on to support African American families well beyond subsistence level.

Secondly, while Reed's aim might be to show how both Washington and Du Bois 'should be celebrated' rather than 'being pitted against each other', he effectively succeeds in foregrounding their major differences of outlook and policy.<sup>151</sup> Indeed by firstly commending Washington's *Up from Slavery* as an indispensable work 'written in a modern reader-friendly prose style', and secondly by presenting Washington's Atlanta Compromise Speech in 1895, as a 'master-piece of hard-line practicality', it is hard not to draw the conclusion that Reed is privileging Washington to the exclusion of anyone else.<sup>152</sup> By drawing on the preface from *Up from Slavery* and from Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* it is possible to comprehend why Reed has reached this standpoint. Washington recounts how his work comprises a series of articles dealing with life incidents and how much of the work had 'been written on board trains, or at hotels or railroad stations', since the majority of his time was 'required for the executive work connected with Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, and in securing the money necessary for the support of the institution'.<sup>153</sup> In contrast to this Du Bois's main objective in the preface of *The Souls of Black Folk* was, 'to sketch, in vague, uncertain outline, the spiritual world in which ten thousand Americans live and strive'.<sup>154</sup> Reed honours the active and business-like approach of Washington and he contrasts this disapprovingly with Du Bois's more scholastic and intellectually elusive manner.

Washington's practicality inevitably led to clashes with Du Bois and his sympathisers, Reed believes, because the former continued to strategise on the basis of experience and observation rather than books while,

Du Bois, Ralph Ellison and their intellectual followers believed that if one digested the contents of "Great Books," that is, books written by white men, one would be, in DuBois's words, "wedded" to the truth. They believed that by ingesting this material African Americans would assimilate "high," that is, European culture. Their obedience to this concept led them to accept uncritically material that was not based upon science but often on folklore and wild speculation. While Booker T. Washington based his values on the

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., pp. 76, 79.

<sup>153</sup> Booker T. Washington, 'Up From Slavery', in *Three Negro Classics* with introduction by John Hope Franklin (New York: Avon Books, 1965), pp. 23-205 (p. 25).

<sup>154</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The Souls of Black Folk' in *Three Negro Classics*, pp. 207-389 (p. 209).

teachings of Christianity, his critics worshipped at the altar of modernism, a movement now considered passé.<sup>155</sup>

Doubly contemptible, in Reed's terms, are the two restraints imposed by a European classical education. Initially this leads to a direct critique of Du Bois and others for their enthrallment to a traditional Eurocentric curriculum with the intended outcome of accessing and disseminating a pattern of 'civilised' western cultural values as a means of prospective race improvement for all African Americans. Secondly, Reed infers that this engagement gives rise to the potent idea that a single absolutist form of truth could be derived from Western intellectual culture. The implication for Reed is that future black intellectuals should not stray too far from prescriptive ideas about white high culture even though he denounces the 'great' works as fanciful, mere products of the imagination. This is ironic given Reed's enthusiasm for experimentation in creative writing, but one suspects that Reed discards this in order to foreground the humanitarian and Universalist principles that Washington drew not from Western Canons of intellect, but from his practice and belief in a form of Christianity that transcended race and class. Although Reed opted for very different belief systems to Washington, Reed eulogises him so that he could differentiate the latter's down to earth practicality with the more urbane, academic ideology of Du Bois.

By focusing on the polarities of this early twentieth century clash between Washington and Du Bois, it is possible to see how Reed's discussion emphasises some key oppositions: the principle of practice versus theoretical proposition and the experiential versus the intellectual. Furthermore it becomes possible to perceive them as a prequel to understanding the clashes between Reed and north eastern intellectuals. Thus he presents himself in the spirit of the fighting 'man of the street' hammering out his views on issues of injustice, exploitation and prejudice in direct opposition to the Harvard Talented Tenth, who, he believes, stay on the side-lines rooted in unworldliness and impracticality. Washington is in many respects a role model for Reed and consequently he notes approvingly how Washington 'was born a slave and did not receive a "higher education", while some of his enemies were born free and were Harvard educated'.<sup>156</sup> This has major correspondence with Reed's admission in 1972 that he did not have a degree and that he preferred to be creative outside the academy.

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<sup>155</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), pp. 81-82.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p.78.

Reed's bitterness towards black academics stems from his insistence that they despise individuals who have not been awarded a degree. Thus, as discussed earlier in this section, Reed becomes particularly heated when confronted with black academic hubris, but on another level this can be understood as a more contemporary echo of the sneers levelled against Washington by the same group. Reed commends Washington because he 'based his actions not on books but on experience', and also because of his 'insistence that industrial education for African Americans take priority over what he considered the frills of the "New England curriculum"'.<sup>157</sup> However Washington's insistence on buying time for black economic development in order to improve the 'material, educational and moral and religious life' for huge numbers of ordinary African Americans was not welcomed by Du Bois and others.<sup>158</sup> Reed is correct nevertheless to point out that 'Du Bois's attitude to Washington is inconsistent', because Du Bois at first commended the latter for his 'enthusiasm', 'unlimited energy' and his 'singleness of vision'.<sup>159</sup> Also Du Bois highlights Washington's achievements comprising the 'Atlanta Compromise', his intuitive grasp of the commercial 'spirit of the age which was dominating the North' and finally he notes that Washington was 'one of the most notable figures in a nation of seventy millions'.<sup>160</sup> This thoughtful appraisal did not prevent Du Bois from issuing a measured critique of Washington in which he contended that the latter ultimately counselled 'a silent submission to civic inferiority' and a deprecation of 'institutions of higher learning', which meant that his 'doctrine tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burden of the Negro problem to the Negro's shoulders and stand aside as critical [...] spectators'.<sup>161</sup> Reed subsequently critiques Du Bois for favouring a political development and progress that could only be achieved by a 'Talented Tenth [...] an elite that would lead African Americans to freedom'.<sup>162</sup> The point is that these oppositions show how Washington, like Reed, did not necessarily consider a classical form of education to be the most important milestone and goal in an African American's life. Reed preferred to build up his own experience of writing through his early forays into journalism, experimental writing with the Umbra workshops and later ventures into publishing, film and theatre. This did not mean that he disapproved of higher education as a whole but he is clearly wounded by the rejection he encountered from black intellectuals.

<sup>157</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), pp. 81, 83.

<sup>158</sup> Washington, 'Up From Slavery' in *Three Negro Classics*, p. 202.

<sup>159</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, 'The Souls of Black Folk' in *Three Negro Classics*, p. 241.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 241-242.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 247, 251.

<sup>162</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. 81. He also points out that the concept of the Talented Tenth was based on 'one tenth of the 10 million population of African American's at the time'.

Washington, around the turn of the twentieth century, was a public and well-known figure and he had more famously experienced similar condescension from Du Bois and his contemporaries. They implied that Washington was ‘designing a program that “practically accept [...] the alleged inferiority of the Negro races” by insisting on an industrial based education to the detriment of black advancement.’<sup>163</sup> Reed reveals how,

W.E.B. Du Bois asked what Socrates and Saint Francis of Assisi would say to Washington’s point about ex-slaves who knew the classics but had no knowledge of how to fend for themselves, a remark that would prompt a practical man like Washington to refer to Du Bois as a “dunce.” When Washington described a black intellectual as someone “with a high hat, imitation gold eye-glasses, a showy walking-stick, kid gloves, fancy boots, and what not,” we have a pretty good idea whom he is signifying upon.<sup>164</sup>

This quote is used by Reed to demonstrate the hostility between the two men over the issue of the African American racial future and also how complacent Du Bois appeared to be about the survival of the average Negro. Reed adds how they ‘exchanged insults and at one point Du Bois referred to Washington as the Arch Tempter, and synonym for Satan’, a point that led Reed to add later that Du Bois’s ‘anger with Washington led him to abandon the scientific objectivity that he had admired’.<sup>165</sup> Since Du Bois attempted to accuse Washington of deflecting the urgency of racial progress, Reed is keen to vindicate Washington as one who had never totally denounced learning by intellectual means; rather he endorsed ‘both “hand” and “head” education, that half the student’s education be devoted to learning industrial trades and half to book learning’.<sup>166</sup> Reed therefore cites Washington’s complaint ‘to the editor of the Indianapolis Star about Du Bois’s’ attempt to distort ‘his record’.<sup>167</sup> The lessons learned from Washington’s example stayed with Reed so that in 1974 he was saying: ‘Maybe this generation should listen to shoemakers, masons, bakers, brick and tile makers, inventors, butchers [...] and others [...] and maybe they have a lesson to teach the present. No matter what his critics say about him, Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee is still there’.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ishmael Reed, ‘The Writer as Seer: Ishmael Reed on Ishmael Reed’, 1974, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 59-73 (p. 72).

Reed fundamentally approved of Washington because of his clear principles, his unpretentiousness and because of his pride in being a Negro. He records that Washington's,

passages in *Up from Slavery* gush with racial pride. "From any point of view, I had rather be what I am, a member of the Negro Race, rather than be able to claim membership with the most favored of any other race." [...] By contrast his Harvard tormentors seemed uncomfortable with their African heritage. W.E.B. Du Bois, a product of a white supremacist curriculum believed that the whites were an advanced race and that African societies were primitive [...] and he] also characterized the masses of African Americans as "primitive".<sup>169</sup>

Reed's use of the word 'tormentor' clearly spells out the animosity between what became a vicious trade of insults between the two men and the word denotes Reed's sense of indignation on Washington's behalf. This led Reed to mount this defence of his position, 'So successful have Du Bois's followers and their intellectual descendants been in defining Booker T. Washington's reputation that he has been characterized by many as an accommodationist and worse'.<sup>170</sup> To add further impetus to his argument Reed records that although Washington had been bitterly accused by Du Bois and his followers of 'appeasing whites', there is 'evidence' to suggest that Du Bois, 'when attacking Washington, sometimes did the bidding of whites who believed that they should be the arbiters of who should be the political, cultural and intellectual leaders of black Americans'.<sup>171</sup>

Reed recounted how the friction between Washington and Du Bois mainly erupted because the 'Northern elitist intellectuals, Negro Saxons' took the view that Washington's policies would ensure 'the inferior position of African-Americans'.<sup>172</sup> Washington was blamed for the Jim Crow laws that the Southern states adopted following his 'Atlanta Compromise Speech, which called for social separation of the races'.<sup>173</sup> Reed, on the other hand, is sympathetic to Washington's vision of social separation expressed in the maxim, 'In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers', for two reasons.<sup>174</sup> Initially, Reed was appreciative that 'Washington knew that in order to win over the confidence of white supporters he had to pacify the primal fear of many Southern white men' about black men's

<sup>169</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. 81.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p.85.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>174</sup> Washington, 'Up From Slavery', in *Three Negro Classics*, p. 159.



sexuality.<sup>175</sup> Also Reed believed that Washington's proposal at that time had the potential to deflect the very potent though imagined threat of the stereotypical black rapist of white women, who had been so graphically depicted by the novelist Thomas Dixon, in *The Klansman*. Reed comments how the latter 'became psychotic at the idea of black men and white women intermingling' and notes grimly, 'this is what integration meant to these primitives'.<sup>176</sup> Secondly, Reed intended to apply Washington's principles to the late twentieth century and he records a series of un-annotated statements showing that segregation was no longer regarded with suspicion. He writes of how 'separatism and entrepreneurship' seems 'to have captured the imagination of Hip Hoppers like Sister Souljah; how a study entitled "Re-segregation in American schools by Gary Oldfield"', concluded that 'de-segregation is now no longer necessary', and that even Orlando Patterson the 'Harvard Sociologist' reported in July 1999 that, 'there has been a return to the old Southern doctrine of separate and equal, as long as it is truly equal'.<sup>177</sup>

Washington's views of black intellectuals, particularly of Du Bois, have undoubtedly informed Reed's own antipathy towards them, but do Reed's arguments hold any water? Reed claims that at the start of a new millennium Washington is deserving of 're-assessment', and that he is not opposed to Du Bois, but his essay is more a denouncement of the tradition of north-eastern academia than it is a discourse on race issues. It seems that for Reed the nineteen nineties was a time when he felt there was some rapprochement with the notions of black separatism and therefore with Washington's ideas. Initially, his essay seems intent on establishing Washington as the original benefactor of the African American race and the pioneer of advancement in the early twentieth century before the advent of Du Bois and his Talented Tenth. Also Reed attempts to show how an ex-slave of humble background and education was able to offer and sustain a vision of a Negro community that could be independent and self-supporting and could potentially offer an economic and social base for a future generation of African Americans. Indeed Reed's reading of Washington would allow for the 'Wizard of Tuskegee' to be situated as a figurehead in the American pragmatist tradition that Cornel West has always attributed to be at the 'center of American civilization'.<sup>178</sup> Washington was a contemporary of Charles Sanders Pierce, John Dewey and

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<sup>175</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. 79.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., pp. 86-87.

<sup>178</sup> West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1989), p.11.

William James, who in West's genealogy of pragmatism are portrayed as the founding fathers of the philosophical tradition of pragmatist philosophy. Yet Washington does not merit a mention in West's study presumably because he did not forge his way and vision from what West has described as 'a deep intellectual vocation' that compelled budding pragmatists 'to be organic intellectuals of some sort'.<sup>179</sup> West held that pragmatists participated 'in the life of the mind' by having viewpoints and relating them to action 'by means of creating, constituting, or consolidating constituencies for moral aims and political purposes'.<sup>180</sup> Of course Washington has to be very close to this. His overriding aim was to create an inclusive Afro-American constituency that would be cognisant of the larger good of American society. He believed this could be achieved by gradually moving towards a form of assimilation through a separate though equal African American constituency. West's valorisation of Du Bois is a widely embraced position today, while Reed's crucial intervention allows for a more thorough going evaluation of Washington.

Washington's vision was de facto 'an attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment' and his structuring of these goals may well have stemmed from his conviction that,

in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands [...and] that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life [...] No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem.<sup>181</sup>

Washington's emphasis on a practical vocation was visualised as the basis for an African American future that would incorporate all levels of achievement. But his route to self-improvement and sufficiency was perceived by many, including Du Bois, as an acceptance of segregation. This was to lead to the charge of Uncle Tomism by 'critics mostly intellectuals in the North', who Reed scathingly denounced, because they 'practice their militancy on campuses, located in communities where blacks are rare'.<sup>182</sup> It is this belief which Reed undoubtedly wished to counter in the face of much opposition from other black scholars.

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-6.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 5; Washington, 'Up from Slavery', in *Three Negro Classics*, p. 147.

<sup>182</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. xxx.

In this light, though Reed does not mention him specifically, we might do no better than to compare Reed's views with the work of Houston Baker Jr., even though Reed formerly regarded the latter as an academician who 'talked jargon' because of his use of 'long Latin words', and who knew less about his own 'culture than many white scholars'.<sup>183</sup> Yet Baker, in one of his earlier works, regarded Washington as the 'quintessential herald of modernism in black expressive culture', who 'earnestly projected the flourishing of a southern black Eden at Tuskegee—a New World garden to nurture hands, heads, and hearts of a younger generation of agrarian black folk'.<sup>184</sup> Like Reed, Baker evoked the importance of Washington for his family and he explains that the many accomplishments achieved by his father and in-laws derived from their engagement with Washington's 'oratorical promise of American reward for Negro merit'.<sup>185</sup> Baker was thoroughly impressed by Washington's achievements, even to the point of employing a romantic lexis of organic development, where young people would flourish by growing in harmony alongside with what might be considered the more rural and natural environment of Tuskegee. But astoundingly, from this position of support, Baker moved to one of discrediting Washington totally. By 2001 in the publication *Turning South Again*, Baker pronounced Tuskegee to be a place of 'ill equipped instruction' and 'retrograde' advancement.<sup>186</sup> Furthermore he exclaimed that Washington and 'the black-South mass body were inert with respect to public mobility' and 'cosmopolitanism', because his 'personal triumphalism' impeded the progress and the incorporation of the black majority into the political, social, and economic public sphere.<sup>187</sup> Baker's latest assessment of Washington's policies suggests that they did little to prepare his pupils for the incipient modernity of the twentieth century, so the latter's achievements could only be deemed a form of appeasement at worst.

Baker would undoubtedly be included in Reed's attack on northern black intellectuals, for the former's change of heart about Washington attempted to achieve the very reverse of what Reed intended by his 'reassessment' in 2003. In the latter Reed argues (perhaps somewhat hopefully), 'while the 1960's may have belonged to Du Bois, the 1990's were definitely

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<sup>183</sup> Abbott and Simmons, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1975, p. 85. ; Domini, 'Ishmael Reed: A Conversation with John Domini' 1977, p. 135.

<sup>184</sup> Houston Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 37.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100-102.

<sup>186</sup> Houston Baker Jr., *Turning South Again: Re-thinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T.* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 62, 64.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Bookerite'.<sup>188</sup> This point is of course completely at odds with Baker's critique of Washington's apparent anti-modernity, but Reed is adamant. Above all it is his intention to set the record straight about Washington, and, whereas Baker resigns him to the past, Reed argues that Washington has much potential for the twenty first century where he argues, among younger African American intellectuals in the nineteen nineties, segregation is in vogue'.<sup>189</sup> Washington's capacity to build and to establish foundations for a sustainable African American future is the main focus of Reed's re-assessment. In the nineteen seventies Reed was building his own multicultural institution through the Before Columbus Foundation with the intention of later constructing a school. His impetus was fuelled by the view that, 'Booker T. Washington built his own school and he was a slave. Why can't we?'<sup>190</sup> This capacity remains undimmed, for in 2008 Reed exclaimed, 'I have been building institutions in the West and woodshedding. I have been building an aesthetic workhouse'.<sup>191</sup> Reed's favourite vision of the multicultural artistic commune is drawn explicitly from Washington's legacy.

Reed has consistently denounced the detachment of the black academic intellectual from grass roots social and economic issues. The complex relationship between black intellectualism and class had been famously analysed by Harold Cruse in the nineteen sixties work *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. One cannot overestimate how instrumental this work was in formulating Reed's views. Famously Cruse was a communist who later transferred his allegiance to Black Nationalism. Many of his ideas were grounded in Marxist theory though he generally attacked Marxists for espousing radical ideas of revolution to black people, because they were not in tune with the practical needs of African Americans.<sup>192</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, even though Cruse prided himself on being a freelance creative writer, he severely criticised many of the key figures in the African American arts, and particularly the Harlem Writers Guild and Writers Club. These contradictory assertions beg the question of why Reed should have found inspiration in Cruse's work. Reed never officially linked himself to a political faction and he formerly condemned the Nationalists for their intellectual pretentiousness and for their oppressive habits in falsely recruiting black

<sup>188</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. 85.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>190</sup> Northouse, 'Ishmael Reed', in *Conversations with Writers II*, p. 244.

<sup>191</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up: Taking on the Media Bullies and Other Reflections* (2008), p. 36.

<sup>192</sup> Henry Vance Davis, 'Harold Wright Cruse: The Early Years and the Jewish Factor', *The Black Scholar*, 35 (2006), pp. 16-31, 64. According to Davis, Cruse 'continued to believe in certain basic tenets of Communism: the disenfranchised united in a struggle against domination remained a part of his arsenal'. See pp. 26-29.

people while ultimately having white people's interests at heart.<sup>193</sup> Yet strangely there seems to be a correspondence of ideas between the two writers. At the heart of Cruse's thesis is the assertion that: 'The Negro movement is at an impasse precisely because it lacks a real functional corps of intellectuals able to confront and deal perceptively with American realities on a level that social conditions demand'.<sup>194</sup> The fact that he held intellectuals culpable for the stasis in racial progress and equality in the nineteen sixties would sound a keynote in Reed's critiques. Also the shifting perspectives to be found in Cruse's writing mirror Reed's sense of contingency. Henry Vance Davis notes that 'Cruse was an independent thinker at an early age', and even when grown up 'the rules of the intellectual community, black or white, of the 1930's meant little to him'.<sup>195</sup> Like Reed, Cruse was prepared to challenge America's higher education institutions by engaging in a series of intellectual confrontations outside the academy. Also the fact that Cruse was able to write a serious intellectual work, and that he 'retired from the University of Michigan as a full professor' without the benefit of a university education, would also be most laudable in Reed's estimation.<sup>196</sup> I hope to show in the following discussion how both Cruse and Reed apparently operate in the tradition of confrontation to counter black intellectuals.

Cruse is similar to Reed in that he is broadly appreciative of Booker T. Washington. Likewise Cruse displays hostility towards Du Bois by resentfully exclaiming that 'Negro intellectuals as a class have never explained the cold raw, economic facts of life to the Negro wage earner'.<sup>197</sup> By examining these economic factors Cruse notes that,

As far back as 1900, Booker T. Washington counselled the Negro to seek economic self-sufficiency; to soft-pedal civil rights and social equality until he was on the road to achieving his own "economic" base for survival. Although the ordinary Negro has always understood the fundamental wisdom of this advice, his middle-class civil rights leadership (both Left and Reform) has chosen not to.<sup>198</sup>

Cruse opens up the chasm between Washington's baseline advice to working class blacks and the disregard of the middle classes. He recounts Washington's sensible laissez faire approach

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<sup>193</sup> See Reed's discussion of the political movements of the nineteen sixties. Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), pp. 17, 72.

<sup>194</sup> Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (London: W. H. Allen, 1969), p. 472.

<sup>195</sup> Davis, 'Harold Wright Cruse: The Early Years and the Jewish Factor', p. 20.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>197</sup> Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, p. 177.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

to Civil Rights where, ‘Good school teachers and plenty of money to pay them will be more potent in settling the race question than many civil rights bills and investigation committees’.<sup>199</sup> Cruse also records the furious responses of Du Bois who inaugurated twenty years of equality campaigns under the auspices of the NAACP.<sup>200</sup> As a corollary to this argument Cruse foregrounds, the way in which, by 1940, Du Bois had lost confidence. In parodic language Cruse points out how the ‘venerable scholar-intellectual’ admitted that “‘despite anything [...the Negro] can do [...racial segregation] will persist for many decades’”.<sup>201</sup> For Cruse these words are tantamount to vindicating Washington’s methodology, for he argues that Du Bois never admitted that the former had been closest to the truth at the turn of the century. With disdain Cruse notes how, thereafter, ‘Du Bois switched his attention to the problem of economic self-sufficiency’.<sup>202</sup> What particularly offends Cruse is that ‘since the 1930’s, both radical and reform Negro intellectuals have refused to admit that despite Du Bois’s brilliance and scholarly achievements, he has, several times, been grievously wrong: either too far ahead or too far behind, but out of step with mass thinking’.<sup>203</sup> Again Cruse resumes his ironic tone by posing the question, ‘how else does one explain the incongruity of this learned man’s actions?’<sup>204</sup> This correlates with Reed’s charge that Du Bois and his descendants, the ‘Talented Tenthers’, were scathing in their comments about the “‘Tuskegee Machine’”, a derogatory name given to Washington’s organization by his enemies’, and Reed is also careful to note that this machine that was ‘often in competition with Du Bois and his followers for white patrons, frustrated some of Du Bois’s career goals’.<sup>205</sup> Yet whereas Cruse attributed little credence to Du Bois’s campaigns Reed is prepared to quote Du Bois’s defence of Washington while he was in Ghana in 1960. Du Bois announced that ‘the sage of Tuskegee’ had built the institution ‘with his bare hands’ and unlike many had suffered extreme brutality under slavery.<sup>206</sup> Reed also praises Du Bois for being ‘one of the founders of the Pan-African movement, and for being forceful enough to demand such respect that this would lead ‘to less humiliation for African Americans in daily life’.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. 83.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

Throughout the *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* Cruse generally critiques what he believes to be the two opposing attitudes of separatism and assimilationism within the black community. Though he maintains that these stem from the nineteenth century, the historical context for the *Crisis* extends from the Harlem Renaissance to the Civil Rights era. His main assertion is consistent:

the Negro intellectual's quandary in America [...] the social root of their problem is directly traceable to their class separation from the ethnic-group consciousness level of Negro thought (that resides mostly in the lower mass of disinherited ghetto Negroes, for whom the American middle-class liberal establishment offers no way out).<sup>208</sup>

Cruse points to two critical situations in black twentieth century history for the development of African American intellectual ineptitude. Firstly, the 1920's was an era that spelled out the separation of the "intellectual and artistic" when African American intellectuals negated 'the basic art expressions [...] in music, dance, literature and theatre' and adopted 'middle-class values' in order to fully integrate.<sup>209</sup> Cruse was anxious to point out that the differentiation of arts from more cerebral pursuits meant that black intellectuals were unable to 'effectively interpret themselves' or 'make objective interpretations of their own relation to the American scene'.<sup>210</sup> He notes the repercussions in 1955 when no protests were aired about the 'deplorable "stereotypes" of southern blacks found in the film version of *Porgy and Bess*, even as far as 1965, when they were unable to take some form of stand on, for example, the issue of Duke Ellington being 'turned down for the Pulitzer prize citation for "long-term achievement" in American music'.<sup>211</sup> Cruse believed this was due to the predominantly white patronage of the black intellectual world, so that 'the Negro intelligentsia had 'no firm cultural base in the reality of either the black world or to the white [...] The result: a rootless class of displaced persons who are refugees from the social poverty of the black world'.<sup>212</sup> Indeed by 1979 Reed was as troubled as Cruse had been in the 1930's about how black creativity was being appropriated by whites. Reed contended that, 'What's happening in New York and New England is a power struggle [...] a big power struggle over liberal patronage among Afro-American writers and intellectuals'.<sup>213</sup>

<sup>208</sup> Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, p. 202.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 101, 107.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 454.

<sup>213</sup> Peter Nazareth, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed 1979, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 181-204 (p. 191).

Secondly, Cruse highlighted the 1930's as laying the 'roots of the economic and political aspect of the Negro intellectual's debacle', when many were 'intellectually side-tracked' by Communist left-wing philosophy, a time when they did not 'fight for intellectual clarity' between 'what was applicable from Garveyism (especially economic nationalism) and what they learned from Marxism that was valid'.<sup>214</sup> Many black Marxists were uninterested in developing African American business, but remained more spell bound by the dogma of radicalisation, and ultimately Cruse concluded that, as the desire for integration and acceptance among their peers and white liberals and intellectuals took hold, the black intellectuals 'developed as a stratum that expresses not the needs of the Negro masses but its own needs as an articulate class'.<sup>215</sup> In 1978 Reed was convinced of the same point,

I think black intellectuals have been harmed by reliance on the Marxist perspective. It's a comfortable system that allows them to sit back in their chairs without having to go out and investigate what is happening [...] That's too easy [...] they are very vociferous and know how to use the media. I get criticized a lot by them. All these radicals from the 60's who questioned my scepticism then, are very well heeled now. Maybe I should have been a Marxist.<sup>216</sup>

This quotation exposes what Reed feels to be the neglect of issues such as the prevailing hegemonic social structures, class exploitation and other social constraints by a group of African American intellectuals who are more comfortable with the more theoretical aspects of a socialist ideology. He also accuses them of looking to their own material needs rather than those of the black community as a whole. A year later Reed confirmed his exasperation upon listening to political debates between black intellectuals, because they 'have no organizations nor financial power nor institutions nor technology to see [...their] ideas through' therefore rendering their ideas 'empty'.<sup>217</sup> Having no interest in a collective praxis this group is defined by the material benefits of 'occupational achievements'.<sup>218</sup> Since Reed has eschewed any form of political affiliation he draws attention here again to his own marginal status while the Marxists have assimilated themselves into white middle class culture. On principle Reed foregrounds his holding out, ideologically and financially, against the attraction of a lucrative media career.

<sup>214</sup> Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, pp. 177, 63, 151.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>216</sup> Helm, 'Ishmael Reed: An Interview' 1978, pp. 150-151.

<sup>217</sup> Nazareth, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1979, p. 191.

<sup>218</sup> Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, p. 444.



Reed is convinced that the black intellectuals' 'lack of response to spurious criticism and attacks in print by critics', together with a lack of intellectual coherence on ideological and economic issues, forged a situational paralysis prohibiting them from total collaboration in the on-going fight for black equality in the USA.<sup>219</sup> In reaching this conviction Reed admitted his indebtedness to Cruse's work as far back as 1968, recommending that 'everyone ought to read his book'.<sup>220</sup> In fact much of Reed's criticism of African American intellectuals has its foundation in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*,

I also think that the inability of minorities to rebut some of these neo-Nazi charges and presumptions in an organised fashion is a serious matter. Jesse Jackson used an unfortunate slur during his campaign and the whole white press came down on him, but he did not say that white people or Jewish people were biologically inferior, which is the kind of remark I hear from some of these neo-conservatives. They actually use some of the same rhetoric that the Nazis used. The "Crisis" that Cruse wrote about actually became real when Afro-American intellectuals didn't challenge all these slurs. They showed how otherworldly and abstract they were—they were about as involved as monks.<sup>221</sup>

Reed draws attention to the sinister dynamics of facism and racism in American society and to how a black public figure, such as the Reverend Jesse Jackson, received a disproportionate amount of negative criticism from a largely white media. In 1984 Jackson made some pejorative anti-Semitic remarks about Jews being 'hymies' and he described New York as 'hymietown'.<sup>222</sup> But Reed makes the point that the condemnation heaped upon Jackson was out of proportion to the content of the remark. Rather it was centred on his black skin colour. The example that Reed draws on might be more recent but his point is consistent with the assertions found in Cruse's work: when a member of the African American community is being subjected to unjustified censure, no-one from the black intelligentsia comes to his defence. Instead they preserve an academic distance believing this to be the most dignified stance.

<sup>219</sup> Watkins, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1985, p. 254.

<sup>220</sup> Shepperd, 'When State Magicians Fail: An Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1968, p. 7.

<sup>221</sup> Watkins, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1985, p. 254.

<sup>222</sup> Jackson made these remarks during a conversation with a black Washington Post reporter, Milton Coleman. The former assumed the references 'would not be printed because of his racial bond with Coleman, but several weeks later Coleman permitted the slurs to be included far down in an article by another Post reporter on Jackson's rocky relations with American Jews'. Jackson initially denied that the conversation had taken place but eventually he made a public apology to Jewish leaders. See Larry J. Sabato, 'Jesse Jackson's 'Hymietown' Remark - 1984', 1998 in <[www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/frenzy/jackson.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/frenzy/jackson.htm)> [accessed 25 March 2011]

The works of Washington and Cruse were very influential on Reed's thought. He declares Washington's formula to be responsible for his family's economic progress and he has expressly attributed *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* as being an 'invaluable' source of facts when conducting his research. In fact Reed portrays Cruse as a key observer of a particular period, to the point of demonstrating 'the witness of a skilful political scientist'.<sup>223</sup> By persistently adapting their modes of thought Reed demonstrates the important influence of Washington and Cruse on African American culture in the twenty first century, when a number of black intellectuals still profess to reject Washington for being too accommodationist, while some critique Cruse's work as 'a facile portrait of black radicalism'.<sup>224</sup> Reed however pragmatically envisions the works of Washington and Cruse as sources that provide him with ample fodder and credible authority for critiquing the middle-class black intelligentsia whom he felt had betrayed the average working class African American through their indifference towards supporting and elevating black progress.

In 1997 Reed started to target a particular group of intellectuals with his vitriol,

You can see why the establishment is pushing Northeastern Ph.D. intellectuals as the new black intellectuals. They serve a missionary function. The establishment is tired of being burned by extra-curricular and autodidactic intellectuals like Malcolm X, George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton, and John Henrik Clarke, and so they create a new intellectual rump regime'.<sup>225</sup>

Reed is unequivocal about favouring those black activists who for a number of reasons did not access scholarship in a traditional sense. These intellectuals are the only ones to win his esteem because they mirror his own life in some respects. They were self-taught, they suffered a number of economic hardships and with the exception of Clarke, they excelled as political activists. They are technically outsiders who struggled against the white power structures to the point of imprisonment and early death in many cases. It was also the case that the black establishment feared them, and as early as 1978, Reed noted that the 'Sixties left wing media' tended to draw on intellectuals for the purpose of 'appointing black gurus

<sup>223</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p.78.

<sup>224</sup> Interview conducted by Scott McLemee, 'Forty Years of "The Crisis of the Negro intellectual"', August 29, 2007 <[www.insidehighered.com/layout/set/print/views/mclemee/mclemee119](http://www.insidehighered.com/layout/set/print/views/mclemee/mclemee119)> [accessed 4 August 2010]

<sup>225</sup> Bruce Dick, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed' 1997 in *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed* ed. by Bruce Allen Dick (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 228-250 (p. 231).

and black spokesmen', who could pontificate on black issues and thus gather an underserved following in black culture.<sup>226</sup> The intellectuals that Reed attacks are undoubtedly the 'Northeastern Talented Tenth', which he defines as the Du Boisian term for the intellectual elite that would lead blacks to freedom'.<sup>227</sup> Reed, is scathingly critical of this group and his attack is two-forked. Firstly, he is keen to critique Du Bois's notion of exceptionalism, an assumption that is confirmed by one of the contemporary Tenthers Cornel West, who quotes Du Bois, 'that if any "race" especially black people—is to be saved exceptional men will do it'.<sup>228</sup> Reed has questioned this notion of the 'chosen few' and perceives the Tenthers as 'an incestuous elite of intellectuals and professionals', who by implication are undeserving of this accolade.<sup>229</sup> Reed's contempt has been unabated, as he perceives them as intellectuals, 'who serve the right, and who are now engaged in a power struggle over which ones will benefit from "progressive", neo-conservative, and right-wing patronage'.<sup>230</sup>

In contrast Reed has depicted his own life history in more mundane terms. In the nineteen eighties he reflected on why he did not build on his literary successes and diversify into cinema and publishing. He concluded that,

I wasn't looking for hand-outs [...] I failed to get that going in New York because there is so much patronage [...] You can always get someone else to do it for you [...] I came from a working class family, and I was always taught if you didn't have any money you went out and got a job or lived off unemployment until you could find another job.<sup>231</sup>

This quotation stresses Reed's early itinerant career and his determination to be financially independent in order to differentiate himself from what he describes, as the 'New York style', where 'people don't feel they have to build their own institutions'.<sup>232</sup> This has influenced his association of the 'Eastern Manhattan' heartland with 'living in and moving in intellectual circles' in which 'most people do not think the way' East Coast intellectuals 'think'.<sup>233</sup> Self-admitting the paradox of his view on the grounds that his life in New York was the catalyst for his publishing success, Reed is keen to emphasise the hardships in his own career so that

<sup>226</sup> Helm, 'Ishmael Reed: An Interview' 1978, p. 146.

<sup>227</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. 22.

<sup>228</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 65.

<sup>229</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), p. 93.

<sup>230</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Multi-America: Essays on Cultural War and Cultural Peace* (New York and London: Viking, 1997), p.xvi.

<sup>231</sup> Zamir, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1988, p. 281.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Crouch, 'Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1976, p.106.

his eventual settlement on the West Coast and his failure to achieve tenure at Berkeley were experiences that contrasted with what he deems to be the privileges and class espoused by membership of the Ivy League university system.

The second aspect of Reed's critique concerns not merely his disapproval of the membership of an Ivy League university system, but also points to an anti-intellectual resentment at the notion of the 'ivory tower' academic shut away from the grim realities of working class life. The current individuals that Reed targets in the Ivy League are Henry Gates Jr. and Cornel West, who were both affiliated with the department of Afro-American Studies in Harvard, and Orlando Patterson, who is based in the sociology department. He exclaims,

The Harvard Talented Tenth should get out of Cambridge from time to time and learn what's happening in this country [...] Though the Harvard Talented Tenth believe they have more in common with their upper class colleagues than with other blacks, if the American government decided to exterminate the blacks as they did the Indians, or put them in concentration camps as they did the Japanese-Americans [...] the Tenth's white Harvard colleagues would sever ties with them. Wouldn't know them. Probably testify against them. Turn them in.<sup>234</sup>

Reed aims his outrageous attack at the Harvard group, who, in his assessment, practice such exclusivity that they delude themselves into believing that they are fully symbiotic with their fellow white scholars. Reed dramatizes this point to absurd proportions by differentiating between the Tenthers and their 'upper class colleagues' (who, presumably in Reed's estimation, are not only white, but scholars from prestigiously academic or wealthy families) to emphasise the formers' misguided foolishness for believing that the white academic community would support them in any racial conflict. Reed envisions them as the outsiders, an affiliation of university scholars who have subjected the black community to betrayal. He also underlines this issue in the essay known as 'Another Day at the Front', which is largely constructed as a journal of his largely truculent encounters with the police force. The hostilities he personally suffered are symptomatic of the African American population as a whole, but with the added implication that these indignities would never be suffered by the Harvard group. Reed opines, 'Randall Kennedy and other members of the Talented Tenth might argue that African Americans are under scrutiny because the crime rate among blacks

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., p.71.

is so high'.<sup>235</sup> As earlier Reed is pointing to a fundamental problem of communication and class in the African American community for he feels the exclusivity of academia allows its members to believe that 'the problems of millions of blacks are self-induced'.<sup>236</sup>

In this contemporary setting, what of the 'grandchildren of the Talented Tenth—those who had been trained to succeed and geared to prosper'?<sup>237</sup> Reed primarily perceives Henry Louis Gates Jr., as the heir of Du Bois and the current leader of the Tenthers, and he has variously commended and disapproved of Gates's work. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates applauded Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* as the definitive novel 'of Afro-American culture and its deflation' and Reed exclaimed of Gates's work: 'It's a terrific book! [...] I think he comes as close to defining the Afro-American literary style as anyone I've read'.<sup>238</sup> Later Reed follows this with the more guarded comment, 'I like the work, the parts I can understand'.<sup>239</sup> At one time Reed applauded Gates's scholarship: 'Gates, Jr [...] provided me with valuable assistance by pointing out errors I have made during the course of writing more than a dozen books' and 'he said we need to study the languages and culture in depth. It's good for me'.<sup>240</sup> These statements are deeply ironic in some respects, propelling Gates into the role of Reed's mentor. They suggest that Gates offered a prompt, or at least that further incentive to embrace an Afrocentric sense of scholarship, for indeed Reed has studied Yoruba and he has drawn on African folklore a good deal in his writing.

However, on the whole, Reed is more combative and critical in his discussion of Gates.

Gates has done a lot to support my own work [...] we should not be afraid to criticise each other [...] You talk about me criticising Gates. It's good for Gates' ideas to come away from immunity, to come away from the *New York Times* and all that. To come out here in the provinces and have some good old home town debate. It keeps you honest [...] The corporate media can't be relied upon to present a broad representation of views. You can see what people are thinking outside your entourage. We all want to get away from the situation of imperial criticism [...] Some critics don't understand what's going on outside.<sup>241</sup>

<sup>235</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), p. 70.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Gates, Jr. and West, *The Future of the Race*, p. 13.

<sup>238</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 220. ; Watkins, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1985, p. 253.

<sup>239</sup> Zamir, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1988, p. 290.

<sup>240</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. 33. ; Bruce Dick, 'Ishmael Reed: An Interview', 1993, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 344- 356 (p. 355).

<sup>241</sup> Dick, 'Ishmael Reed: An Interview' 1993, pp. 355-6.

Reed targets the isolation of Gates not merely within the academic community, but here he suggests that Gates is also protected by the North-eastern heartland of publishing houses and media corporations. In an interview conducted in 1997, Reed went on to claim that ‘since the establishment made [...Gates] the H.N.I.C., people are afraid to criticize him’.<sup>242</sup> This is a cynical acronym deployed by Reed to confirm Gates’s status as the ‘Head Negro in Charge’ of all cultural affairs. According to Reed however, Gates’s views are only contemporized and validated by their confirmation through the media and are therefore unrepresentative of African Americans across the States. Reed’s lexis is significant, implying that Gates belongs to a ruling dynasty of intellectuals whose word is accepted as sacrosanct, regardless of what Reed considers to be its often dubious content.

In his satire of university politics *Japanese by Spring*, Reed very loosely bases one of his characters Dr. Charles Obi on Gates. As the Chair of the African American Studies Department Obi is identified as ‘one of the aristocrats’ within black culture (*JBS*, 31), and is described thus,

His fifteen-hundred-dollar conservative pin-striped suits fitted him perfectly. His teeth were a brazen white and they looked as though he’d had never had a cavity. His skin was clear and bore a sheen. He wore some sort of expensive cologne (30) [...] Dr. Obi had been president of the Maoist Student League in the sixties. Now, all he talked about was his Volvo and his summer house (*JBS*, 35).

Obi’s noble representation is promoted by the narrative focus on his appearance and this is meant to draw attention to his expensive tastes and his accumulated wealth, thus leaving the deprivations of the African American working class far behind him. The reader is directed to noting, ‘the portrait of Du Bois on the wall’ of Obi’s office (*JBS*, 30), who presumably is meant to signify Obi’s revered academic mentor. However the narrator adds uncharitably that when inebriated Obi would ‘remind everyone that he had a Ph.D. from Harvard, but what he’d done with it few could tell’ (*JBS*, 30). The author’s thinly veiled contempt is apparent when designating Obi to a mere ‘academic fireman’, whose ‘stuff published in scholarly journals was unreadable’ (*JBS*, 30, 32). This suggests that Obi, far from promoting African

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<sup>242</sup> Dick, ‘A Conversation with Ishmael Reed’, 1997, in *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed*, p. 237.

American studies, was responsible for extinguishing any enthusiasm for such programmes of study.

Indeed Reed repeatedly shows his exasperation with Gates's academic reputation and his representation as an absolute authority on African American culture. Not surprisingly, therefore, given Reed's proven ability to unearth and root out facts, and given any opportunity to expose the unscholarly methods of the Talented Tenth, he contends,

Gates' conclusion that anti-Semitism is "generally on the wane while black anti-Semitism is on the rise—carried in an op-ed piece entitled "Black Demagogues and Pseudo Scholars"—proceeded from a false premise [...] I checked with Jack Cohen, assistant director of the San Francisco Anti-Defamation League, who told me that anti-Semitism rose by 11 per cent between 1990 and 1991 [...] later in 1992, the statistics revealed that contrary to what Gates said, anti-Semitism among blacks had declined since 1964. Why my friend Gates—one of the nation's most publicised scholars—would make such an assertion without checking the facts, and why the *New York Times* would fail to check his implication that the last vestiges of anti-Semitism exist only among African Americans is puzzling [...] Every time I've submitted an article to the *Times*, it has been fact-checked to death.<sup>243</sup>

Again Reed scours the media representation of an individual in order to launch an attack.

This quote demonstrates his determination to expose Gates as a careless writer by attempting to counter his inaccuracies by finding new facts. At the same time he underlines his resentment that Gates's proclamations are accepted as authoritative, while his own are subjected to a disproportionate amount of scrutiny. Over ten years later Reed provided yet another sample of Gates's unsubstantiated generalisations, when the latter in his 'standard "tough love" speech' condemned 'thirty-five-year-old black grandmothers living in the projects'.<sup>244</sup> Reed was yet again prompted to investigate the truth of this claim and retorted, 'what [...Gates] and his friends fail to mention is that the "out-of-wedlock" birthrate among black women has plummeted faster than any ethnic group.'<sup>245</sup> Reed implies that Gates panders to the stereotypes offered by the media, because he knows that Americans have a fascination for racial issues, and also he jibes that 'sometimes it appears that black intellectuals are willing to sacrifice scholarship for the sake of publicity and cash'.<sup>246</sup>

<sup>243</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), pp. 33-34.

<sup>244</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. 117.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Does Reed have any grounds for these charges of unworldliness and isolation? The collaborative publication *The Future of the Race*, by Gates and Cornel West, offers a useful lens through which to comprehend Reed's objections to the 'Talented Tenth'. Gates's contribution is written as an autobiographical essay in which he initially writes fondly of his years spent at Yale, arguing, 'how better to serve our people, then, than as students at an elite institution?'<sup>247</sup> This type of discourse has inevitably resulted in some hard-hitting censure from Reed, for both he and Gates hail from working class backgrounds, and in a parallel sense theirs are 'rags to riches' American success stories in the cultural sphere. Even though Gates insisted his 'rationale' was to change 'the system' by firstly 'knowing just what the system is', Reed has generally viewed an Ivy league education as an act of 'selling out' to elitism and detachment from the world.<sup>248</sup> This is curious given the view of Stefan Collini, writing from Cambridge UK, who perceives Gates and West as 'a new group of black public intellectuals', who are figures of success because they appear to 'constitute an arresting exception to the general decline of the public intellectual'.<sup>249</sup> Collini seems to think that the 'wider culture's fascination with certain black writers and scholars is that they seem to successfully combine academic standing with a genuine following among a non-academic audience'.<sup>250</sup> This presents a challenge to the validity of Reed's views for what seem to be their emotive rather than rational content, but in the discussion that follows it is possible to perceive what might be classed as the resentment on Reed's part, not being merely due to envy or rancour, but due to a conviction about the advantages of pragmatism. Collini quotes Gates as saying, 'It is the birthright of the black writer that his experiences, however personal, are automatically historical' which is tantamount to expressing a close relationship between the writer and the needs of his community.<sup>251</sup> Yet even Collini seems doubtful about this self-belief, noting that 'no-one's experiences are any more "automatically historical" than anyone else's', thus hinting that Gates is deluding himself with romantic ideals.<sup>252</sup> Houston Baker is doubly scathing and he notes that when Gates arrived in Yale in 1969 there was 'already a thriving black public sphere', which means that Gates's premiss about his generation inevitably inventing the 'strikes and protests and steering committees', is

<sup>247</sup> Gates Jr. and West, *The Future of the Race*, p. 17.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain*, p. 242.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.



ludicrous.<sup>253</sup> Moreover Baker quips that Gates is ‘simply making up history as he goes’ and offers ‘a charming case for why he bailed out of blackness’, thus generally confirming Reed’s assertions, and refuting Collini’s impressions of Gates’ connections with the wider community. In his latest work Baker is openly hostile to Gates and West, regarding them as ‘centrist’ intellectuals belonging to the current Talented Tenth, who have betrayed the black community with their abandonment of the original ideals of the Civil Rights Era.

In separate essays in *The Future of the Race*, both Gates and West express the intention to ‘think through—and critique—Du Bois’s challenge of commitment to service that [...] the formally educated owe to all those who have not benefited from the expanded opportunities afforded by gains in civil rights’, though West presents by far the more rigorous critique.<sup>254</sup> Gates acknowledges the works of Cruse and Du Bois to be crucial in his own intellectual development and he presents a defence of his scholarly ancestor. Gates is proud of Du Bois’s vision ‘of the educated bourgeoisie as the truly revolutionary class’, exclaiming that this ‘exerted an unmistakable sway on us’.<sup>255</sup> Yet wryly Reed points out that in spite of this reverence for Du Bois, the ‘new Talented Tenth, which blames the black underclass for its problems, is making deals with megacapitalists like Microsoft, while the Du Bois museum in Accra, Ghana is running out of money’.<sup>256</sup> Thus Reed subtly accuses the Tenthers of hypocrisy. When Gates exclaims that the ‘persistent strain of antipathy toward the black middle class’ is ‘a phenomenon analogous to the curious strain of anti-Semitism in present-day Japan’ he admits that ‘empirically speaking its target is scarcely to be seen’.<sup>257</sup> This remark is explosive, virtually playing in to the hands of Reed’s contempt for the invisibility of academics in the real world. Gates is clearly sensitive to the views of Nathan Hare, Martin Luther King and Harold Cruse and quotes their denouncements of the black bourgeoisie. King is charged for criticising those who remain ‘untouched by the agonies and struggles of their underprivileged brothers’ and Cruse is condemned for describing them as ‘an empty class that has flowered into social prominence without a clearly defined social mission’.<sup>258</sup>

<sup>253</sup> Houston A. Baker Jr., *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 120.

<sup>254</sup> Gates Jr. and West, *The Future of the Race*, p. viii.

<sup>255</sup> Gates Jr., ‘Parable of the Talents’ in *The Future of the Race*, p. 5.

<sup>256</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), p.87.

<sup>257</sup> Gates Jr., ‘Parable of the Talents’ in *The Future of the Race*, p.9.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Gates collects these views on the black middle class only to later dispel them as ‘evidence’ of that widespread trend for ‘self-loathing’.<sup>259</sup>

These views may have been instrumental in what appears to be Gates’s enthusiastic validation of Du Bois’s legacy: ‘we were to get just as much education as we possibly could, to stay the enemies of racism, segregation, and discrimination’, and he also presents the affirmative consequences: ‘Today, roughly a third of black families can be counted as middle-class’.<sup>260</sup> While Gates acknowledges the improved wealth and access to education, at the same time he rues the middle class paradox of ‘succeeding more and enjoying it less’, since many middle class blacks in his estimation showed a pessimism towards the American dream.<sup>261</sup> He then admits to the endemic poverty and ‘chronic hardship’ present within a ‘third of black America’, and in a series of remarks congruent with Cruse’s discourse over forty years earlier, Gates outlines the seventies as a period when ‘we lost our grip on things like class, and felt ill equipped to deal with the dilemma of *intra*racial disparities’.<sup>262</sup> By the nineteen nineties Gates is rather dismissive, ‘we can’t even agree on the causes of black poverty, let alone how best to remedy it’, and moreover, ‘some blacks have started to think—we could start to get a handle on the grassroots problems. The trouble is, no one can agree on what that leadership should look like; no one ever could’.<sup>263</sup>

Gates issues endorsements rather than censures of the achievements of the Talented Tenth, though he does postulate whether ‘we ever lived up to this idealized image’, encapsulated by the ‘portraits of black college graduates, lawyers and doctors’ on the cover and in the pages of Du Bois’s publication *The Crisis*.<sup>264</sup> Reed would almost certainly agree that the idealization is the problem and Houston Baker even argues that Gates and Cornel West ‘occupy and represent Du Bois’s spirit, as it were, and effectively pretend to *be* him’.<sup>265</sup> Presumably Reed would not disagree with this point, but he would almost certainly oppose Gates’s assertion that, ‘the upshot is that the members of the crossover generation—the black boomers—have kept vigil over the increasing marginalization of black America in the

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>260</sup> Ibid., pp.11; 19.  
<sup>261</sup> Ibid., p.19.  
<sup>262</sup> Ibid., p. 25.  
<sup>263</sup> Ibid., pp. 26, 33.  
<sup>264</sup> Ibid., p. 12.  
<sup>265</sup> Baker Jr., *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era*, p. 117.

political arena'.<sup>266</sup> This notion of the contemporary 'Tenther's' adopting stewardship roles over the black community is anathema to Reed's stance and contemptuously he explodes this notion by asserting that the 'Harvard Professor Orlando Patterson, a follower of Du Bois, believes 'that if blacks will just shape up, and assimilate, attend the opera, whites will associate with them and accept them'.<sup>267</sup> Reed coins the epithet 'The Harvard Machine' in an attempt to foreground the activities of the Tenther's 'at the end of the century' in contrast to the fully functioning, inclusive 'Tuskegee Machine' at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>268</sup> Although the latter is a pejorative term, devised by Washington's critics to denote the industrial, non-academic limits of a vocational education, Reed adopts this metaphor of technological equipment to show how the modern day 'Tenther's' have become cogs in a machine that effectively distances itself from a whole range of independently working black writers, artists and politicians including Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X and controversial figures, such as Quincy Troupe and Eldridge Cleaver. Reed is at pains to show that is they who, without any formal education, were able to contribute positively to African American culture and society. Reed especially reinforces how Cleaver was able to practice 'his intellectual style on mentors, who were obviously no match for his probing, hungry intellect'.<sup>269</sup>

In contrast, Reed foregrounds Gates's profile as the self-declared "intellectual entrepreneur" and "capitalist", who instructed black artists on how to become as rich as he'.<sup>270</sup> Reed implies that Gates has devised his own system and apparatus, to negotiate deals with 'Microsoft' and other media 'megacapitalists', and is prepared to share his skills with certain hand-picked African Americans.<sup>271</sup> In a strange mode of reverse irony Reed comments, 'Somewhere, Booker T. is beaming', implying that even elite intellectuals have taken a leaf out of Washington's book and applied themselves to the process of developing their own economic self-sufficiency.<sup>272</sup> This point is surely debatable and raises the question of whether Reed has taken his pragmatic shifts to an absurdist level. Arguably, Washington's vision at Tuskegee

<sup>266</sup> Gates Jr., 'Parable of the Talents', in *The Future of the Race*, p. 24.

<sup>267</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>268</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), p. 87.

<sup>269</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. 96.

<sup>270</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. 87. Gates described himself thus in an interview in *Black Issues* magazine.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Manning Marable reports that the most negative critiques of black intellectuals centre on Gates with the result that he is described both 'publicly and privately as something of a "modern Booker T. Washington" in the realm of cultural studies and literary studies' with 'extensive influence within foundation circles and inside the white media'. See *Beyond Black and White* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), p. 169-170.

Institute was meant to stimulate black capitalism and in order to promote and sustain the educational facilities at Tuskegee he did seek sponsorship from white capitalists and conservatives. The point is, however, that Washington never lost his focus on black racial progress. His vision was all-encompassing and universally designed to give occupational trades to all African Americans, regardless of class, thus increasing their employment opportunities, their mobility and incomes. In contrast the Harvard 'Tenters' generally won scholarships to higher education institutions where they could hone their intellectual skills in specialist academic courses, with the result that they gravitated towards an Ivy League system and tended to remain in North East America. Even if his point is steeped in irony it is surprising that Reed would envisage Gates's entrepreneurial activities as the ultimate validation of Washington's programme. For Reed has already critiqued Gates for not leaving the Harvard campus and for his limited communication with the wider black community. Turning aside from black political issues to pursue middle class economic development is hardly the sufficiency for all that Washington had in mind. It is even questionable whether Du Bois envisaged the talents of the Tenters being engaged in this way. This issue remains paradoxical, for while Reed, on the one hand, appears to approve of the business-like manner of current black intellectuals, on the other, this contradicts his discourse about striving for civil equality for all African Americans.

While it may not surprise us to find Reed criticizing Gates' intellectual elitism, Cornel West's essay, 'Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization', is much more congruent with both Cruse's and Reed's critiques. West is critical of Du Bois's naiveté, particularly of his 'inability to immerse himself in black everyday life', for according to West, while Du Bois, 'saw, analyzed, and empathized with black sadness, sorrow and suffering', he was not able to 'feel it in his bones deeply enough' because he preserved 'his own personal and intellectual distance'.<sup>273</sup> In spite of this West recognizes that Du Bois was 'never alienated by black people', rather he 'received great respect and admiration' from them.<sup>274</sup> Nevertheless while Reed might be far less vocal about West than Gates he condemns the former by firstly noting how 'works of dubious merit are given inflated advances by publishers', and then he proceeds to exemplify how West, along with his co-writer, Michael Lerner, was 'awarded a reported \$100,000 advance, for their slim collection of essays, *Jews and Blacks: A Dialogue*

<sup>273</sup> West, 'Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization', in *The Future of the Race*, pp. 57-8.

<sup>274</sup> Gates Jr. and West, *The Future of the Race*, pp. 57-8.

on *Race, Religion, and Culture in America*'.<sup>275</sup> Reed now ignores what might be considered to be West's lucrative business instincts and proceeds to ultimately disclose how this work is derivative and contains 'no new or original insights'.<sup>276</sup> Although it was reported earlier that West regards himself as an outsider it is clear that Reed believes West to be firmly ensconced within the Talented Tenthers. Therefore Reed's critique is pointed towards implying that, like Gates, West's writings are immediately accepted by the Northeastern publishing houses regardless of their scholarly merit. Reed proceeds to accuse West of the very things that West criticises black intellectuals for. For example, West argues that the bourgeois model of the black intellectual is 'inescapable' because most of this group teach in 'white elite universities'.<sup>277</sup> Also he explains how,

many black intellectuals principally seek material gain and cultural presence. Since these intellectuals are members of an anxiety ridden and status-hungry black middle class, their proclivities are understandable and, to some extent justifiable. For most intellectuals are in search of recognition, status, power and often wealth.<sup>278</sup>

This confirms Reed's assertions about the Talented Tenth, yet West does recognise that 'no black literate intellectuals [...] have mastered their craft commensurate with the achievements of Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker [...] Miles Davis, Sarah Vaughn'.<sup>279</sup> Just as Reed has valued the black musical tradition West pays his own tribute to the richness and diversity of that black cultural phenomenon, by suggesting that no black intellectual will ever be able to match this in terms of scholarly production.

This discussion began by examining Reed's twenty first century re-assessment of the merits of Washington's vision, and subsequently it is clear that this has been one of the major catalysts for informing Reed's views on black liberal intellectuals. Also this played a part in facilitating his move away from the north-east, and his formation of aesthetic partnerships and institutions which endeavour to publish less well known writers. Reed has attempted to show how Washington's principles of striving for self-sufficiency and equality can be applied to twentieth century life regardless of whether individuals embarked on a classical higher education to develop their intellectual capacities. To counter Du Bois Reed argued that the

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<sup>275</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), p.117.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> West, 'The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual', *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, p. 63.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., p.61

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

Tuskegee agenda would not restrict African Americans permanently to the ranks of second-class citizenship, but that a productive intellectual life, together with entrepreneurial opportunities, could be aspired to by many outside academia. Somewhat pragmatically Reed mustered the views of Cruse in order to demonstrate the limitations of Du Bois's thinking and to bolster his critiques of middle-class black intellectuals for not supporting their fellow African Americans. Reed believes that the Du Boisian proviso of the special privileges to be awarded to the Tenthers for their leadership of the black community has been taken too literally by current black academics, who seek celebrity status beyond their merit. Curiously in his diatribe against the Tenthers Reed has shifted his arguments towards suggesting that the former, because of their involvement in the white establishment and their lack of awareness of the inner realities of African American life on a daily scale, it is they who are the true outsiders. Reed represents his own ideas as being more centripetally involved in the shaping of black culture.

## Conclusion

One of the primary motivating factors in Reed's career is his desire to challenge a consensus in which the term 'intellectuals' denotes a narrow group of people residing in places of higher education, and in which academics continue to effectively monopolise the role of intellectuals in dominant culture. Reed has mounted a sustained campaign to expose the scholarly shortcomings of black and white intellectuals since the nineteen seventies. He mounts his critique from a position of outsidership by locating himself within the intellectual domain of independent African American thinkers and artists who form a counter group to the establishment. His self-representation is romantic, based on the black outlaw figure, who ventures to the frontier of white cultural exchange, carrying valuable insights from the marginalised black world. There is paradoxically nothing more truly American than an outsider based on the rugged frontiersman type striving for elemental freedoms. Intellectuals, however, whatever their ethnic heritage or educational background, have to appeal to a wide public if they wish to make themselves understood as serious thinkers engaged in striving for justice. Reed has been and continues to be summarily preoccupied with debating the intellectual underpinnings of the black and white world, and the very fact that he engages himself with the multiple tensions of outsidership and insidership, reflects his own position as a central figure in contemporary American culture.

Reed inhabits the mind-set of a prize-fighter and his statements comprise a pragmatic and pugilistic response to the developments within American intellectual and social life. In responding to different interviewers, or to specific cultural stimuli, he modifies his arguments in order to counter whoever faces him. Reed is the anti-academic whose lack of a higher education qualification is probably very significant in his relentless criticism of intellectuals, even though he was a college professor at Berkeley for many years with academic publications. Whether Reed really visualises himself as an academic is questionable however, because much of his discourse implies that he is the consummate polemicist, or in West's terms, borrowing from Antonio Gramsci, an 'organic intellectual', who explores ideas alongside a close involvement with organizing local groups and communities. Indeed Reed can obviously downplay his associations with Berkeley when it suits him, though the denial of a tenured position at this establishment was undoubtedly a blow to his self-esteem. This factor also partly explains why Reed has foregrounded and championed various self-taught black activists as diverse champions of black progress, but this is difficult to reconcile with his sudden celebration of black academics with doctorates, when faced with the condescending racist remarks of a white critic about the tendency of African Americans to underachieve in the educational system. As a budding journalist early in his career Reed represented himself as part of the continuum of muckrakers working to expose corruption, and in his case, the underlying racism of Western culture, however he reserves great hostility for the influence of the contemporary media. Ever the resourceful and avid consumer of newspapers and magazines, Reed employs these as a basis from which to respond to critics of the black community and he has availed himself of a range of electronic and social media to self-publicise his works and to take part in hotly contested debates about black and white intellectual culture. This sheer range of seemingly contradictory perspectives and positions exemplifies the power of Reed's redescriptive abilities, which again points to the quintessentially American trait of not merely deliberating about ideas and arguments, but utilising them to effect change and difference in one's community. Reed's critique of the liberal infrastructure of American society takes place within a vibrant intellectual culture which that very liberalism makes possible.

## Chapter Two:

### 'To Live in a Racist Society is to Live in a Situation of Comic Absurdity [...] a Situation of Irony and Paradox': Reed on Race and Ethnicity

#### Introduction

The cultural and political formation of the USA is historically complex. From the seventeenth century the existing native population of American Indians succumbed to a European colonisation that continued to absorb wave after wave of migrants. At the same time the institution of slavery necessitated and encouraged the movements of variegated racial groups to the New World on an immense scale. As a consequence the US population formed into a multivalence of racial categories ranging from Europeans occupying the apex of the hierarchy followed by the Chicanos, the American Indians, the Asians and African Americans amongst other ethnic groups and subaltern peoples. As a nation the United States was associated with having the most diverse cultural identity in the world and although this factor would imply a close correspondence with the American ideals of liberty and egalitarianism, the African American literary tradition has underlined the tensions and the casualties of this envisaged intermingling of different peoples.<sup>1</sup> Manning Marable felt moved to assert that 'Americans are arguably the most "race-conscious" people on earth', pointing out that the intense resonance of race relations has formed the greatest barrier to social cohesion.<sup>2</sup> Stephen Howe defined this more specifically and declared that 'the central object of this obsession has always been the distinctions between black and white', the key differentiation being 'African Americans and "everyone else"'.<sup>3</sup> This form of racial profiling, and particularly the way in which Ishmael Reed has presented this as part of an overriding American paradox, will be the focus of this chapter. In a country that espouses the ideals, values and beliefs of a liberal

<sup>1</sup> These universalizing ideals were originally derived from The Declaration of Independence (1776) which directly addressed American constitutional rights: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness'. See 'The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription', <[http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html)> [accessed 13 May 2011]

<sup>2</sup> Manning Marable, *Beyond Black and White* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), p. 21. Howe elaborates that, 'African Americans remain sharply, perhaps uniquely, differentiated from the remainder of the population by almost every indicator from residential segregation to rates of intergroup marriage'. See pp. 22-23.



democracy throughout its political and cultural machinery, this culture appears to mask the condition and treatment of African Americans. He reveals that while a number of ethnic groups have attempted to ascend what he caustically terms ‘a ladder of whiteness’, blacks have invariably been left on the bottom rung.<sup>4</sup>

In 1982, while compiling his essay collection *God Made Alaska for the Indians*, Reed meditated upon the various perceptions of race:

One could even say that the first 300 years of Afro-European history in America was spent in bed. That’s why it’s about 300—some say 50, 000—years too late to talk about a pure race [...] The Americas are creole from the Arctic ocean to the bottom of Argentina. President Andrew Johnson wrote of travelling through the post-war ghettos of Tennessee and not being able to tell what was what, the black mothers had so many white-appearing children at their apron strings. In the *Alabama Beacon*, June 14, 1845, there appeared an ad asking for information on the whereabouts of a runaway: “She is as white as most white women, with straight light hair, blue eyes, and can pass herself for a white woman.”<sup>5</sup>

Reed dispels the notion of racial purity and points here to the historical phenomenon of generational inter-relationships and miscegenation between African Americans and Europeans. He argues that any form of biological and genetic proof about specific racial categorisation in the Americas cannot be sustained. By including the physical details of the runaway as ‘white’, Reed provides the proof needed to demonstrate that the notion of the pure black or negro was dissipated during the years of slavery. Nevertheless his sense of ‘race’ as a cultural construction, and his definition of racism as ‘drawing conclusions without examining the evidence’ are weighed against an American social reality where he explains the ‘one-drop rule’ is enforced ‘when one drop of African blood defines you as black’.<sup>6</sup>

There will be three interrelated strands in this chapter which will demonstrate that, on the subject of race and ethnicity, Reed cannot hope to project his outsider position. He is fully engaged with the African American experiences of discrimination and with protesting against the white power structure. Initially I hope to show how Reed has not flinched from using

<sup>4</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front: Dispatches from the Race War* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> Reed, *God Made Alaska for the Indians* (New York and London: Garland, 1982), pp. 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Monica Valencia, ‘Prof Plays “Gotcha” with Ethnic Myths’, 1994 in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed* ed. by Bruce Dick and Amrijit Singh, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), pp. 357-360 (p. 360); Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), p. xii.

blackness as a racial category in order to challenge the standards and norms of the white hegemony.<sup>7</sup> While Reed, like many other African Americans, contests the notion of race he cannot escape from what Audrey Smedley calls the ‘racial worldview [...that] was institutionalized and made a systematic and dominant component of American social structure’.<sup>8</sup> She argues that race, defined as a ‘folk’ concept, is structured on innate biological differences.<sup>9</sup> She believes blackness to be symptomatic as it ‘conveys a model’ of group exclusivity based on classifying humans into ‘five analytically ascertainable ideological ingredients’ in North America.<sup>10</sup> While many African American intellectuals have condemned this ideology the difficulty of living with America’s obsessiveness with race remains. Reed is aware of these theoretical problems for though he has pointed out that everyone is irretrievably mixed in America, in practice he has to deal with a racist reality which divides society into ‘white’ or ‘black’.

I argue that Reed’s strategy for coping with the experience of racial chauvinism is to infuse his writing with Black Nationalist and Afrocentrist assertions of black identity in order to counter the white centre. By way of introduction it would be useful to briefly examine these terms for their theoretical and combined significance and later I hope to show how they carry separate symbolic weight in Reed’s discourse. In North America Black Nationalism grew out of the enslavement of Africans and the Civil Rights movement in the nineteen sixties and was expressed through a form of political activism. Even though it lacked the benefits of a land base it sought self-determination for blacks though it was the search for a viable identity that channelled the righteous anger of young activists.<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth West usefully notes that blacks formed their collective identity ‘out of this shared experience of oppression’, forming ‘a

<sup>7</sup> During Reed’s emergence as a writer during the nineteen sixties significant intellectual shifts in thinking about race took place. Ashraf Rushdy notes that this was a time when post war attitudes in America evolved towards ‘the de-biologizing of race as a transcendental signified’. See *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 20-22.

<sup>8</sup> Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Smedley identifies five ingredients within the model: the classification of human groups into ‘exclusive and discrete biological entities’; the imposition of an ‘inegalitarian ethos’; the recognition of ‘outer physical characteristics’ as ‘surface manifestations of inner realities’ relating to behaviour, intellect, /temperament and morality; that these qualities are inheritable and finally that such characteristics are fixed and unalterable and cannot be transcended or bridged. The point is that a racial outlook will only admit culture as learned behaviour as attendant only an innate concomitant of biophysical form. See pp. 28-29.

<sup>11</sup> As a concept Nationalism seeks to achieve the establishment of a separate nation involving specific territory or at least some form of independence and emphasises a collective identity which is centred upon cultural membership and this is ‘used both for the identity of a group and for the socially based identity of its members’. See Nenad Miscevic, ‘Nationalism’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2010) <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/nationalism/>> [accessed 23 June 2011].

nation within a nation—a people in, but excluded from, the dominant culture'.<sup>12</sup> The black struggles for equality intensified during the Watts rebellion in 1965 and the call for Black Power in 1966, when Reed was ensconced in New York as a young journalist.<sup>13</sup> At this point black racial identity politics was never more dramatically poised to challenge white domination and Malcolm X forcibly expressed the view that since a number of African countries had apparently moved to a state of independence 'through the philosophy of nationalism', it was possible for black Americans to follow their lead.<sup>14</sup> A link was forged between Black Power and a growing Afrocentric world view which meant that many American blacks began to oppose any theories that dislocated Africans to the periphery of human thought and experience.<sup>15</sup> Stephen Howe regards Afrocentrism as 'a species of

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<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth, J. West, 'Black Nationalism' in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* ed. by William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster and Trudier Harris (New York and Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), pp. 75-79 (p. 76). W. E. B. Du Bois formerly identified this dual aspect as the 'twoness of the African American identity. The Africans who were abducted and brought to America, found that despite their very disparate lines of kinship, race was the major factor that united them in the United States. There were a number of moves to repatriate African American slaves back to Liberia or Sierra Leone in the nineteenth century. Marcus Garvey's 'Back to Africa' campaign in the first two decades of the twentieth century gained 11 million members though the dream was never realized. Black Nationalism is a movement that is strongly connected with the various periods of African nationalism and because the physical space for a separate nation was lacking in America. Nevertheless it sought to unify a people of colour through a common sense of suffering rather than by a geographical entity.

<sup>13</sup> The Watts rebellion took place in Los Angeles after a black resident was arrested for speeding. A crowd gathered to watch as the latter resisted arrest and this escalated into a full scale riot lasting for five days and involving 30,000 people who protested about racial injustices; The slogan, Black Power, was coined and popularized by Kwame Ture, formerly known as Stokely Carmichael in 1962. As a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) he attended a rally in Greenwood, Mississippi, where he leapt onto a stage and gave a speech that did not advocate love and forbearance but Black Power. To accentuate the spirit of this movement his clenched fist raised in the air suggested a break with the pacifism of the past into a youthful political movement calling for militancy and radical activism.

<sup>14</sup> A new explosion of black consciousness and black pride took place among black people in the United States and such aphorisms as, 'Black is beautiful', became the order of the day. ; Malcolm X, 'The Ballot or the Bullet', in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 90-101 (p. 93). In the romantic Black Nationalist's imagination Africa was a mythical place of origin for all African Americans. Hailed as a thriving zone of black independence and rich cultural promise that would take its place in global leadership many black artists began to adopt the Afro hairstyle, kente cloth shirts and dresses, and African expressive cultural productions for home aesthetics became far more prominent among all classes of African Americans during the 1960's than at any previous moment in black history. The assertion 'We are an African People!' became almost conventional wisdom in the Black Arts. The introduction of African intellectual, cultural and imaginative matters moved into the vocabularies and images of Black Power and the Black Arts. The reality of course was very different because many African countries continued to be ruled by puppet representatives of former white rulers. See *The Norton Anthology*, pp. 1800-1803.

<sup>15</sup> The OED states that the earliest use of the term, 'Afrocentric' in print was made by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1967: "In the end our EUROCENTRIC, rather than AFROCENTRIC, conclusions merely confirm our pathological communion with the well-known . . . 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness.'"—'Freedomways,' VII. ii. page 170/2> See <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/240336?redirectedFrom=afrocentrism#eid12919091>> [accessed 12 June 2011].

cultural nationalism' and collectively these movements have at various times sought to unify African Americans on the basis of their common heritage and racial adversity.<sup>16</sup>

Nationalism and Afrocentrism suggest a strong self/group identification that is underpinned by a separation from the dominant culture of whiteness, and that these should have some subliminal presence in Reed's primary emphasis on blackness is not surprising given his emergence as a writer in the nineteen sixties. He makes a strong case for the exceptionalism of black treatment at the hands of white perpetrators to the point where he exclaims 'though I own my Native American and European-American heritage, my nerves must be black, because I get a visceral reaction when I feel that blacks, as a group, are treated unfairly'.<sup>17</sup> This jest is testimony to his underlying nationalist sensibility and consequently he often adopts an essentialist stance when attempting to use the language of racial difference. He tends to draw upon Manichean linguistic constructions of black versus white, and even though he has bemoaned the fact that the former term upholds the negative associations of blackness with evil and the absence of reason he uses blackness as a tool to expose the hypocrisies of American society. As recently as 2010 Reed commented that, effectively 'multiculturalism in the United States has come to mean everybody but blacks'.<sup>18</sup> He relates confronting the mayor of Berkeley 'over this issue' only to find that 'he introduced Hispanic and Chinese American members of his administration so as to deflect charges that he was a racist'.<sup>19</sup> Therefore to focus public attention on the unjustness of racial practices to blacks he veers towards the nationalist view that any form of multi-ethnicity really belongs to whites.<sup>20</sup> His complaint has been that his critics have often referred to him, 'as a "black" without revealing their own ethnic backgrounds'.<sup>21</sup> By implication he suggests that blacks are not allowed that option of ethnicity because of the crude biological determinism that continues to underpin the racialised consciousness of the US through *visible* markers of difference.

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<sup>16</sup> Howe, *Afrocentrism*, p. 87. In its modern form Afrocentrism flowered due to the activism of black intellectuals in the American Civil Rights movement and as a growing intellectual idea in the nineteen eighties this appeared in the development of African American Studies programmes in universities. Many Nationalists wanted to de-Americanise their minds and celebrate Africanness. Howe argued that African Americans conceived of 'themselves as belonging to [...] and advocating the interests not just of an ethnic group, a community, or even a race, but a nation, in some way distinct from the majority (Euro-) American nationality'. See pp. 87-89.

<sup>17</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), p. xliii.

<sup>18</sup> Reed, 'The Celtic in Us', *Comparative American Studies*, 8 (2010), 327-336 (p. 332).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Reed, *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media: The Return of the Nigger Breakers* (Montreal: Baraka Books, 2010), p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> Reed, *Writin' is Fightin': Thirty-Seven Years of Boxing on Paper* (New York: Atheneum Macmillan Publishing, 1990), p. 59.

Though the term ethnicity is milder than race and denotes a non-biological and cultural form of identity, Reed uses this interchangeably with race in a nationalist context.

Reed is consistent in his point that, in the USA, colour is a sharp determinant in signifying racial heritage, so that blackness appears to invalidate any sense of multiple ethnicity. In the light of this issue, I propose to explore how Reed gravitates towards a nationalist position on a number of pragmatic fronts, namely through his deployment of a code of linguistic and cultural blackness, through his Afrocentric emphasis on descent and heritage, through his veering towards essentialism by championing a number of black individuals who have made their mark on the black community, and finally through his refusal to reject the existence of racial categories. This last point leads him to reject a post-ethnic position and to categorically deny the post-race theories popular within contemporary cultural criticism.<sup>22</sup>

Any account of Reed's Afrocentric Nationalism must also address his seemingly paradoxical celebration of multi-ethnic diversity through the metaphor of a cultural mosaic. He has consistently promoted his association with other minority groups and writers denying that this is mere 'ethnic feelgoodism' and 'political correctness' on his part.<sup>23</sup> For though Reed's self-identity might be rooted in blackness, in an essay entitled 'Distant Cousins', he gradually reveals his tripartite ethnicity to be not only African American, but *also* 'Native American' and 'Irish American'.<sup>24</sup> Reed explains that he discussed his ancestry with his aunts and a genealogist at different times, and that he has still not 'pieced together all the strains' of his identity, but above all this data exemplifies his personal affiliation with the plural.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, when he discusses blackness in this context, Reed embraces a slightly different conceptual idea of identity; he regards this as one ethnicity in parallel terms to *all* other ethnic groupings, even those that would be regarded as primarily white. By the time he famously declared in 1997, 'I am a typical multiculturalist', Reed had acted as a general editor and contributor to the publications known as *Quilt* and the *Mosaic* series.<sup>26</sup> These anthologies

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<sup>22</sup> The post-ethnic standpoint is favoured by the historian, David A. Hollinger, who believes that multiculturalism has too many 'limitations'. Therefore it is preferable to move to a 'cosmopolitan-inspired step' up that embraces the 'rootedness' of ethnicity but not the empowerment of specific groups. See Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), pp. 1-7.

<sup>23</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1993), p. 47.

<sup>24</sup> Reed, 'Distant Cousins', in *Airing Dirty Laundry*, pp. 266-273 (pp. 267, 271)

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>26</sup> Reed, *MultiAmerica: Essays on Cultural War and Cultural Peace* (New York and London: Viking Penguin Books, 1997), p. xxii; *Quilt* was a collaborative multicultural publication that Reed co-edited with Al Young; *Mosaic* belonged to a four-part Harper-Collins series presenting separate anthologies of *Hispanic/Asian/Native*

bring together ethnic writings in English from diverse cultures into one publication and I argue that effectively these titles manifest Reed's vision of multicultural space in America. Far from presenting homogeneity, the metaphorical artistry of quilting and creating mosaic shapes allows for a kaleidoscope of difference with the proviso that they will come together as one whole. When applied to America this means that diversity is maintained in order for people to retain something of their unique cultural background but overall they form a nation, that he believes, in a tribute to his version of the concept of American Exceptionalism, will be a leading light in a drive towards a global multiculturalism.

In his model of mosaic patterning Reed anticipates numbers of ethnic groups participating in a democracy that allows for and sustains the rich diversity of cultures. However I propose that this futurist optimism is difficult to maintain in practice because Reed has to balance this with 'historical ethnic divisions' on the one hand, and the continual animosities between competing communities ranging from Native Americans, Jews, Asians and Middle Easterners, on the other.<sup>27</sup> His cultural mosaic is constructed in opposition to what Werner Sollors calls the 'blandness of the melting pot', a term that assumes an assimilationist stance where the different elements would 'melt together' into a harmonious whole within a common culture.<sup>28</sup> The monocultural goal of a totally assimilated society, where everyone rescinds their past heritage, is one that sits uneasily with Reed's dream of a global multicultural society. The problem is that Reed predicates this dream on the basis of his assumption that all the ethnicities would wish to retain their customs and languages in spite of the fact that many generations of people were encouraged to turn their back on their ethnic roots in order to ensure success in a white Anglicized society. His artistic ideas and practices clash with the practices of assimilation where the 'model minority' myths, perpetuated by the media, attempt to undo his vision of the mosaic. In order to underline the advantages of multiculturalism he takes a pragmatic stand against a number of opposing positions that

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*and African American Literature* in 1995. These were edited by Nicolas Kinellos, Shawn Wong, Gerald Vizenor and Al Young respectively. Each contains a generic 'Foreword' by Reed himself.

<sup>27</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. 60. While living in New York in the nineteen sixties Reed found that relations between the blacks, Puerto Ricans and the police who 'were members of the Irish- and Italian-American upper underclass' were very fraught. He complained that the police favoured the whites over the blacks and South Americans.

<sup>28</sup> Werner Sollors, *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. xiv.; The 'melting pot' concept can be originally attributed to J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur. In his writings, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), he explored the notion of immigrants being received into America, the new culture: 'Here individuals of all nations are *melted* into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.' See J Hector St John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (Carlisle MA: Applewood Books, 2003), p. 55.

examine multiculturalism, even to the point of exposing the difficulties posed by ethnic minority groups

Having established and examined the Black Nationalist, and multiculturalist, strains in Reed's thought, I will then explore the ways in which the seeming contradictions between these positions are explored in his fiction. Given Reed's focus on blackness *and* ethnic diversity it is possible to question whether he is really committed to the notion of the cultural mosaic. His range of pluralistic activities can be said to actively promote a sense of 'MultiAmerica', but can the black experience really be placed prominently within this model? Is Reed really a quasi-nationalist *or* a quasi-multiculturalist? After all, his racial discourse is antagonistic, while his embrace of American pluralism bespeaks of fostering social harmony. Christopher Shinn describes Reed as a 'discrepant multiculturalist', which suggests that Reed's pluralism is incomplete for his undeniable commitment to an ethnic mosaic can only be undermined by his own authoritative insistence on blackness.<sup>29</sup> There is certainly scope for saying that Reed can be all these things without contradiction, because his racial politics are also governed by a black imagination that expresses itself through the culinary metaphor of the 'gumbo', a proverbial and synchronic 'throwing into the soup' of many diverse elements. Nevertheless I will argue that Reed is a cultural nationalist with ambitions for a fully functioning multi-ethnic nation made up of many cultural nationalisms.

## Black Nationalism and Strategic Essentialism

Reed's contemplations on race oscillate between dismissing the concept of race as a 'myth' of fallacious origin on the grounds that there is no 'real data on racism', and maintaining that race is a 'problem in psychology and perception'.<sup>30</sup> As a corollary to this view he suggests that race has germinated into 'an epidemic, a virus' necessitating 'clinics' for the sufferers.<sup>31</sup> Reed might dispute the existence of race in biological terms, but from personal experience he

<sup>29</sup> Christopher A. Shinn, 'The Art of War: Ishmael Reed and Frank Chin and the U.S. Black-Asian Alliance of multicultural Satire' in *African American Humor, Irony and Satire: Ishmael Reed, Satirically Speaking* ed. by Dana A. Williams (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007), pp. 62-83 (p. 70).

<sup>30</sup> Michael Helm, 'Ishmael Reed: An Interview', 1978, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 144 -160 (pp. 149-150); Judith Moore, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed' in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 219-234 (p. 225).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

is aware that racism is a constant factor in the everyday lives of many African Americans. Throughout this alternation between racial negation and racial recognition Reed embraces a Nationalist sensibility in order to respond to the racist realities of America. This has taken the form of varying manifestations through the decades of his writing career, but I think it is fair to say that Reed never really breaks away from his roots in Black Nationalism.

Reed's political radicalisation stemmed from his early affiliation to the *Umbra* workshop in New York in the nineteen sixties where, as a result of working alongside others in this black writer's guild, he adopted the polemical and confrontational tone that accompanied black nationalist representation. His poems were conceived in the spirit of incitement as manifested in Malcolm X's speeches, where words were used as weapons. In his poem, 'The Decade that Screamed', Reed alludes to how 'some fondled pistols' while 'others in trench coats jotted down names/ for the state' and the poetic voice warns of 'what was [...] what is' and more forebodingly 'what is to come'.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately this text is a panegyric for the creative energy and the potential response to Black Power in the nineteen sixties at a time of increased black activism when 'some sprinted/some bopped [...and some] jumped like lions'.<sup>33</sup> The activist spirit is magnified with the line: JUMP JUMP JUMP (millions of hands megaphoning razored lips).<sup>34</sup> In a 1977 interview Reed claimed that in *Umbra* he had found his creative home, in the 'nucleus, of the Black Power movement' when, as the only salaried individual, he paid the rent for the *Umbra* poets.<sup>35</sup>

Black Nationalism took its identity and coherence from pride in black culture and disapproval of white culture, and on a linguistic basis Reed has argued that there is such a 'propaganda effort' to further 'white resentment against blacks' that it is not surprising that even 'the professional critics of blacks use the language of war'.<sup>36</sup> Indeed as Toni Morrison pointed out, 'for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language'.<sup>37</sup> In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, (1969) Reed depicts the world of the white, overbearing American rancher, Drag Gibson, as one where

<sup>32</sup> This poem was published originally in 1966 in *Black World*. The lines here are extracted from Reed's publication, *Chattanooga* (New York: Random House, 1966; repr. 1973), pp. 24, 23.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> John Domini, 'Ishmael Reed: A Conversation with John Domini' 1977, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 128-143 (p. 137).

<sup>36</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), p. xl.

<sup>37</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 12-13.



‘the white man is smarter than God’.<sup>38</sup> Reed parodies Gibson as a corporate capitalist, though he is also an echo of the white slave master confident in his power to continue what he likes doing best – commoditizing and exploiting other people, and appropriating their lives and property when they stand in his way. Gibson feels assured enough to mask his evil deeds from the legal authorities, until by the end of the novel he is arrested by the Cavalry. Before they can detain him he falls into a pit of ‘greedy and unnatural animals’ where he is devoured by the results of his own corrupt and perverse practices.<sup>39</sup> In *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), the white member of Reed’s multi-ethnic gang, the Mu’tafikah, is unmistakably categorized as either the ‘White Boy’ or ‘gringo’.<sup>40</sup> The capitalization is indicative of the racial binary of black and white, and the other gang members are recorded as harbouring their suspicions of Thor because of his ‘Robber Baron of a father’.<sup>41</sup> This reference to Thor’s Nordic European ethnicity and Viking heritage provokes an argument between Thor and Fuentes, the Mayan seaman, about other colonisers from the past, including the Conquistadors. Yet, the African American leader of the group, Berbelang, is prepared to accept the benefit of Thor’s membership, due to the latter’s ability to beguile the white authorities. Later Berbelang changes his mind and voices his fears: ‘if there is such a thing as a racial soul, a piece of Faust [...] residing in a corner of the white man’s mind, then we are doomed’.<sup>42</sup> This Faustian analogy is essential to the plot of *Mumbo Jumbo* for it is meant to imply that whites made a pact with the devil a long time ago by surrendering their moral integrity for ultimate power over subaltern peoples. The text infers that through the centuries whites stole the art and creativity of non-Europeans due to a desire for cultural autonomy and to maintain the racial hierarchy of white over black. In the event, rather than admit his membership of a black gang to his father, Thor betrays the Mu’tafikah to a white police sergeant who advises him, ‘Son, this is a nigger closing in on our mysteries and soon he will be asking our civilization to “come quietly”’.<sup>43</sup>

Reed has made prolific use of the designations of ‘white’ and ‘black’ even though he has suggested that they are ‘polarizing and not very precise’.<sup>44</sup> He asserts that blacks and whites

<sup>38</sup> Reed, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), p. 57.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>40</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Scribner, 1996), p. 86.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>44</sup> Mel Watkins, ‘An Interview with Ishmael Reed’, 1985, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 245-257 (p. 251).

have been inducted into forming 'separate cultural and epistemological nations' where whites 'are devoted to family, hard work, and reason' and blacks are portrayed as 'lazy, dysfunctional, and irrational'.<sup>45</sup> Thus, for Reed, the issue of race is a perpetual one. By association, 'whiteness' is connected with the 'centre' and the dominant social hierarchy, while in total opposition, 'blackness' is aligned with invisibility and peripheral menace. This means that much of Reed's racial discourse is grounded in the nationalist view that there can only be two major groups in America: black and white. Reed argues that any sense of multiple ethnicity belongs to whites only because 'it's your black or brown skin that marks you' in a world where African Americans are profiled by colour.<sup>46</sup> At times this point appears contradictory because he tends to use the term race interchangeably with ethnicity. For example, he contends, it is 'probably true' that 'the black people in this country are the only new race in modern times [...] Nothing in history quite happened like it happened here'.<sup>47</sup> Although Reed has constantly repudiated the ideology of race he seems to suggest here that America has in fact created a new race of black people in order to differentiate them from whites.

Oddly enough Reed condemned the popularization of the term 'black' by the media, and he recounts how according to 'Theodore Bernstein [...] the newspapers chose the term "black" over "Afro-American," because he claims they found the word "black" was easier to set in headlines'.<sup>48</sup> Reed's particular *bête noire* has always been the journalists who, he argues 'are hung up on the black/white model of race, which allows them to scapegoat black Americans for the country's social problems'.<sup>49</sup> However, this could be yet another example of Reed's tactical expediency, for Kevin Cokely reported that the white media started capitalizing the term, 'Negro' in 1930 which then became 'the term of choice'.<sup>50</sup> Moreover Cokely points out that it was not until the revolutionary nineteen sixties (which were so focused on black pride) that 'Black became the preferred racial designation'.<sup>51</sup> This questions whether the white media could be deemed as largely responsible for prolonging the racial divide, for the nationalists were very keen to politicise the term 'black' for purposes of social reform. Reed

<sup>45</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), p. 126.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>47</sup> John O'Brien, 'Ishmael Reed', 1972 in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, 1972, pp. 25-40 (p. 39).

<sup>48</sup> Reed, *Writin' is Fightin'* (1990), p. 59.

<sup>49</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p.112.

<sup>50</sup> Kevin Cokely, 'To Be or Not to Be Black: Problematics of Racial Identity' in *Critical Essays in African Social Philosophy* ed. by Robert E. Birt (Maryland and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), pp. 29-44 (p. 33).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*



nevertheless has perennially blamed the media's culpability for prolonging the racial divide, remarking most recently that the 'media are as white as a KKK picnic'.<sup>52</sup> But the continuous flaunting and juxtaposing of these harsh binary distinctions enables Reed to mark himself as a racial antagonist outside of white culture and against the racial chauvinism that whiteness entails. Reed claims that he dislikes the term 'black' because of the inferred racial limitations, but, nevertheless, he often deploys the term to negate and critique the power of 'whites'.

Indeed as a self-described, "'paranoid" black male', Reed perpetuates a racial engagement by assuming a black platform so that 'he has an opportunity to combat the slander and libel aimed at blacks as a group'.<sup>53</sup> In adopting this stance on behalf of African Americans Reed is aware of the contentions this might engender and he exclaims, 'Does that sound too black? Well, a racist society will often force you to engage in "essentialism", from time to time'.<sup>54</sup> This disclosure exemplifies his pragmatic response to a racist society where resistance to racial profiling necessitates substituting cultural pluralism for the championing of black issues in order to try and dislodge the very volatile facts upon which the concept of race is established. No matter how untenable race might be as a concept Reed engages in a form of what Gayatri C. Spivak has famously termed 'the strategic use of essentialism'.<sup>55</sup> This means that those who are oppressed may need to make careful and judicious 'use of some mobilizing slogan or masterword', or to take risks whenever appropriate, to outwit one's enemy when agitating for political demands.<sup>56</sup> This approach is largely a pragmatic one and in the climate of opposition and harassment in America, Reed qualifies his strategy by pronouncing,

Being universal is difficult in a country where African-Americans are defined by the police, by the red-liners, by the racial and retail profilers, by the rude treatment in everyday life by people who are prejudiced.<sup>57</sup>

The point he wishes to make is that racial incidents of a personal nature have dogged his life from his earliest memories of residing in Chattanooga to his current experiences of residing

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<sup>52</sup> Reed, *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media* (2010), p. 14. Reed discusses the fact that the black presence in the media is diminishing. See pp. 13-17.

<sup>53</sup> Reed, *Writin' is Fightin'* (1990), p. 200; Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), p. xliii.

<sup>54</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. xliii.

<sup>55</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4. Whenever there is a visible political interest at stake Spivak has spoken of the need for persistence when it comes to fabricating a national identity to achieve a renewed sense of the value and dignity of pre-colonial cultural life.

<sup>57</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. xliii.

in Oakland, California. Therefore he feels justified in allowing his comic irony to surface when he profiles himself as the realist who is not “‘afraid to talk” about blacks’ and who will at the next opportunity ‘remind the policeman, or the department store security guard, that race is a social construct’ knowing full well that this will fail to produce the desired respect for human rights.<sup>58</sup>

If we regard Black Nationalism in the wider sense as the collective effort of blacks to secure social, political and economic rights for the African American community, then Reed’s embrace of essentialism has led him to express his admiration of a number of black nationalist individuals even though his intense period of political activism in the nineteen sixties was followed by his disavowal of nationalism and Afrocentrism. He spoke of the dangers of black separatism and asserted that while it, ‘on the upside, instils black pride [...] on the downside it plays into the hands of racists’ on the grounds that it is ‘negative, arrogant and cynical’.<sup>59</sup> He feared those forms of nation building could potentially lead to all blacks being viewed as and treated as identical.<sup>60</sup> Yet by 1993 Reed was nostalgically celebrating the activities of Malcolm X and the Black Panther, Eldridge Cleaver, precisely because they were involved in racial uplift by challenging the white majority. In response to the stereotyping of blacks by the media Reed retaliated by not only attempting to ‘*Air*’ the ‘*Dirty Laundry*’ of white American culture but also to ‘profile’ those ‘articulate black men and women [...] with whom the media are uncomfortable’ because they were not ‘criminals, athletes, entertainers or neoconservatives’.<sup>61</sup> He chooses Malcolm X and Cleaver in spite of the fact that in the nineteen eighties Reed wrote of his disillusionment with Black Power because of ‘the jargon, and political abstruseness’, even admitting to a cynicism early on when he ‘saw some of the militants picking up the habits of the oppressors’.<sup>62</sup> Thus Reed overlooks the militant and separatist aspects of nationalism that he condemned earlier and it would be no exaggeration to suggest that in this sense Reed never really strayed from Malcolm X’s admonition, ‘if you are black you should be thinking black’.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. xli-xliii.

<sup>59</sup> Shamoan Zamir, ‘An interview with Ishmael Reed’, *Callaloo* 17 (1994), 1131-1157 (pp. 1140-1).

<sup>60</sup> As a writer Reed genuinely feared ‘the dubious political programs’ that an alliance of black nationalists and revolutionaries and white radicals and liberals could generate by controlling the cultural framework, in what he called the ‘Axis’ of American publishing. See Ishmael Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (New York: Atheneum Macmillan, 1989), pp. 71-72.

<sup>61</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. xvi.

<sup>62</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p. 17.

<sup>63</sup> Malcolm X, ‘The Ballot or the Bullet’, pp. 90-101 (p. 93).

Malcolm X was often associated with an alternative and militant expression of social protest due to his admonition that the black community was faced with either ‘liberty or death [...] freedom for everybody or freedom for nobody’.<sup>64</sup> His directive was veiled by the threat of ‘revolution’, yet Malcolm X is portrayed throughout Reed’s non-fiction as the latter’s revered spiritual mentor and he attributes Malcolm X with transforming his writing so that it became more radical, and ‘more direct’.<sup>65</sup> Not only did Reed relish exercising a candid tone it is also possible to note distinct similarities in the lexical outpouring of combat in the writings of both men. In *The Ballot or the Bullet*, a speech of 1964 which debated the merits of violence and pacifism, Malcolm X endorsed ‘fighting today [...] not] in any one front, but on all fronts’, and he denounced the fact that African Americans suffered ‘political oppression. Economic exploitation. And social degradation’, as a result of the ‘same enemy’.<sup>66</sup> During various essays and interviews in the nineteen nineties Reed adopted a similar tone when he bemoaned the ‘politicians and the cultural leaders [...] who] present us as an enemy nation’ and he continued to reinforce this later with the statement, ‘Blacks are treated as the enemy nation within the US. We’re the evil empire right now’.<sup>67</sup> In fact much of Reed’s discourse is punctuated by the forcible aide memoire that ‘being African American in this hemisphere has been a battle, and each day is like a day at the front. The battle styles include everything from mega-aggression, full scale riots, and lynchings to micro-aggression, everyday rudeness and humiliation’.<sup>68</sup> Though Reed did not advocate physically taking up arms the social gulf between the white and black communities is clearly accentuated by the two men.

Reed expresses his admiration of Cleaver firstly for the quality of his publication, *Soul on Ice* (1968), and secondly for his contribution to black politics by making ‘the downtown Oakland political establishment [...] black’ and electing a black Congressman.<sup>69</sup> Cleaver also won

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 98. Malcolm X adopted a candid stance and instigated change often by working on people’s awareness of the raw facts of politics, philosophy and economics in the African American community. Reed makes an effort to disassociate Malcolm X from the violent images that followed him in the media. In the nineteen sixties a photograph from Life magazine showed Malcolm X looking out a window with powerful rifle in his hands which inspired many Black Panthers in Oakland, to carry guns openly in order to re-inforce his philosophy: ‘By any means necessary’. Alternatively Reed concentrates on Malcolm X’s words and speeches. ; Wolfgang Binder and Helmbrecht Breinig, *American Contradictions* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1995), pp. 101-110 (p. 104).

<sup>66</sup> Malcolm X, ‘The Ballot or the Bullet’, pp. 90-101 (pp. 90, 92).

<sup>67</sup> George Paul Csicery, ‘The Many Battles of Ishmael Reed’, 1990, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 314-338 (p. 321).; Binder and Breinig, *American Contradictions*, p.107.

<sup>68</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. ix.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 102. Eldridge Cleaver was the Minister of Information or spokesperson for the Oakland based Black Panther party. Reed has also paid tribute to the Panther, Elaine Brown, and he writes positively of her work, *Taste of Power* (1992). Reed believes the book has much gravitas because Brown was ‘a former party insider

Reed's respect because he notes that as an autodidact Cleaver faced and met huge intellectual challenges and that unlike other young black men he did not 'languish in the country's prisons', but was renowned for 'using his wits to get out of one of those Nazi-like pits'.<sup>70</sup> Reed does not offer any particular judgement as to Cleaver's former career as a rapist, his subsequent prison sentence for assault and his later shoot-outs with the Oakland police. Rather he seems content to extol the merits of Cleaver's work, *Soul on Ice*, because he believed the re-issue of this work in 1992 would, 'challenge the current bleaching out of the black influence on the cultural and political climate of the sixties'.<sup>71</sup> Reed liberally quotes from Cleaver's support of Malcolm X, where the latter is depicted as 'our shining prince' who would force the white authorities to 'pay [...] for the humiliations we suffered in a racist country'.<sup>72</sup> Both Reed and Cleaver accorded Malcolm with a truly inspirational legacy and the point is that Cleaver was 'awakened [...] to the concept of what it meant to be black in white America' through the process of segregation and the prison system.<sup>73</sup>

Importantly for Reed, Cleaver generally subscribed to a world view where whites and blacks are 'mutually exclusive types', where the central problem is dealing with the oppression meted out by whites who he described as former 'enslavers, colonizers, imperialists and neo-colonialists'.<sup>74</sup> As a consequence Cleaver claimed to be 'an Ofay Watcher', a close observer of white culture, which meant that like Reed he differentiated himself from whites.<sup>75</sup> Most surprisingly is that Reed uses more of a nationalist lens than Cleaver at one point in his essay, for the latter in nineteen sixty eight, was prepared to concede that the 'greatest change' was taking place 'among the white youth of the world' because they were 'repudiating their heritage of blood and taking people of color as their heroes and models'.<sup>76</sup> But Reed did not share Cleaver's optimism because he comments directly that the likelihood of whites being 'wooned away from their omnipotent administrator fathers by African American dance and music' was remote and that the only result was that 'whites began to dance better' for they

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who traces its history from the days when it was only an idea in the head of Huey Newton' but more importantly that Brown was 'instrumental' in the 'tactics' that 'successfully engineered the Panthers into becoming players in Oakland and national politics. See *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), pp. 87-94.

<sup>70</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p.99.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp. 21, 102-103. Reed wrote the introduction to the new edition of *Soul on Ice* by Laurel Books in 1992.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 95-96.; See 'Initial Reactions on the Assassination of Malcolm X' in *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver (New York: Delta Paperbacks, 1992), pp. 72- 84. Cleaver records the heroic stature of Malcolm X by quoting the words of Ossie Davis's oration at Malcolm's funeral.

<sup>73</sup> Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, p. 21.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp. 102, 87.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 91, 104.

did not become 'more humanistic'.<sup>77</sup> Reed leaves the subject of Cleaver's book with a tangible yearning that 'Soul on Ice is the sixties' which in Reed's view is the 'most thrilling and humanistic decade' of the twentieth century. He is led to question, 'what would have happened if Cleaver [...] and the Panthers hadn't been used as pawns' by the left and right wing political factions in California.<sup>78</sup> His brief chapter forms not only Reed's tribute to Cleaver, but also his lament for the violent deaths of the former Panthers and the lost energy and potential of the Panther movement.

Reed might not have physically associated with the more militant activities of Black Nationalism and Black Power for he is a writer rather than a social reformer, but he is extremely serious about the problems blacks have faced in trying to achieve positive selfhood. His activism leads him time after time to come to the defence of black individuals, essentially because they are black, and even when he disagrees fundamentally with their social behaviour and politics.<sup>79</sup> This led him to publish his latest round of essays in Canada in 2010 under the highly provocative title, *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media: The Return of the Nigger Breakers*. The full meaning of this title becomes clear when Reed propels himself into battle to counterpoint what he believes to be a contemporary form of 'Nigger breaking', a term that he defines as the public humiliation of 'a prominent black person as a way of sending a message to blacks'.<sup>80</sup> Reed mounts a spirited defence of the most high profile African American, the US President, even though he has admitted to being critical of Barack Obama for his 'chastising of African Americans and Africans [...] in order to please a white constituency'.<sup>81</sup> Reed reasoned that though this becomes a 'dilemma' for himself and for other 'black intellectuals', when he sees 'people showing up at Obama rallies with guns and ugly racist signs aimed at the president', he discovers he is one of the crowd who 'find

<sup>77</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), pp. 100-101.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp. 103, 101-102.

<sup>79</sup> Reed wrote scathingly of a set up orchestrated by the FBI. They arranged for a female friend of Marion Barry, the Washington DC mayor, to visit him in a hotel room where he was duly videoed and audio-taped smoking crack cocaine. Barry was arrested and Reed's point is that the US Attorney who indicted him was 'an Iowan and Ivy League' while Barry was 'the son of a Mississippi sharecropper' so Reed implies that the event was staged, possibly implicating individuals as far up as the Oval Office. Reed concedes the fact that Barry is not innocent in this situation, but what he draws attention to is the degree of scandal surrounding a black man. See George Paul Csicery, 'The Many Battles of Ishmael Reed', 1990, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 317-319.

<sup>80</sup> Reed, *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media* (2010), pp. 243, 30. The term 'Nigger Breaker' is an allusion to the brutal beatings meted out by Edward Covey, the "professional Nigger Breaker" and slave driver in Frederick Douglass's slave testament, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Yet in a tough physical battle lasting two hours Douglass fought back and won his right to personhood, an inspirational fact that has given much hope to thousands of black Americans ever since.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

themselves rallying behind one of their own'.<sup>82</sup> He concedes to being overwhelmed 'by the Obama phenomenon' and his admiration is unmistakable,

Barack Obama gave his administration a B plus...I'd give him an A minus because I understand the shackles placed on him and his administration in a country where the most powerful weapons and the money are in the hands of the whites [...] Though Obama sometimes reminds one of Martin Luther-King Jr. and Malcolm X, he might resemble Booker T. Washington more than the other two [...] When he answers his critics who question his commitment to black employment by suggesting that economic recovery for all will lead to black employment, he sounds like Booker T. Washington [...] Obama as president has smoked out the virulent racism that has been covered by euphemism and code words like 'busing', 'political correctness', 'welfare and 'crime'.<sup>83</sup>

Reed makes no secret of the fact that he dislikes the political machinations against blacks by Obama's administration, but the former's pre-occupation with black racial identity is so intense he is prepared to re-categorise his thinking in order to support the black president. The fact that he favours Obama's likeness to Washington is noteworthy for this means that the former has those practical approaches to governance and the pride in his mixed black heritage that Reed admires. These black politicians and educators might not have all affiliated themselves with nationalist agendas, but to Reed's mind they have attempted to improve the lives of African Americans. This contrasts hugely with the way in which Reed criticised the black nationalists 'for insisting upon "positive" portraits, exclusively of African Americans' in the late nineteen sixties and seventies.<sup>84</sup> However from the decade of the nineteen nineties he reverses his thinking entirely. Reed is a nationalist in all but name and the platform he adopts for political purposes presupposes a cultural and spiritual unity with his fellow black community. He appears to share a true sense of heritage that embraces the African survivals in American culture.

## **Afrocentricism, Race and Ethnicity**

Reed's political nationalism is second nature to his thinking given his commitment to black empowerment and his thorough approbation of figures like Malcolm X, Cleaver and Washington, but the cultural dimension of this affiliation is just as significant. An Afrocentric

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pp. 158, 224-225.

<sup>84</sup> Reed, *The Reed Reader* (2000), p. xvii.



outlook is clearly part of Reed's vision even though he has not foregrounded his African descent as the strongest aspect of his identity. This manifests itself positively in a strong sense of spirituality, language and temporality, and when Reed encounters the prospect of European culture promoting itself as universal he is pointedly antagonistic. Molefi Kete Asante, one of the principle theorists of Afrocentricity, argues that African Americans have more in common than the colour of their skin and that there 'exists an emotional, cultural, psychological connection between this people'.<sup>85</sup> Indeed Reed often alludes to the idea that an African descent is more than just about colour for in his view Africans were responsible for an Ur-culture that was sophisticated and learned. History and a sense of the past are fundamental underpinnings to this perspective and it is notable how Reed begins most of his discourse and fiction with the premiss of rootedness in African culture. He exclaims: 'one utters a few words and stones roll aside, the dead are raised and the river beds emptied of their content'.<sup>86</sup> Invoking a sense of African spirituality is instinctive and many tropes and patterns of this nature appear though Reed's writing. In 1972 when in conversation with Doyle Foreman, the black sculptor, both men showed a perspicuous absorption in their 'Choctaw [...] and (Cherokee) Indian background', but Reed overwhelmingly clarified this as 'a day of black consciousness'.<sup>87</sup> The two men posed the question of whether this motive could be 'hereditary' or even 'genetic' and they ultimately agreed on the importance of having 'reverence for ancestors,' which is a feature that Reed describes as a 'traditional black thing [...] African thing'.<sup>88</sup> Consider, for example, the character, Papa La Bas. He is an archetypal ancestral figure who appears in three of Reed's novels as a priest/houngan manifesting an ancient wisdom and Reed traces his evolution from 'the long JuJu of Aro in eastern Nigeria. A descendant of that line of conjurers who taught Greeks to oracle'.<sup>89</sup> In *Mumbo Jumbo* he is the 'fugitive-hermit, obeah man, botanist, animal impersonator [...] from

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<sup>85</sup> Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1988), p. 67. Asante is Professor of African American Studies at Temple University. He is emphatic that, we are not African Americans without Africanity; *we are an African people*'.

<sup>86</sup> Reed, *19 Necromancers from Now* (New York: Double Day, 1970), p. xvii. Reed confirms that his idea of African religion evolved from the nineteen sixties and that he had to rely on the oral tradition of his community. See Steve Cannon, and others, 'A Gathering of the Tribes: Conversation with Ishmael Reed', 1995, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 361-381 (pp. 372, 374-5).

<sup>87</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p. 179.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Reed, 'Cab Calloway Stands in For the Moon' in *19 Necromancers from Now*, p. 293. La Bas evolves from the trickster protagonist Loop Garoo in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969) to play a detective messenger in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974). Reed confirms that at first he believed the genealogy of La Bas to be a 'carry over from the West African Eshu [...] whose twin aspect is Elegbara-Elegbaa', but after years of linguistic research he discovered that 'stylistically and in demeanour, this character closely resembles Iku who [...] is said to be eniti ile re mbe lagbedemeji aiye on orun (an entity whose residence lay between earth and heaven)'. See Reed, *The Reed Reader* (2000), p. xvi.

a long line of people who made their pact with nature long ago'.<sup>90</sup> Reed portrays him as a shape shifting communicant with the Voodoo gods with the gift of prophecy, and, as Donald Hoffman admitted, though this figure might re-call the Merlin figure of 'Western tradition he is derived from primarily African sources'.<sup>91</sup>

Being grounded by a distinct sense of heritage is significant to Reed and he observes that while many Euro/Asian Americans might have abandoned their lands of origin, he notes approvingly that, 'most African-Americans never completely abandoned Africa, and whenever I visit Africa, I am struck by how much African-Americans have maintained their African style and how much they have lost'.<sup>92</sup> He writes of the lack of 'reverence for the elderly and nature', but sees evidence of 'the remarkable testimony to the adaptability of Africans wherever they go', a survival technique.<sup>93</sup> He explains that, 'as a writer, I am interested in African psychology and mythology' and 'just like [...] other parts of Europe' you will 'find people looking back into the oral tradition for their material. This is the thrust behind Afrocentricity, and Afrocentric schools have produced concrete results'.<sup>94</sup> He notes that 'Yoruba is very influential in this hemisphere', witnessed in a 'million people' speaking the language' and he argues that Hoodoo still retains some of the West African forms'.<sup>95</sup> In fact Neo-Hoodoo is the Afrocentric lens through which Reed sees the world, for it is his African point of survival in American culture in two forms. Firstly, it informs his ability to freely draw from all other religions and cultural traditions whilst remaining true to his African roots which he refers to as syncretism. He explains, 'Black people still speak Yoruba [...] English with a Yoruban syntax. They drop their verbs for example'.<sup>96</sup> This is often mixed with black American dialect, slang and some aspects of standard English. Thus in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed infuses the speech of the black Baptist preacher father of Woodrow Wilson Jefferson with southern rhythms and eclectic style: 'The Rhyming Fool [...] sits in Re-mote Mississippi and talks "crazy for hours. The dazzling parodying punning mischievous

<sup>90</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, p. 45.

<sup>91</sup> Donald L. Hoffman, 'A Darker Shade of Grail: Questing at the Crossroads in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*', *Callaloo*, 17 (1994), 1245-1256 (p. 1248).

<sup>92</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front: Dispatches from the Race War* (2003), p. 130.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.; Cannon, and others, 'A Gathering of the Tribes: Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1995, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, p. 374.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 372.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. Reed gives the example of a figure from African folklore called John the Conqueror, who is represented as the ancient West African entity, Damballah, the white python. He points out the survival of this form in Haiti and he relates that in the 'US, there's a root called Johnny the root' which is 'shaped like a snake.' He confirms how these discoveries influenced him to go back to the matrix to understand how the original African culture influences contemporary usage.

<sup>96</sup> Cannon and others, 'A Gathering of the Tribes: Conversation with Ishmael Reed', 1995, p.371.

[...] style play of your Cakewalking your Calinda your Minstrelsy give-and-take of the ultra absurd [...] Open-Up-To-Right-Here”<sup>97</sup> This bespeaks of the cultural vitality of black English, and though collectively these linguistic practices might be incongruous they allow Reed to generate humour and a recognition of an oral folk vernacular.

Secondly, Reed’s sense of time is synchronic where past events constantly overlap with the here-and-now, the present.<sup>98</sup> Reginald Martin notes how ‘all of Reed’s books exhibit *dystaxy* i.e. the disruption of linear narrative’ in order to mimic ‘the African oral culture sense of time’ to take ‘the narrative out of the routine, the linear, the dull’.<sup>99</sup> Reed believes he has ‘a touch of sync or synchronization ability’ that he has inherited from his mother, ‘who has the gift of precognition’.<sup>100</sup> This is best reflected in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and *Flight to Canada* (1976) where it is possible to see an overlapping of decades. The setting of the former is the 1920’s Harlem Renaissance and caricatures of Carl Van Vechten and Sterling Brown are satirically represented by the figures of the supposed negrophile, Hinckle Von Vampton, and the black poet, Nathan Brown.<sup>101</sup> Reed deploys these characters to comment on and attack the nineteen sixties, for instance, Brown rejects Von Vampton’s overtures to employ him as writer for a pseudo black arts magazine and Brown could well be speaking for Reed with the acerbic: ‘when people like you...say “The Negro Experience” you are saying that all Negroes experience the world in the same way’.<sup>102</sup> Presumably this is meant to represent Reed rejecting the Black Arts movement, which had a tendency to view all African Americans as having the same backgrounds, interests and goals. In *Flight to Canada* the nineteenth century antebellum period is textually imprinted with twentieth century technology and events. The black characters have a distinctly modern consciousness. Raven Quickskill escapes to Canada

<sup>97</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, p. 152.

<sup>98</sup> Reed comments that his preference is for ‘Voodoo’s recognition of the past, its reverence for the past’ where ‘people never really go away, they become marine animals or insects or whatever and they’re always with you. History is always with you. Life goes on’. See Robert Gover, ‘An Interview with Ishmael Reed’, *Black American Literature Forum*, 12 (1978), 12-19 (p.15).

<sup>99</sup> Reginald Martin, ‘Ishmael Reed’s Syncretic Use of Language: Bathos as Popular Discourse’, *Modern Language Studies*, 20 (1990), 3-9 (p. 7).

<sup>100</sup> Reed, ‘The Writer as Seer: Ishmael Reed on Ishmael Reed’, 1974, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 59-73 (p. 61). He informs the reader that his mother communicates with the spirits of deceased relatives who bring her important news and prophecies.

<sup>101</sup> Carl Ven Vechten was a white writer, critic, and photographer who served almost as a ‘PR’ man between Harlem and white New York. Brown was a black vernacular poet who despaired of middle class African America’s lack of interest in the new black fiction and arts. Anachronisms abound throughout *Mumbo Jumbo*. The secret Wallflower Order (a pun on Ivy League) seems to have the advanced technology and materials of the later twentieth century: ‘Everything is polyurethane, Polystyrene [...] Mylar, Teflon, phenolic, polycarbonate. A gallimaufry of synthetic materials’. See *Mumbo Jumbo*, p. 62

<sup>102</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, p. 117.

aboard a jumbo jet; automobiles and telephones play significant roles in events. Reed combines his views of the Civil war with the Civil unrest of the nineteen sixties, and, nineteenth century slavery with the neo-slavery of the contemporary age. He is aware that the postmodernists would describe this strategy as ‘deliberate anachronism’, but he is emphatic that he adopts a vodun method from his ancestors where ‘‘people go back into the past and get some metaphor from the past to explain the present or the future. I call this necromancy, because that’s what it is’.<sup>103</sup>

The cultural patterns that appear throughout Reed’s Afrocentric writing suggest a racial unity connecting all African Americans. Not all would share his views. Cornel West notes that Afrocentrism is ‘a contemporary species of black nationalism [...] a gallant yet misguided attempt to define an African identity in a white society perceived to be hostile’.<sup>104</sup> He perceives that this movement is worthy because it places black issues rather than white ones ‘at the centre of discussion’, but it is ill-advised because ‘it reinforces narrow discussions about race’.<sup>105</sup> Manning Marable makes a similar point that Afrocentrism, as a cultural and educational movement, is a ‘model of multiculturalism’ with definite strengths such as ‘the fostering of pride, group solidarity and self-respect’, while on a negative note ‘many Afrocentrists have absolutely no desire to engage in a critical discourse with white America at any level’.<sup>106</sup> If we follow this line of reasoning then Reed’s celebration of African traditions is affirmative, but these very practices are grounded in sociological difference. When discussing African American spirituality Reed veers towards outlining an ontological blackness, and by prominently depicting black language and experience he indicates attributes that are essentially black. It would also be true to say that his ethnocentricity manifests itself in hostility towards what he sees as the obstructive power of Europe. He has spoken of his desire to ‘humble Judaeo-Christian culture’ because of what he believes is its occupation of high cultural hegemony in terms of intellectual and artistic achievements leaving no room for others.<sup>107</sup> But there is always the danger that Reed is indeed narrowing the focus of racial consciousness which could in effect be injurious to intragroup unity, for not everyone in the black community has made upbeat assessments of Afrocentrism.

<sup>103</sup> Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 152. ; John O’Brien, ‘Interview with Ishmael Reed’ 1971, p. 16

<sup>104</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Marable, *Beyond Black and White*, pp. 121-122.

<sup>107</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p.133.

Reed exclaims that,

Afrocentric nationalism has been taking a real pounding from professional op-ed writers, talented tenters, and magazines published by some of the most rigid and brazen of ethnic chauvinists. Whatever one may think of Afrocentrism, it will take many years and billions of dollars in appropriations for its leaders to do the kind of damage to the national psyche that has been done by Eurocentrics.<sup>108</sup>

He believes that this harm has manifested itself in two forms. Firstly he draws attention to the historical settlement of the United States by Europeans, but what he particularly objects to is how this is conceived positively by white Americans through the concept of Exceptionalism.<sup>109</sup> This gave rise to significant key tropes that idealized America as a new and original nation, particularly the notions that, 'the United States was a gift to Europeans by god', and that the goal was to create 'A City on the Hill' on the American landmass.<sup>110</sup>

In an interview in 1978 Reed countered them by exclaiming that,

the Europeans [...] didn't send their aristocracy. We got the poor white-trash from Europe, with some Utopians thrown in. The South was settled by prisoners and the North by mental rejects, the *bizarre* people. The Puritans, they couldn't get along with anybody—although I've read new evidence on the Puritans [...] some [...] liked *wenches* and *ale*, imported *fancy cloth* and *tobacco* [...] the country was mainly settled by Whites who were hypocrites and mean-minded people.<sup>111</sup>

Reed appears to attribute the racial problems of the United States to the immigration of Europeans with unstable or even criminal pasts, suggesting that they had been forcibly ejected from their homelands. Certainly he does not succumb to the oft held assumption that the Puritans, with their reputation for strict religiosity and thrift, should be held up as an example to the rest of the world. Rather, Reed attempts to expose their hypocrisy by revealing their hedonism and promiscuity. An alternative reading of this quotation might

<sup>108</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. 87.

<sup>109</sup> This refers to the belief that the United States and the American people hold a special place in the world and have a special role to play in human history. This originated from Alexis de Tocqueville's observation, during his travels in 1831, that due to the influx of various peoples, 'the position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one'. See Alexis de Tocqueville, 'The Example Of The Americans Does Not Prove That A Democratic People Can Have No Aptitude And No Taste For Science, Literature, Or Art' in *Democracy in America*, trans. by Henry Reeve 2 vols <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/816/816-h/816-h.htm>> [accessed 18 June 2011]

<sup>110</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. 224.

<sup>111</sup> Gover, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed', *Black American Literature Forum* 12 (1978), 12-19 (p. 16).

point to its underlying irony, for Reed implies that America's early population would have benefitted more from aristocratic settlers, thus instituting a form of royal elitism. However, whatever Reed's intention, far from eulogising the historical forefathers of white America, he constructs his response to provide a counterpoint to the hegemonic American value system which perpetuates one view of reality to the exclusion of all others.

According to Reed, the second aspect of damage from Eurocentric sources can be seen within the American school curriculum. He argues that 'it's because of the Eurocentric control of the public school curriculum that the United States produces generation after generation of white bigots and black, yellow and brown intellectuals who spend half their lives seeking their "identity"'.<sup>112</sup> Reed continues that their 'lack of knowledge of African American, Latino, and Asian American history condemns them to repeat the mistakes of the past'.<sup>113</sup> He provides evidence from higher education where, 'all one has to do is inspect the courses listed in the catalogs of ten American colleges or universities, selected at random, to discover that Eurocentrism still reigns'.<sup>114</sup> He calls for a re-education of the 'American public [...] about Africa' to the point of proposing that he would himself 'settle for missionary work [...] to free them from entrapment by the corporate media'.<sup>115</sup> This is an extraordinary suggestion and Reed moves from downright hostility for white western influences to what he deems to be the educational possibilities for enlightening all communities about the true multicultural heritage and linguistic mapping of America. He implies that this will foster a sense of true identity thus promoting group solidarity in the long term.

The discussion thus far of Reed's Nationalist tendencies profiles 'race' as blackness, and only blackness, so that anyone who is deemed to possess one drop of African blood will always be regarded as black. However, Reed often uses the concept of 'race' interchangeably with 'ethnicity', which can mean that he is not always dealing so much with the latter's usual association with cultural attributes, but is delving directly into the entrenched nationalist features of racial profiling and essentialism. The relation of 'race' and 'ethnicity' has become entwined in contemporary discourse and both terms can be defined in social and political

<sup>112</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. 87.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up: Taking on the Media Bullies and Other Reflections* (Philadelphia: De Capo Press, 2008), p. 242.

<sup>115</sup> Reed, *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media* (2010), p. 72.

terms.<sup>116</sup> In Werner Sollors's estimation any discussion of ethnicity is much more preferable since 'race' with its hierarchical divisions resonant of Europe and its *others*, 'is a most unhelpful concept and that it should be regarded as merely one aspect of ethnicity'.<sup>117</sup> In his view the use of the less highly charged and more inclusive term, ethnicity, is advantageous because any form of discourse about American pluralism would then have to include the 'rites and rituals of culturally dominant groups' *as well as* 'divergent group identities' such as African Americans.<sup>118</sup> Indeed Sollors provides a broader set of definitions to work with so that he views America as multi-ethnic, rather than upholding the usual binaries of 'black' and 'white'. It is true that Reed has demonstrated a tangible pride in his own ethnic heritage which apart from the African link has shown a genealogical connection to the American Indian, Cherokee tribe, and to Ireland. But above all Reed continually pinpoints the fact that identity is not to be achieved by simply looking to one's blood relations or claiming one's historical and cultural roots. American identity is constructed on racial and national grounds against the norm of white hegemony. African Americans are perpetually bound to a racial classification in which they are identified as exclusively 'black' where there can be no recognition of their ethnically diverse heritage.

Reed's sense of black ethnic descent is paramount in his racial worldview but this can often be tempered by indignation as he satirises ethnic life through the metaphor of a sports contest in which there are 'two basketball teams in the United States right now—"White America" and "Black America"'.<sup>119</sup> The proviso is that the blacks are to be found usually on the losing team. Therefore when Reed poses the question 'who is ethnic?', he insists that if African Americans are placed in the equation there can only be two major racial dimensions, black and white, followed by the implication that there is only one real ethnicity: whiteness.<sup>120</sup>

This is because he argues,

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<sup>116</sup> Ashraf Rushdy notes that post war attitudes in America evolved towards 'the de-biologizing of race as a transcendental signified' which meant that it could be no longer perceived by physiological specificity. See *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, pp. 20-22. This deconstruction of race therefore moved towards a matter of social constructivism rather than one based on nature. This could be said to share similar features with ethnicity which could be viewed as belonging to a social and cultural specificity. As a result Peter Ratcliffe argues that the latter can be deployed very 'loosely to imply commonalities of language, religion, identity, national origins and/or even skin colour. See *Race, Ethnicity and Difference: Imagining the Inclusive Society* (Berkshire and New York: Open University, 2004), p. 28.

<sup>117</sup> Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 36.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Reed, 'Is Ethnicity Obsolete?' in *The Invention of Ethnicity* ed. by Werner Sollors (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 226-229 (p. 226). See also Reed, *Writin' is Fightin'* (1990), p. 197.

<sup>120</sup> Reed, 'Is Ethnicity Obsolete?' in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, p. 226.

Others are not so obvious, so they're allowed to play ethnic games without being identified as such. They're allowed to hide behind whiteness. People don't call themselves Italian Americans or English Americans or Jewish Americans. They're all white. So they can play ethnic games without being obvious. With us we're obviously what we are, although we're not what we appear to be.<sup>121</sup>

If ethnicity is only grounded in whiteness then he implies that white people are what Richard Dyer calls 'non raced', because race usually tends to be 'only applied to non-white peoples'.<sup>122</sup> Whites then gain neutrality because they do not perceive of themselves in racial terms. Reed's anger is palpable on this issue and he contends 'we permit millions of people to acquire what passes in the United States as prestige without their having to earn it. All one has to be is "white". For them to be "white", to permit them to be "white", to liberate themselves from what they regard as the shackles of ethnicity, there has to be "blackness".<sup>123</sup> Reed claims that 'whiteness is an American invention', and he highlights the particularly crude American reality of ethnocentrism when people of colour are instantly stereotyped, filling rigid racial categories that separate white people as insiders from black people who are deemed as outsiders.<sup>124</sup>

Reed demonstrates pride in celebrating the distinctiveness of African American culture, but faced with the discomfort incurred by white America when observing black people he comments sarcastically, 'the presence of blacks should be viewed as a blessing. Without blacks taking the brunt of the system's failures, where would our great republic be?'<sup>125</sup> He concludes that there is a form of colour blindness with regard to ethnicity and notes, 'Blacks have difficulty in claiming the multi-ethnicity of their heritage because such a claim renders millions of people less "white" [...] We cannot define ourselves fully because it threatens people'.<sup>126</sup> When he states, 'ethnicity is interchangeable with being black. In other words, "blacks are the only ethnic group in the United States"', he is really indicating his exasperation with the current racial status quo. Reed points out that 'we are the most complex

<sup>121</sup> Rebekah Presson, 'Ishmael Reed Interview' 1988, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 303-313 (p. 304).

<sup>122</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 2, 1. Dyer has shown in his discussion of film representations that white ethnicity is only implicitly present but also explicitly absent because, 'white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm'. Thus white people therefore are just people while other colours are something else.

<sup>123</sup> Reed, 'Is Ethnicity Obsolete?' in *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1989), p. 228.

<sup>124</sup> Moore, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed' 1983, p. 223.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>126</sup> Reed, 'Is Ethnicity Obsolete?' in *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1989), p. 227.



group of people in the United States in the sense that we have European and Native American and African ancestry' but blacks are not allowed to present or celebrate this factor because of colour profiling.<sup>127</sup>

Reed attempts to counter the assumptions that white people make by regarding themselves as 'invisible men', and that it has to be the separation of whiteness from blackness that can determine ethnic traits. Ethnicity is Reed's euphemism for race and therefore the title of his essay, 'Is Ethnicity obsolete?', can be answered. Yes, it is for blacks! In Reed's world, the 'one-drop rule' imposed on those of African descent is still current and divisive and is set against a power relationship of whiteness which is underpinned by authority and privilege. Race in this sense acquires an overdetermined generation of meaning that brings together corporal features and behaviour and custom as if there was some logical connection between them. For Reed, racial formation outweighs ethnicity and for African Americans this goes beyond the cultural into sustaining the divisive institutional operations of categorisation.

## The Post-race Era

Given the on-going racial and ethnic tensions between blacks and whites some commentators have suggested moving to a post-ethnic position. David Hollinger challenges the inflexibility of race in America, which he describes as the 'ethno-racial pentagon' that orders individuals into one of five categories (African American, Asian American, Euro-American, Indigenous and Latino).<sup>128</sup> To prove his point Hollinger draws on Reed's observation that 'if Alex Haley had traced his father's bloodline, he would have travelled twelve generations back to, not Gambia, but *Ireland*'.<sup>129</sup> Hollinger makes much of Haley's decision not to document his Irish ancestry for his television series, *Roots*, which he classes as 'Haley's choice', but the overwhelming issue for Hollinger is that the former's quest to document his African rather than his Irish ancestry limits his genealogical identifications to one of the five identified Pentagon races.<sup>130</sup> This insidious pressure to choose one predominant ethnicity over another

<sup>127</sup> Presson, 'Ishmael Reed Interview' 1988, p. 304.

<sup>128</sup> Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, p.8.

<sup>129</sup> Reed, 'Is Ethnicity Obsolete?' in *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1989), p. 227.

<sup>130</sup> Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, p. 20.

leads to what Hollinger terms ‘the Hobson’s choice of genealogy in America’.<sup>131</sup> He also uses Reed’s experience, who was placed in a similar situation to Haley, for when the former ‘mentioned his “Irish-American heritage” to a “Professor of Celtic Studies at Dartmouth” [...he] laughed’.<sup>132</sup> Hollinger proposes that these situations pose impossible quandaries for conferring or erasing various ethnic identities. He argues that Americans should adopt instead a ‘postethnic’ perspective in which ethno-racial identity becomes a matter of voluntary affiliation made by individuals rather than an involuntary designation forced on every member of a group. In this sense ‘postethnicity would enable Hayley and Reed to be both African American and Irish American without having to choose one to the exclusion of the other’.<sup>133</sup>

Hollinger’s recommendation suggests that there would be an end to the use of physical, racial markers to identify and hold back members of certain communities. The implication is that he actually disapproves of multiculturalism because it ‘breeds an enthusiasm for specific traditional cultures that can sometimes mask a provinciality from which individuals are eager to escape through new, out-group affiliations’.<sup>134</sup> Hollinger’s solution is that the postethnic perspective will allow the United States to ‘maintain its own public culture [...] against which the demands of various particularisms shall be obliged to struggle within a formal constitutional framework’.<sup>135</sup> However his formulation would not work for Reed, given his primary emphasis on blackness and his affiliation to cultural nationalism. After all Reed is keen to participate in the enterprise of encouraging each African American to take pride in their ethnic identity and to affirm their spiritual connections with the original homeland. Hollinger asserts that even though culture flourishes within each of the pentagon blocs, holding onto that dimension rather than ‘political categories risks saddling us with a sense of diversity grounded in an analysis not of cultural difference but of the history of victimization’ justified by superficial biological differences’.<sup>136</sup> Again this dimension does not comply with Reed’s educational ambitions for he proposed making blacks cognisant of the degree to which African culture contributed to western art, values and history as a whole. Rather than

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid. Consequently Hollinger points out that if Haley identified with Africa, he would accept ‘the categories of the white oppressors’, but if he chose to identify with Ireland he would deny ‘in effect his social solidarity with people who most shared his social destiny’.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 107. Hollinger later argues that similarly holding onto one’s ancestry can be limiting even though grandparents ‘can help to create a frame for life’. See also p. 117.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., pp. 36-37.

perceive the black experience in America in terms of victimhood, the nationalist issue arises of facilitating awareness of America's debt to blacks for the years of brutality, labour and social exclusion. By drawing on the example of Alex Haley's celebrated television series, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, Reed highlights Haley's Irish roots, rather than his more predictably Gambian ones to refute once and for all the very idea of white supremacy, based on lines of racial purity. Yet Reed's point is that in the series Haley pointedly chose to re-construct his African ancestry because he wished to engender a sense of belonging and continuity with those people he felt most solidarity with, a line of people who formerly had been robbed unjustly of their rightful history and identity. Under Hollinger's proposals this quest would be rendered irrelevant or at best inconsequential. Although Reed might not ultimately disagree with Hollinger's aim to dispel racial profiling, the issue lies not so much with the question of 'blackness' but the way in which 'Irishness' is constituted as 'white'. Once again this reinforces Reed's point that blacks are disqualified from being ethnic.

Since the election of Barack Obama as the United States' first African American president, there has been much discussion of whether America is a 'post-racial' society amongst journalists and political commentators.<sup>137</sup> This idea arose initially in 2006 because of the seemingly positive responses to Obama's campaign. However, back in 2003 Reed was at that point exclaiming his astonishment about the 'new thinking on race' where 'spokespersons for the white side maintained that racism is dead. They proposed that when blacks complain about racism, they're playing the race card' to the point that 'some white commentators argue that racism is not dead, because African Americans are racists'.<sup>138</sup> Reed's nationalist thinking is distinct for he insists that race is firmly ingrained into American culture and his exasperation with the 'double standard regarding what ethnic and racial designations' can mean is trenchant.<sup>139</sup> He points out that while he can be designated as 'black by any 'journalist or critic', his use of the 'word white marks [...him] as racist', which suggests that the media alone will not allow for a race-free future.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> In the July 21<sup>st</sup> 2010 edition of the Fox News Channel programme *Hannity*, the conservative commentator, Ann Coulter declared, 'We don't have racism in America anymore' (Media Matters, 2010). Also in an October 2011 interview on CNN, the Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain said, 'I don't believe racism in this country today holds anybody back in a big way'. See Daniel Byrd and Bruce Merken, *Post Racial? Americans and Race in the Age of Obama* (Berkeley, California: The Greenlining Institute, 2011), pp. 1-26 (p. 5). <<http://www.greenlining.org/resources/pdfs/AmericansandRaceinAgeofObama.pdf>> [Accessed 5 September, 2011]

<sup>138</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), pp. 126-7.

<sup>139</sup> Reed, *Writin' is Fightin'* (1990), p. 59.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

Indeed the black community is far from uniform in terms of the influence of Nationalism and Afrocentrism and Reed has clashed with neo-conservative blacks because he believes that many racial issues have been ‘ignored by a handful of black academics who claim that we have entered a postrace period.’<sup>141</sup> There is much dissent about whether blacks are meted out harsher treatment in the United States. For example in an article entitled ‘Still Losing the Race?’, John McWhorter, who is a self-described neo-conservative black, proposes that many African Americans use racism as a pose in order to achieve better rights.<sup>142</sup> He contends that “‘black America is currently caught in certain ideological holding patterns’—chief among them being the ideology of permanent victimhood’ and he duly sets out to directly challenge and denounce the works of fellow black writers and scholars who have particularly exemplified and recorded the phenomenon of racism in the black community.<sup>143</sup> McWhorter complains that reading such texts,

require one to enter into a kind of alternate black universe [...that] bears so little resemblance to my own experience or the experience of my friends and acquaintances that I can only throw up *my* hands. Certainly, my friends and I can cite unpleasant and possibly racially tinged incidents here and there in the course of our lifetimes. But for none of us are these the anecdotes we come home with on a weekly, monthly, or even annual basis. Not once to date have I had a nasty, intrusive run-in with the police, despite being no stranger to nightlife in cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Oakland, and despite having driven a beat-up car in tony white neighbourhoods on a regular basis.<sup>144</sup>

McWhorter’s flat reductionism is based on offering his own history as an authoritative template for the contemporary black experience to counter the experiences of fellow blacks. His life experiences show that he has been relatively unscathed by discrimination, though he becomes anecdotal himself at this point. It seems that McWhorter’s words are deliberately designed to provoke as he specifically critiques Deborah Mathis, Manning Marable and Ishmael Reed for ‘having been born in an earlier era’ which means they are ‘stuck in the realities of their childhood and early adolescence’.<sup>145</sup> McWhorter attempts to ‘de-essentialise’

<sup>141</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up: Taking on the Media Bullies and Other Reflections* (2008), p. 99.

<sup>142</sup> John McWhorter was a professor of linguistics at Berkeley and is now a senior fellow in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

<sup>143</sup> John H. McWhorter, ‘Still Losing the Race?’, *Commentary*, 117 (2004), 37- 41 (p. 37). In this article he particularly critiques three notable African American writers including Deborah Mathis, Manning Marable and Ishmael Reed.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.38-39.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

his black critics by raising the crude issue of colour in his defence. He claims that ‘neither Marable, Mathis, nor Reed is dark skinned’ and that a reversal of the nineteen sixties situation when ‘light-skinned blacks looked down on dark-skinned blacks’ has now taken place. McWhorter insists that ‘his most vociferous critics tend to be lighter-skinned blacks in their fifties’, their particular animus probably stemming ‘from a desire to show how “black they really are”’.<sup>146</sup>

McWhorter’s main proposal is that the idea of ‘black’ protest is based on a deliberately contrived essentialism that should have run its course by the late twentieth century. Yet Reed of course has always foregrounded the prevalence of the ‘one-drop rule’ in the determination of race, rendering the issue of particular hues of ‘blackness’ almost academic.<sup>147</sup> The sub-text of these quotes becomes even clearer after reading McWhorter’s critique of Reed’s essay collection *Another Day at the Front*, particularly the chapter by the same name, that recounts Reed’s ‘violent encounters [...] with police in the 1960’s and 1970’s and nasty ones thereafter’.<sup>148</sup> Reed structures this chapter to read as a detailed inventory of his own lifelong experiences of white harassment which records: being placed under surveillance; indicted, taken to court and later acquitted by the New York police; stopped frequently for suspected robbery and drink driving in Berkeley; harassed by ‘Airport Narcotics Security’ for using an exit without baggage; escorted through a car park in Oakland; and searched and nearly arrested for ‘walking while black’ by the Los Angeles police.<sup>149</sup> The point that Reed wishes to reinforce is that throughout his life he *suffered* racial harassment and his underlying implication is that the majority of African American males in his acquaintance have been meted out similar treatment. Controversially Reed remarks that, ‘it’s your black or brown skin that marks you as the Star of David and the pink triangle marked Jews and gays in Nazi Germany’ which means it is precisely those physical markers that continue to earmark black people for arrest and possible incarceration.<sup>150</sup> But, while initially conceding that ‘Reed echoes a common complaint of even well-heeled black people across the country’, McWhorter infers that Reed’s essay is a work of pragmatism to provide an easy ‘recourse to

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Reed, *God Made Alaska for the Indians* (1982), p. 76. Here Reed explains how ‘one drop’ of ‘Negro blood’ makes for ‘non persons or invisible men’.

<sup>148</sup> McWhorter, ‘Still Losing the Race?’, p. 39.

<sup>149</sup> Reed, ‘Another Day at the Front’ in *Another Day At the Front* (2003), pp. 56-75. Reed notes that an earlier version of this article appeared in *Police Brutality*, edited by Jill Nelson in 2000.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

the iconography of cops as the black man's enemy'.<sup>151</sup> This critique effectively reduces Reed's chapter to the status of a fictional television drama.

It is clear that McWhorter does not accept the validity of Reed's account. He criticises Reed for being 'so caught up in his battle at "the front" that he often simply fabricates', and in an accompanying footnote he exclaims, 'Reed's book is a self-obsessed rambling mess, and its publisher appears not even to have subjected the pages to proof reading'.<sup>152</sup> McWhorter asserts that the 'ignorant' thesis of Reed's book is that 'racism persists because white Americans have a vested interest in maintaining the fiction of white superiority, and, especially, black inferiority', even to the point that Reed is over-determined in claiming that blacks are 'designated to fill the role' of 'scapegoat' for all American 'ills'.<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, McWhorter finds that 'taking Reed at his word requires a heartless dismissal of, precisely, black suffering'.<sup>154</sup> The former accuses Reed thus because he objects to Reed's provision of detailed facts and figures regarding the murder of blacks by other blacks, and also by whites, who have killed blacks in far greater proportion over the course of the twentieth century. McWhorter believes that, while Reed might receive a 'rhetorical thrill' from this, it is an impractical exercise that provides no benefits whatsoever to 'the Chicago community leader helplessly watching black teens gunning each other down' or perhaps standing at 'the third funeral for a teenager [...] in a month'.<sup>155</sup> His final challenge to Reed is to stand 'besides this man at the real front', implying that Reed, along with Mathis and Marable, are merely engaging in a 'simple, self-indulgent quest for indignation' and are only 'slightly more sophisticated' than the 'legions of up-and-coming blacks under forty-five [...] mouthing the cop-hating lyrics of hip-hop music as they drive to their corporate offices in their new Mercedes sedans'.<sup>156</sup>

Faced with these incendiary allegations it is hardly surprising that in typical pugilistic fashion Reed launched his own counter critique against McWhorter on three grounds. Firstly, Reed questions McWhorter's authority as a black spokesman, by commenting on the latter's contribution to a 'National Public Radio' programme on affirmative action.<sup>157</sup> Reed describes

<sup>151</sup> McWhorter, 'Still Losing the Race?', p. 39.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., pp. 40-41.

<sup>157</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), p. 134.

how McWhorter 'was allowed to run amuck with his usual tall tales and anecdotes about blacks lowering standards by accepting affirmative action, but not once suggesting' that it is actually 'white women' who have been the major recipients of this social programme.<sup>158</sup> By implication Reed critiques McWhorter for not conducting any accurate research and for his self-interest in not daring to upset the 'feminists who run NPR'.<sup>159</sup> Secondly, Reed dismisses the quality of the latter's writing, describing it as 'breezy' and that the former's theories had 'already been pronounced much more eloquently by Shelby Steele and more colorfully by Stanley Crouch'.<sup>160</sup> His charge is that McWhorter's theories are derivative, and that he is 'the author of a book of throwaway lines' with no gravitas.<sup>161</sup>

Ultimately Reed describes McWhorter as a 'linguist who has apparently been urged by his conservative backers to comment on subjects outside his field' because he is representative of 'the new settler culture' where 'only certain types of blacks are tolerated [...] those projected by the media and the so-called educational system [...] based upon one's ability to pledge loyalty oaths to Anglo culture'.<sup>162</sup> Finally, Reed attacks McWhorter for shying away from any face to face discussion with him, implying that the latter lacks the courage of his convictions. There is much sarcasm in Reed's hint about the obsessional nature of McWhorter's claims, to the extent of suggesting there may be a need for 'a new field of psychiatry' for such individuals.<sup>163</sup> In fact Reed's critique takes on a more personal note with his reference to McWhorter 'as a rent-a-black', a gesture which he grudgingly admitted later was inappropriate, though his regret was retracted after McWhorter refused to engage in a debate on affirmative action issued by the 'group BAMN, By Any Means Necessary'.<sup>164</sup> This avoidance of confrontation inflamed Reed to the point that he augmented his earlier label by

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., pp. 134-135.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p.135.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., pp. 136-137. Shelby Steele's book, *The Content of our Character* (1990) received much praise from a great number of conservatives and liberals for its moderate stance on contemporary racial issues and its condemnation of Affirmative Action and other racial remedies. In the essay collection, *Notes of a Hanging Judge* (1989), Stanley Crouch argued against the idea that blacks are "essentially alienated" victims of a hopelessly racist society' and he controversially claimed that any African Americans who subscribe to that view are 'self-hating right-wing puppets'. See Greg Robinson, 'Stanley Crouch: Neocon or Ellisonian?' in *Solidarity* (1995) <<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/2285>> [accessed 19 October 2011] (p. 1).

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>162</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), pp. 136, 10. ; *God Made Alaska for the Indians* (1982), p. 77.

<sup>163</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), p. 137.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. Reed comments that his daughter belongs to this group and reveals that McWhorter referred to the participants of the group as 'stupid idiots' and that BAMN was merely 'a real fart of an organization'.

calling McWhorter a 'proxy black [...] who fronts the opinions of others' and boosts the ratings of television shows by accusing black people of self-sabotage on air.<sup>165</sup>

The views of McWhorter and Reed are directly in conflict and they seem to take on personal notes of bitterness. The latter has never resorted to acquiring a corporate office or generating a great deal of wealth, preferring to remain independent, as I discussed in an earlier chapter. While McWhorter disclaims the presence of constant racism in the contemporary USA, and is resentful that Reed has denounced him as an 'intellectual lightweight', Reed's overriding and continual mantra is indeed that 'African-Americans are the permanent scapegoat. Tarded and feathered. Digitally and electronically lynched' by all media propaganda in the USA.<sup>166</sup> The question remains of whether McWhorter's remarks can be justified, for Reed is unrepentantly caustic, perceiving the former as a public intellectual who does not base his assertions on researched fact, an aspect Reed feels is exemplified by McWhorter's negation of 'the idea that blacks are stereotyped in television roles', even though this had been substantiated by various authoritative studies by the Civil Rights Commission.<sup>167</sup> In 2008 Reed continued to provide more specific evidence that even the Bush administration admitted to the 'existence of racial profiling' and 'the New England Journal of Medicine has documented racial disparities in health care; the Center for Responsible Lending has issued a report about the unequal treatment of blacks by the mortgage-lending institutions, even to those who work hard and play by the rules'.<sup>168</sup> Whether Reed's work can be regarded as fabricated and rambling is another consideration for he has revealed that much of his 'data is garnered from the very newspapers and television news shows where think-tank operatives discuss crime, drugs, illegitimacy, and welfare as predominantly black problems'.<sup>169</sup> However Reed is not alone in his thinking, for Marable and Baker also critique the idea that America has moved into a post-racial phase. It is notable that all three writers paint something of their early life histories in the publications listed below, which affirm the support of the black community in the face of a 'justified terror before the worst offenses of "whiteness" in America'.<sup>170</sup> Baker

<sup>165</sup> Ibid. Reed cites how McWhorter has appeared in 'Marty Peretz's *New Republic*' and 'Donald Bogle's *Primetime Blues: African-Americans On Network Television*' in companies that 'view black thrashing as a way of boosting their audience'. According to Reed, McWhorter fronts the kind of opinion product that gets him airtime on places like Fox and MSNBC.

<sup>166</sup> McWhorter, 'Still Losing the Race?', p. 38.; Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), p. 139.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>168</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up: Taking on the Media Bullies and Other Reflections* (2008) pp. 95-96.

<sup>169</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p.11.

<sup>170</sup> Houston Baker, *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Columbia University, 2008), p. 3.



stridently criticises black neo-conservatives for fostering ‘a myth of racial progress’ when ‘race, in fact, eclipses or subtends all other issues’, and though Marable’s argument is that race is constantly being redefined though the political and economic forces of American society Baker remains adamant of the reality that ‘race constantly represents itself to black people as an apparently unending series of moments of inequality’ which constantly sap and drain their ‘physical, mental and moral resources’.<sup>171</sup>

By 2009 Reed felt totally vindicated about his assertions on America as a racist nation when, in July of that year, the black intellectual and Harvard University professor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., was arrested on suspicion of breaking into his own house in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Gates was booked for disorderly conduct after ‘exhibiting loud and tumultuous behavior’, and according to a police report, Gates accused the white investigating officer of being a racist and told him that he was being targeted because "I'm a black man in America."<sup>172</sup> Gates provided full identification at the time but was handcuffed and taken into police custody for several hours. Five days later the charges of disorderly conduct against Gates were dropped, but not before the arrest generated a national debate about whether or not it represented an example of racial profiling by police. Later that month, Reed issued a startling headline, ‘Post-Race scholar yells Racism’, in the on-line journal, *Counterpunch*. Reed had long regarded Gates as a neo-conservative and the tone of contempt is unmistakable,

Now that Henry Louis Gates Jr. has gotten a tiny taste of what ‘the underclass’ undergo each day, do you think he will go easier on them? Lighten up on the tough love lectures? Even during his encounter with the police, he was given some slack. If a black man in an inner city neighbourhood had hesitated to identify himself, or given the police some lip, the police would have called SWAT. When Oscar Grant, an apprentice butcher, talked back to a BART policeman in Oakland he was shot!

Given the position that Gates has pronounced since the late eighties, if I had been the arresting officer and post-race spokesperson Gates accused me of racism, I would have replied that ‘race is a social construct’ the line that he and his friends have been pushing over the last couple of decades.<sup>173</sup>

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., pp. xii, 61. ; Marable, *Beyond Black and White*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>172</sup> The arrest occurred after a local police officer responded to a witness who claimed that a potential burglary was in progress when she saw two men breaking into the Gates residence. A police report said that Gates told the officer that he had ‘no idea who he was messing with.’. See Tracy Jan, ‘Harvard professor Gates arrested at Cambridge home’, <[http://www.boston.com/news/local/breaking\\_news/2009/07/harvard.html](http://www.boston.com/news/local/breaking_news/2009/07/harvard.html)> [accessed 3 July, 2011]

<sup>173</sup> Reed, ‘Post-Race Scholar Yells Racism: How Henry Louis Gates Got Ordained as the Nation’s “Leading Black Intellectual”’ in *Counterpunch* (2009) <<http://counterpunch.org/reed07272009.html>> [accessed 17 August 2009] (p. 1).

Reed seems to exude a certain *schadenfreude* that Gates should endure a racist experience after maintaining for many years that all the problems of black people are caused and suffered by the behaviour of male inner city blacks. While Reed has been reporting racist incidents continuously since the nineteen sixties he points out that Gates received moderate treatment after his full identification as a Harvard professor but the fact of his African American ethnicity still provoked an arrest. By citing the case of Oscar Grant, Reed attempts to show that the same event in an inner city or black working class environment merits more severe, even fatal punishment.<sup>174</sup> This supported an earlier observation in which after a 'young black film maker, quoted in *The New York Times*, said that class had replaced race as post-race paradigm' Reed pronounced, 'it's not class, its one's black ass'.<sup>175</sup> Reed therefore concluded that 'Skip Gates found out during his encounter with a lying policeman that it's not a matter of class, it's your black ass that gets you into trouble with the police'.<sup>176</sup>

Irony fuels Reed's assertion that, when faced with a heated incident between a black citizen and a white authority, a debate about the socially constructed reality of race is highly unlikely to take place. He quotes Gates as saying that, 'what it made me realize was how vulnerable all black men are, how vulnerable are all poor people to capricious forces like a rogue policemen'.<sup>177</sup> Reed expresses exasperation with Gates for suggesting that he did not understand the extent of racial profiling, which Reed argues has been 'a problem for over two hundred years'.<sup>178</sup> Reed was well aware of the global focus that this incident incurred given that it took place relatively early in Obama's administration, and that even during the Obama presidential campaign, the media were 'signalling the advent of a new post-race period'.<sup>179</sup> The Gates arrest fuelled even further uproar when President Obama became involved by commenting on and criticizing the arrest and the response by the white police officer. Reed followed this up by posting a further article on Counterpunch entitled, 'Let's All Have a Beer', which referred to Obama's attempt to deflect the intense national media debate about

<sup>174</sup> Reed, 'The Inaugural and My Coffee Pot Search' in *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media* (2010), pp. 141-158 (pp. 154-157). In this essay Reed reports that Oscar Grant was in legal employment, a family man with a child, but because he argued with a policeman he was taken off a train and 'beaten by the police before being shot in the back'.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p.154.

<sup>176</sup> Reed, 'Let's All Have a Beer', in *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media* (2010), pp. 171- 184 (p. 182).

<sup>177</sup> Reed, 'Post-Race Scholar Yells Racism: How Henry Louis Gates Got Ordained as the Nation's "Leading Black Intellectual"' in *Counterpunch* (2009), 1-5 (p. 3). <[www.counterpunch.org/2009/07/27/post-race-scholar-yells-racism/](http://www.counterpunch.org/2009/07/27/post-race-scholar-yells-racism/)> [accessed 5 September 2009]

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media* (2010), p. 157.

racial profiling by inviting Gates and the arresting police officer to the White House for a cordial visit.<sup>180</sup> While this proved to be amicable and achieved Obama's objective of generating meaningful dialogue about what he perceived to be an unfortunate incident, Reed is adamant that 'three beers won't do it' and that the whole episode was quintessentially racial.<sup>181</sup>

Reed's tone becomes softer towards Gates when he says that, 'Gates might have raised his voice, he might have yelled, but there was no evidence that he was "belligerent" [...or] that Gates "over-reacted"'.<sup>182</sup> In this article Reed notes that Gates proposed generating 'a documentary about racial profiling' and so he challenged Gates to feature a monthly meeting when residents from his 'Oakland ghetto neighbourhood' could recount their experiences to the police.<sup>183</sup> Reed grimly comments that a documentary would probably be transformed into 'a reality show' accruing 'more profits to Gates, the intellectual entrepreneur, perhaps co-hosted by his new pal, Sgt. Crowley, cable's latest matinee idol'.<sup>184</sup> The point is that though Reed was perhaps only slightly sympathetic to Gates's plight he remains contemptuous about those black intellectuals and neo-conservatives who in his estimation betray the integrity and the experiences of the African American community by denying the existence of racial problems. He even comments, ironically, that 'Obama is the post-race president whom they won't allow to be post-race' because he claims that 'eight hundred and forty' journalists who are affiliated to ethnic minorities have lost their jobs during this time.<sup>185</sup> Reed notes how the media constantly portrays Obama as a black president which limits his acceptance by America as a whole.

The discussion thus far has examined how Reed deconstructs the dynamics of race and how far he is prepared to accentuate blackness as a member of a minority group. On pragmatic grounds he endorses a sense of black racial essence even though this might do little to end the presence of racism. Above all his emphasis on blackness is intended to counter the white

<sup>180</sup> The article, 'Let's All Have a Beer', was later included in *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media* (2010), p. 182. This event became known colloquially as the 'Beer Summit'.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., pp. 178-180. It was also reported that Sgt. Leon Lashley, a black officer who was present at Gates's arrest, said he supported Sgt. Crowley's actions "100 per cent." Lashley added that he thought it would have gone differently, with no arrest, if he had been the first officer to arrive on the scene and the initial encounter with Gates had been "black man to black man."

<sup>183</sup> Reed, 'Post-Race Scholar Yells Racism: How Henry Louis Gates Got Ordained as the Nation's "Leading Black Intellectual"' in *Counterpunch* (2009), p. 5.

<sup>184</sup> Reed, *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media* (2010), pp. 183-184.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

centre and to highlight the unjust legal renderings of race. Reed draws attention to the stark polarisation of 'blacks' and 'whites' in America because the negative associations of blackness preclude African Americans from being included in any multi-ethnic groupings. According to Reed the latter is a whites-only category which is why the notion of a post-racial society is unsustainable in the present climate. This situation does not facilitate the intragroup harmony that Reed desires though it does not prevent him from actively supporting and working with the plural traditions of the United States.

## The American Mosaic

The complexity of blackness in a racial sense flourishes in Reed's writing yet at the same time he juggles with two seemingly oppositional though inter-related issues. Firstly he postulates that 'blacks are the least ethnic of America's ethnic groups', due to their 'multi-heritage'.<sup>186</sup> In 1993 he expressed this more boldly, 'there's no such thing as Black America or White America, two nations, with two separate bloodlines. America is a land of distant cousins', which means that he transmutes the nationalist racial binary.<sup>187</sup> This begs the question of how he, as a black individual, can begin to address his unique lineage and it signals the exponential prospect of going beyond the boundaries of an Afrocentric vision and exploring and embracing what he describes as his 'plural self', defined in his case by his white and American Indian heritage.<sup>188</sup> Secondly he lays claim to be 'influenced by as many cultures as possible', and that as a consequence he found his artistic inspiration within the cosmopolitanism and pluralism of U.S. life.<sup>189</sup> Reed sensed real possibilities with America primarily because it 'is not Europe, and it is not Africa', rather he notes, 'it is a new civilization' and he pronounces the 'exciting destiny' of the United States to be a crisscrossing of the world's cultures.<sup>190</sup> From this juxtaposition of plurality and multiple ancestry it is discernible that Reed is actually an American patriot, who on the one hand might challenge the U. S. canon to pave the way for one that is inclusive of black and white towards an alternative centre of consciousness, but who on the other hand senses a real future

<sup>186</sup> Reed, 'Is Ethnicity Obsolete?' in *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1989), p. 227.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>188</sup> Reed, 'The Celtic In Us', (2010), p. 327.

<sup>189</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p. 227.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133, 227.

for how America might lead the world in multicultural affairs.<sup>191</sup> I propose in the following sections to explore how Reed constructs this space as a mosaic of relations where different cultures interact in a spirit of mutual respect and equality, though the distinctiveness of each ethnic group remains within the larger composite of American diversity. I will also examine the various models that Reed develops to support his vision of how this mosaic might operate in various contexts: from his writings and organizational activities, the relations between ethnic groups, through to his personal relationships and encounters. From these I argue that his vision is largely a utopian palimpsest that is underpinned by a particular form of American Exceptionalism.

Reed's enthusiasm knows no bounds when attempting to create multicultural space, and he claims to have been one of 'the first ones to use the term', through the auspices of the Before Columbus Foundation.<sup>192</sup> It is important finally to clarify what Reed means precisely by the label 'multicultural', especially since he has highlighted the white fears about this as 'a term that has become a political football in the struggle between the politically correct of the left and the right'.<sup>193</sup> He decided in *Multi-America* on the impossibility of achieving a sound definition due to the media-toting vagaries of public intellectuals, but he disputes the view of Bharati Mukherjee when 'she says that the mosaic theory of multiculturalism means an American culture divided by separate cultural entities'.<sup>194</sup> He has also repudiated a tokenist form of multiculturalism whereby a tiny minority of non-white people might be appointed within a dominant organisation of whites. What is clear is that Reed welcomes and cherishes cultural diversity and the internal validation of identities, and therefore he seems to aspire to what Manning Marable would have described as a 'radical democratic multiculturalism'.<sup>195</sup> This can be defined by its emphasis on 'the parallels between the cultural experiences of America's minority groups with oppressed people throughout the world' since this involves generating discussions about power inequalities and the potential means to restructure political and cultural power.<sup>196</sup> This might seem contradictory given Reed's identification

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<sup>191</sup> Robert Elliot Fox describes this as, 'a space for blackness to reinterpret itself'. See *Conscientious Sorcerers: The Black Postmodernist Fiction of LeRoi Jones, Ishmael Reed, and Samuel R. Delaney* (New York, Connecticut and London: Greenwood, 1987), p. 6-7.

<sup>192</sup> Cannon and others, 'A Gathering of the Tribes: Conversation with Ishmael Reed' 1995, p. 373.

<sup>193</sup> Reed, 'Foreword' in *African American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology*, ed. by Al Young (Berkeley: Harper Collins, 1996), p. xi.

<sup>194</sup> Reed, *MultiAmerica: Essays on Cultural War and Cultural Peace* (1997), p. xxii.

<sup>195</sup> Marable, *Beyond Black and White*, p. 119.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 123-124. Marable identifies four types of multiculturalism: 'Corporate, Liberal, Racial essentialism, and radical democratic essentialism. See pages 119-125. The first form is concerned with economic forces while

with Afrocentrism which Marable has also classified as type of multiculturalism, but we have to consider Reed within the context of genuinely wishing to promote respect for the cultural demands and exchanges within diverse communities. It is this particular number of Reed's commitments which has led Christopher Shinn to describe Reed as propounding a form of 'discrepant multiculturalism' at best.<sup>197</sup> This implies that Reed will support a force that will always be dedicated to American pluralism though he will always remain 'committed politically to the margins'.<sup>198</sup> Indeed this classification is a tremendously useful one as it attempts to precisely calibrate the level of Reed's commitment, which on an artistic front is very significant indeed.

I would maintain that the nineteen seventies were pivotal in establishing a multicultural agenda for Reed when a series of culturally diverse writers offered him the opportunity to foster awareness of different cultures. In 1970 he published *19 Necromancers from Now*, a multicultural anthology, and in 1976 he co-founded the Before Columbus Foundation in order to promote multi-ethnic literature so that 'writers from different backgrounds would not be segregated from each other, but would team-teach poetry and prose' to present 'students with the varieties of literature' produced in America.<sup>199</sup> With the aid of a grant from the Californian Arts Council Reed sought out a number of collaborators to publish the multicultural anthology, *Calafia*, with the aim of bringing 'together the poetry of different Californian cultures under one roof'.<sup>200</sup> His novel *Flight to Canada*, published in the same year, registered Reed's interest in the mythology of the Tlingit Indians which proved to be the catalyst for an invitation to visit Alaska from individuals of the Tlingit tribe in the northwest. This resulted in the essay, 'God Made Alaska for the Indians', a keynote work, that later led to a collection of essays by the same name. Reed records that this took place in 1979 which was the beginning of a period in which he developed contacts with several writers from different ethnic groups.<sup>201</sup> In his first essay collection *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*, Reed explored his fascination with this city as a prime example of a workable urban

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the second emphasizes aesthetics and cultural diversity, but not the inequalities of power and resources. These categories do not really apply to Reed, whereas the issue of racial essentialism has been addressed earlier.

<sup>197</sup> Shinn, 'The Art of War: Ishmael Reed and Frank Chin and the U.S. Black-Asian Alliance of multicultural Satire', p. 71

<sup>198</sup> Ibid..

<sup>199</sup> Reed, *Writin' is Fightin'* (1990), p. 119. Reed's co-founders were Bob Callahan and Victor Cruz who represented Irish and Spanish American interests.

<sup>200</sup> Reed, 'Calafia: The California Poetry' in 'Ishmael Reed's Multi-Culture: The Production of Cultural Perspective' by Sharon Jesse in *MELUS*, 13 (1986), 5-14 (p. 5).

<sup>201</sup> The essay, 'God Made Alaska for the Indians' appeared in the book of essays with the same name in 1982. These points appear in his review of his literary career in *The Reed Reader* (2000). See pages xxvii-xxx.

multiculturalism with its syncretistic elements of vodun, the Catholic worship of saints, blues and jazz music, Cajun, gumbo and southern culinary styles. As these associations burgeoned his world view of America as a nation thriving on cultural exchange crystallized and Reed seemed to bask in the sheer knowledge and mixing of different cultures on an egalitarian basis. He borrows the term ‘horizontal integration’ to best express an America where people from different groups will be deemed equal to one another.<sup>202</sup> Later he admitted to a frustration in his role as a creative writing tutor since there were no literary textbooks to reflect the ‘upheaval in American writing that’s occurred since the 1960’s’.<sup>203</sup> This propelled him to accept an offer from Harper-Collins in 1996 to act as the general editor of a *Literary Mosaic Series* that would contain ‘a truly representative sampling of African American, Native American, Hispanic American and Asian American writing at the end of this century.’<sup>204</sup>

These activities establish Reed as a driving force in awarding cultural validation to a number of pluralistic works. For example, in the series ‘Foreword’ to each Mosaic volume he writes that the series is designed to counter,

the preponderance of prose and poetry [...] written by people of similar backgrounds and sensibilities—the white settler-surrounded-by-~~infidels-and-savages~~ theme common to Euro-American literature. In these textbooks we seldom got information about how the Native Americans or the Africans felt. Female and minority writers were left out. There was slack inclusion of contemporary writers, and little space devoted to the popular American culture of our century. These textbooks seemed slavishly worshipful of the past, such that every mediocre line by a past ‘great’ was treated with reverence while the present was ignored.<sup>205</sup>

Reed’s point is that everyone should become acquainted with more than the few Europeans and European Americans covered by traditional texts, a number of whom in his view were undeserving of their literary greatness. He also strives to counter the stereotype of the ‘savage’ and ‘civilized’ attributions ascribed to the so-called primitivist Indians and colonialist Europeans. Reed is enthusiastic about presenting contributions from those who he

<sup>202</sup> Reed, *Writin’ is Fightin’* (1990), p. 119.

<sup>203</sup> Reed, *Another Day At the Front* (2003), pp. 142-143.

<sup>204</sup> Ishmael Reed, ed. ‘Foreword’, in *African American Literature: A Brief Introduction and Anthology* ed. by (Berkeley: HarperCollins College Publishers), p. x. The four volume series includes *African American Literature* edited by Al Young; *Hispanic American Literature* edited by Nick Kanellos; *Asian American Literature* edited by Shawn Wong and *Native American Literature* edited by Gerald Vizenor.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.

feels have not been given the recognition they deserve by the majority of the American populace, thus the Mosaic series depicts writings from the past, from contemporary culture and popular culture to avoid the binary of 'high' and 'low' culture so favoured by canonical works. The preface also begins to reveal his idea of what the true mosaic should be: a sense that 'one doesn't have to abandon the style of one's own tradition in order to embrace styles from other traditions' thus Reed's vision is of a 'creative give and take between artists of different cultures'.<sup>206</sup> He claims the series provides the 'antidote to [...a] version of multiculturalism' that tended to offer 'the same line-up of token ethnic writers found in the policy issue of multicultural books'.<sup>207</sup> His emphasis is therefore on an expansive range of traditional and experimental writing in the form of autobiography, fiction, poetry and drama, edited by what Reed terms as, 'the architects of a more inclusive tradition'.<sup>208</sup>

Reed's conception of the mosaic is based on a strong sense of collaboration between different communities and as a model of how this might work he appears to dispel his sense of racial essentialism in this context to foster the concept of a participative democracy. This notion foregrounds a spirit of inclusivity through representative government, a feature that also finds a strong representation in his fiction. In *Mumbo Jumbo* he creates a multi-ethnic gang, the 'Black Yellow and Red Mu'tafikah', who loot the contents of American and European museums in order to repatriate 'the archives of "mankind's" achievements' to Africa, Asia and Latin America.<sup>209</sup> Notably Reed invests this prose with the context of 'mankind's' creations which is probably meant to satirise the nineteenth century sense of 'culture' when Matthew Arnold's sense of high culture prevailed as 'the best which has been thought and said in the world'.<sup>210</sup> By implication this referred to works of Graeco-European origin coupled with the views of positivist historians who argued that the absence of writing and political organisation deprived Africans of their humanity. For Reed this was tantamount to intimating that objects from the third world could not possibly have any value.<sup>211</sup> Reed's prose implicitly raises the question of why western museums would wish to house the cultural artefacts of civilizations that were regarded as technologically primitive and inferior

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., pp. vii, x.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p. viii.

<sup>209</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, p. 15. In a footnote Reed provides the translation of 'Mu'tafikah' as 'art-nappers'.

<sup>210</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 1822-1888 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 5.

<sup>211</sup> A very useful discussion of how G. W. F. Hegel perceived black culture as the lowest stage of human development can be found in James A. Snead, 'Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture' in *Black Literature and Literary Theory* ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York and London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 62-64.



unless they showed any evidence of humanity or artistic endeavour. Indeed amongst the diverse members of the gang there is a common sense of purpose in restoration and this multicultural network becomes global as the location of works and plunder operations are meticulously plotted and timetabled from museums across the world.<sup>212</sup> So successful is this group that ‘sympathetic White students and intellectuals’ from all over Europe aid the looters and the ‘South American Mu’tafikah’ award the gift of a drinking vessel in the shape of an Inca Warrior’s head ‘to the North American branch in recognition of their work and devotion to the cause’.<sup>213</sup>

Similarly the range of cultural references in the closing pages of *Japanese by Spring* reflect Reed’s gumboesque imagination. The ‘Festival of the Lake’ in Oakland, California, attended by ‘ninety-eight thousand people’ is a soothing palliative to the prospect of a monocultural regime being imposed within the confines of the university system.<sup>214</sup> Diverse forms of food, dance, costume and music are represented in this welcome celebration of multiculturalism, so that it ‘resembles a meeting at the General Assembly of the United Nations’.<sup>215</sup> The narrator, who is also the fictional/biographical Ishmael Reed, comments, ‘this is the way the United States would look in twenty five years’, which means there is an anticipated future when there would be harmonious exchange and cordial interaction between all cultures.

We might understand these fictional tributes to be grounded in a belief that artistic endeavour is able to foster universal co-operation. Reed reserves his respect for dynamic forms of culture rather than race and one senses his openness and tolerance of difference. Reed is keen to foreground the ‘mutual experiences’ of ethnic groupings in their opposition to ‘white supremacy’ rather than the frictions that inevitably exist and he aims to find a workable definition of a common, inclusive culture within the ever changing ethnic dynamic of the States. In his introduction to the essays in *MultiAmerica* he argues that ‘those who say that the standard of an American common culture should be European are in fact the separatists’.<sup>216</sup> He believes that accepting an ethnic label can be a means of bridging the divide between one’s individual descent and voluntary affiliation in the context of a

<sup>212</sup> Many of the names of the ‘Mu’tafikah’ belie their origins: Berbelang, the leader, is an African American; ‘Tam’ is a Nigerian musician and writer; Jose Fuentes, is a Mayan seaman; Yellow Jack, a Chinese American and Thor is of Scandinavian origin.

<sup>213</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>214</sup> Reed, *Japanese by Spring* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 223.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>216</sup> Reed, ed., *Multi-America: Essays on Cultural War and Cultural Peace* (1997), p. xxii.

pluralistic society. He is certainly receptive to positive 'collaboration with different ethnic groups' on the grounds that 'we were introduced to things of our own culture that we hadn't been aware of before. I have seen parallels in their experience to ours, and we've illuminated their backgrounds as well'.<sup>217</sup>

Yet more importantly these aspects denote how Reed establishes his own take on combining his cosmopolitan values with the creed of American Exceptionalism. Previously I examined how Reed attempted to divest this concept of its constituent Puritanism, predicated on the political and moral agenda of advancing America as the 'city upon a hill'. This notion is nevertheless extremely resilient in American culture, and was embraced by Woodrow Wilson, the early twentieth century president, whose exposition was grounded in the belief that the 'force of America is the force of moral principle' and that the 'idea of America is to serve humanity'.<sup>218</sup> Also during the years of his presidency Obama has repeatedly profiled America as exceptional because it has 'a set of values' which relate to not just 'about what's good for us, but [...] about what's good for the world'.<sup>219</sup> He is of course partly referring to the exceptional equality of opportunity offered by American society where even an African American can become president. I would argue that Reed's vision has much correlation with Wilson and Obama's principle of America as the 'nation of nations', especially in the way that Reed envisages America as having the capacity to lead the way in potentially resolving the disputes about racial and ethnic inequalities. His writing agenda, for example, promotes the contribution of the 'literary state' towards 'projecting the United States as a planet-nation'.<sup>220</sup> In practice this found a place in the Before Columbus Foundation publishing house, where multi-ethnic pedagogic teams imparted a diverse diet of literature, and, figuratively in *Mumbo Jumbo*, the repatriation of artworks to their land of origin is taken up on a global basis after, in the eyes of the world, the North American group of Mu'tafikah lead the way. This is concomitant with Reed even revealing his patriotism for the United States, which is ironic

<sup>217</sup> Binder and Breinig, *American Contradictions: Interviews with Nine American Writers*, p.108.

<sup>218</sup> Woodrow Wilson, when asked to justify America's involvement in World War I in 1917 initially expounded the idea that the United States was a nation set apart by its values and principles from the rest of the world. He believed that the United States would use force only 'for the elevation of the spirit of the human race'. See 'Exceptionalism - Woodrow Wilson and American Exceptionalism' in *Encyclopedia of the New American Nation* <<http://www.americanforeignrelations.com/E-N/Exceptionalism-Woodrow-wilson-and-exceptionalism.html>> [accessed 6 August 2011]

<sup>219</sup> Ken Thomas, 'Obama defends American faith amid criticism' in May 10, 2012 <http://flcourier.com/2012/05/10/obama-defends-american-faith-amid-criticism/> [accessed 15 October 2012] (p. 1). Obama's 'set of values' implies that if any American is prepared to work hard, take responsibility then he/she can serve the community in which they live. He believes that these principles are admired throughout the world.

<sup>220</sup> Reed, *Writin' is Fightin'* (1990), pp. 113, 56, 119.

given that typically, as a member of a marginalized community, he portrays himself as an outsider. It seems that his call for multicultural participation is rooted in American intellectual thought.

## The Ethnic Contests

Reed's vision of the American mosaic as a microcosm of a potentially global multicultural democracy is utopian in many respects. It is a future projection whereas in reality the interactions of ethnic groupings are defined by diurnal conflicts greatly contrasting with the relations envisaged in Reed's 'literary state'. The artistic dimension of the mosaic has achieved many notable successes but in practice troubling frictions often come to the surface. These aspects find a place in Reed's publication of the aptly named anthology, *MultiAmerica*, (1997), where in the preface, he seems gratified to announce the inclusion of, 'the writings of Italian Americans, Irish Americans, German Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans and African Americans.'<sup>221</sup> In some respects this work is an extended celebration of Reed as the 'typical multiculturalist' who infuses the work of yet more ethnicities into one anthology, but unlike the Harper-Collins Mosaic collection, which houses a wealth of literary forms, *MultiAmerica* reverts to the language of the battlefield so the work is edited as a series of, *Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace*, invoked by the scholarly and media response to the multiculturalist agenda of higher education in the nineteen eighties and nineties. Here he inscribes a keen deliberation on what he declares to be the hegemony of monocultural values and the more concessional and co-operative ones of multiculturalism.

The lexis of war is indeed apposite if we invoke Shinn's term, 'discrepant multiculturalism', for he also made the point that, when applied to Reed, 'it is by definition combative and necessitates new strategies and tactics for this struggle in the arena of culture'.<sup>222</sup> Therefore Reed attempts to find a way of mediating between what many would see as the divisive separatism of ethnic groupings, typified by the launch of a number of ethnic studies departments in universities, and a universalism that would result in a complete erasure of differences. But even in mediation, the complexities and struggles between the spectrum of

<sup>221</sup> Reed, *The Reed Reader* (2000), p. xxvii.

<sup>222</sup> Shinn, 'The Art of War: Ishmael Reed and Frank Chin and the U.S. Black-Asian Alliance of multicultural Satire', p. 76.

ethnicities are as evident as much as Reed's celebration of them, and I propose to explore how his mosaic vision is challenged by three particular forms of ethnic conflict: through monoculturalism, assimilation and the problematics between voluntary affiliations by consent and descent. Firstly, Reed has to attack the advances of monoculturalism, and, although his antagonism for this is not new in many respects, in *Multi-America* this critique becomes his means of supporting his multicultural project. He proclaims that the monoculturalist agenda is 'essentially an anti-intellectual coalition' because of its prescriptive rejoinder to focus only on Western culture and its dominant forms of rational thought, Judaeo-Christian religion and literature.<sup>223</sup>

Fictionally Reed portrayed this issue as a master conspiracy in *Mumbo Jumbo* where the sudden outbreak of a black orientated cultural epidemic called 'Jes Grew', exemplified in the artistry of Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith, rose to challenge the overarching sway of Judaeo-Christian civilization and its representative monoculturalists, known as 'Atonists'.<sup>224</sup> The latter are the modern day heirs to the medieval Templars, whose Masonic agents Reed calls the Wallflower Order, 'a society of enforcers established when the Atonists triumphed over the West' (*MJ*, 189). They consider that not only is 'Jes Grew [...] the boll weevil eating away at the fabric of our forms our technique our aesthetic integrity' (*MJ*, 17), but also, according to the Attorney General, it 'threatens our National Security, survival and just about everything else you can think of' (*MJ*, 93). In this parody Reed communicates that black culture poses as much a danger to the Anglo-European aesthete as to the 'McArthyesque' politician battling to quell the rise of communism in the nineteen fifties. The Wallflower Order (a pun on Ivy League) conspires to be 'in control' of cultural developments all over the world by attempting to contaminate 'this Germ' (*MJ*, 17), by stamping out the dangers of the black 'tide of mud' (*MJ*, 209). The political sub-text for Reed is exposing the Anglo establishment as dated and infirm. The narrative voice warns that since 'the Atonists got rid of their spirit 1000's of years ago', the headquarters of the Wallflower Order is constructed from 'polyurethane, Polystyrene [...] plastic will soon prevail over flesh and bones. Death will have taken over' (*MJ*, 62). This establishment thrives on dead signs and clichés of a once-living culture which now misdirect and deplete America's imaginative energy. Therefore to reverse what he has termed the monocultural quality of dehumanisation, Reed

<sup>223</sup> Reed, ed. *Multi-America: Essays on Cultural War and Cultural Peace* (1997), p. xvii.

<sup>224</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, p. 15. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically after quotations in the text.

underlines the serious need to grasp and retain cultural blackness so there can be no closure. His point is that this should be one healthy component within the more diverse prospect of America's multicultural vitality that flourishes on dynamic hybridity and growth.

Secondly, Reed focuses on the way in which the apparatus of the monoculturalist movement feeds on the very idea of ethnic contests, through assimilation. In 1978 he provocatively exclaimed, 'monoculturalism is Nazism', because he intended to compare the practices of a military movement towards eradicating physical or cultural differences, with the processes of assimilation in America, and he concluded that all the ethnic conflicts occurred because, 'the problem in America is assimilation. I think the problem is the melting pot'.<sup>225</sup> He believes this is damaging to individual groups, even whites, since they are 'supposed to mold themselves' into an American ideal of whiteness, and they unlike Europeans, with their ancient culture, become 'some kind of homogenized standardized profile'.<sup>226</sup> Since Reed believes that 'whiteness is an American invention' he is effectively critiquing that aspect of American Exceptionalism, first envisaged by Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, when he posed the question, 'What then is the American, this new man?'.<sup>227</sup> When the issue of identity was so crucial in the American Revolutionary period Crèvecoeur surmised that the new American is someone who has embraced 'a new way of life [...and] government', and that 'here individuals of all races are melted into a new race of man, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims'.<sup>228</sup> Although Crèvecoeur's later letters wrote of the horrors of slaveholding in the South his idea of ethnic fusion was associated with the frequency of European patterns of immigration and settlement in the new world therefore he focused only on the white majority.<sup>229</sup> His theme of American distinctiveness, based incongruously on blandness and uniformity, is alien to Reed. The 'melting' of different peoples into one homogenous culture betrays Reed's mosaic vision on the grounds that he finds this process 'dehumanizing'. His vision is one that supports group

<sup>225</sup> Callahan, and others, 'Before Columbus Interview', 1978, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 167-168.

<sup>226</sup> Moore, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed' 1983, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, p. 224. ; In 1917, the president, Theodore Roosevelt, insisted on 'the swift assimilation of aliens' into the 'language and culture that has come down to us from the builders of this republic' at a time when national unity seemed imperative in the light of America's entry into the first World War. See Bikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>227</sup> Moore, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed' 1983, p. 223; Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, 'Letters from an American Farmer', Letter III, 1782 <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/CREV/home.html>> [accessed August 3 2011]

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Crèvecoeur was the first to raise this issue of 'melting' different peoples within one common culture but the term "melting pot" came into use in the United States in 1908, after the premiere of the play *The Melting Pot* by Israel Zangwill.

identities on the grounds that individual cultures are too valuable to lose and this fuels his pledge to counter the perception of America as the common culture monolith and those he describes as monoculturalists.<sup>230</sup>

Throughout his discourse on the mosaic theory of cultures Reed attempts to de-essentialise his black writing to some extent so that he can assume a number of positions. However he is so close to his theme of anti-assimilation here that he is in danger of partially essentialising multiculturalism. Indeed there are a number of key critics who offer opposing views. Vijay Prashad has noted the pitfalls about what he terms the ‘melancholic torments of minoritarianism’ which can be focused on narrow, divisive politics.<sup>231</sup> Similarly Nathan Glazer, the sociologist, wrote as recently as 1999 that ‘multiculturalism is primarily for blacks’.<sup>232</sup> He argues that multiculturalism is ‘so agitating and disturbing’ because blacks do ‘not become part of the assimilatory process’ and, that they show a sharper distinction in ‘religion, language, original nationality and culture’ from the other ethnic minorities, who, he maintains, do ‘not stay a minority for more than two or three generations’.<sup>233</sup> Glazer’s evidence is based on his observations that ethnic conflicts have little to do with immigration, or with European ethnic groups since so many of them intermarry. He also notes that most Asian and Middle Eastern migrants opt to integrate in some way. However Glazer insists that conflicts have everything to do with people of African or Caribbean descent because ‘they still show a degree of residential separation from others [...] that has no parallel’.<sup>234</sup> He is aware that these distinctions will almost certainly be challenged by the advocates of multiculturalism who argue that ‘all the “people of colour” (those who are non-white and non-European) are oppressed by the majority whites, all have had their cultures denigrated [...and] all must receive recognition and respect’, but his answer is that the view held by most Americans, regardless of ethnicity or affiliation, is that ‘it is better to be an American’.<sup>235</sup> Curiously Reed, of course, even when representing a minority is a patriot, and he expounds, ‘I know, based upon my experiences in other countries, that the United States,

<sup>230</sup> Bob Calahan, and others, ‘Before Columbus Interview’, 1978, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 161-180 (p. 168).

<sup>231</sup> Vijay Prashad, ‘Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting’ in *African American Humor, Irony and Satire: Ishmael Reed, Satirically Speaking*, p. 71.

<sup>232</sup> Nathan Glazer, ‘Multiculturalism and American Exceptionalism,’ in *Multicultural Questions* ed. by Christian Joppke and Stephen Lukes (Oxford and New York: Oxford University, 1999), pp. 183-198 (p.186). Glazer’s original ideas on assimilation were inscribed into the work, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, which he co-authored with Daniel Moynihan in 1964.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 186, 189.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, See pp. 189-191.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 191, 196.

despite its problems, is still one of the most creative, experimental, and dynamic societies in the world'.<sup>236</sup> But his insistence on rejecting a common assimilationalist culture is relentless.

Reed's answer is to provide evidence that even European ethnic groups regret their loss of contact with their heritage and this stems from his conviction that the 'so-called whites receive no reinforcement in being white because there's no white culture. There's Italian culture and French culture, but there's no white culture'.<sup>237</sup> In *Multi-America*, he proclaims the beginnings of a resistance to white supremacy and assimilation from Latinos, African/Asian and Native Americans, even from a 'growing number of "whites" [...] and 'Europeans' who 'realize that abandoning ethnic cultures for whiteness was too high a price to pay'.<sup>238</sup> Reed cites examples of such disillusionment ranging from the Mayans rebelling against the Mexican government in 1996, to an Irish American writer's conference in San Francisco in 1995, where he questioned the audience about whether 'assimilation been worth it?'.<sup>239</sup> He reveals his surprise that,

not a single member answered in the affirmative. They complained that they had to change their names to Anglo names, and they had to marry Anglos in order to get a good job. They all agree they had lost something. Perhaps [...] when the Irish left Chicago for the suburbs, they left Ireland.<sup>240</sup>

Reed records the dissatisfaction with the process of assimilation and notes that when ethnic groups lived in close quarters, almost as separatist enclaves within cities, there was more solidarity. He also details further examples of the resentment and estrangement experienced by Italian Americans and German Americans, on the grounds of their 'alleged disloyalty' by Congress and the security services during World War Two.<sup>241</sup> As an echo of Malcolm X's declaration of the 1960's as an African American wilderness period, Reed is able to empathise with the Italian American lament for not only losing their way but forgetting where they came from. This yearning from Reed is in stark opposition to the views of a critic such as Glazer, who argues that 'There will be no foreign enclaves in the United States, if the laws and common opinion can help it. All should be Americans'.<sup>242</sup> But Reed recounts these histories to firstly challenge the view held by 'common culture advocates' that 'as soon as

<sup>236</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. 52.

<sup>237</sup> Cannon and others, 'A Gathering of the Tribes: Conversation with Ishmael Reed' 1995, p. 373.

<sup>238</sup> Reed, *MultiAmerica: Essays on Cultural War and Cultural Peace* (1997), p. xviii.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xix.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> Glazer, 'Multiculturalism and American Exceptionalism' in *Multicultural Questions*, p. 196.

American Europeans passed through Ellis Island, they abandoned their heritages and rushed into the suburbs' and secondly to launch the idea that a 'new European American ethnic Renaissance' is possible.<sup>243</sup> They reinforce his statements about his American mosaic model, where distinct patterns of individual heritage appear in an overall landscape of national culture.

Reed's ideas come under more threat from a form of competitive ethnic politics that he identifies as 'The Model Minority' phenomenon.<sup>244</sup> Presumably intended to bolster ethnic pride, achievement and settlement within the US, he reports how attitudes to ethnic groups have evolved since the eighteenth century, when 'blacks were considered the "model minority" by slavers who considered them to be better workers than Native Americans and European indentured servants'.<sup>245</sup> Reed describes how this conviction radically altered by the twentieth century when 'Italian Americans were encouraged to fashion their values after those held by Irish Americans'.<sup>246</sup> To air the instability of such generalisations he records how this situation changed again by the nineteen eighties when, "'Hispanics" were held up to blacks as the model minority', but then a decade later he notes that, 'due to the large numbers entering the United States' it was 'decided that Hispanics may pose as many problems as blacks'.<sup>247</sup> In *Airing Dirty Laundry* he cites the example of the Asian American community who reportedly 'through hard work and devotion to Anglo values' proved 'that assimilation correlates with American success', but by 2003 this conviction no longer held any value and Reed draws attention to the, 'tough-love critics of blacks', who wondered why African Americans could not 'emulate the successes of Korean mom-and-pop store owners in New York' or even Jewish Americans.<sup>248</sup> Far from demonstrating positive interaction and participation these are largely images projected by a hostile media with the agenda of reinforcing a social hierarchy. The idea of a model minority is a myth in Reed's view but it presents real issues for his model of multiculturalism since it is used against African American populations in terms of denying affirmative action programmes and state and federal funding for education, health and welfare.

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., p. xx.

<sup>244</sup> Reed, *Writin' is Fightin'* (1990), p. 199.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. xii. ; *Another Day At the Front* (2003), p.131.



The fictional extension of a number of these concerns is inscribed as a sinister plot into Reed's satiric novel, *Reckless Eyeballing*, where he shows the dangers of masking one's ethnicity, to facilitate assimilation. The novel presents the rookie character 'Loathesome Larry O'Reedy, as a direct parody of the cinematic detective role 'Dirty Harry'. He is a complex construct of the tough New York Irish Cop who never takes a day's vacation from his campaign to eradicate all the ethnic minorities in the city, particularly blacks. He belongs to the family tradition initiated by his father, Captain Tim O'Reedy, who at the turn of the century beat up Irish prisoners in their paddy wagons. However, Larry's profound guilt about his violent past ultimately leads to a loathing of himself. He is haunted by the shooting of an innocent black jogger in Central Park and he is uneasy because the jogger's surname happens to be identical to his, O'Reedy. The dialogue with his son shows how troubled he is by the question of his ethnic group,

"I'm going to California, Dad. I'm going to be teaching Irish Studies." His father slowly lowered the newspaper from his face.

"Irish what?"

"Irish studies. I've been hired by a foundation that's begun an institute in ethnic studies." [...]

"And, what may I ask is that?"

"It's the study of Irish culture, history, politics, literature—" O'Reedy laughed as his lanky son stood before him dressed in a tweed jacket, green turtleneck sweater, jeans, and sneakers [...]

"What can you learn about Irishmen in a university that you can't learn down at the local gin mill?" [...]

"You hate yourself, Pop, you're Irish, yet you don't think that the Irish have produced anything worthwhile. You and your father, just carrying out the orders of people who hate you, who treat you no differently than they would a stage Irishman, a clown—" <sup>249</sup>

Although O'Reedy's son has absorbed himself fully into the life of a liberal academic the novel hints that his father has deliberately dislocated himself from his ethnicity and ancestry because of the historical perception of the Irish in the nineteenth century. At this time the Irish were associated with gang warfare and many were employed as servants, subsequently becoming known as the white slaves and underclass of society.

Noel Ignatiev, in his well-known work *How the Irish became White*, explores how the Irish and Afro-Americans developed a 'common culture of the lowly' and how they became

<sup>249</sup> Reed, *Reckless Eyeballing* (London: W.H. Allen, 1989), pp. 90-91. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically after quotations in the text.

allianced through marriage, the job market, and, in coming together in minstrelsy, stock types were generated on the early stage.<sup>250</sup> He notes that in the early years of settlement, the 'Irish were frequently referred to as "niggers turned inside out"; and the Negroes [...] were sometimes called "smoked Irish"'.<sup>251</sup> In Reed's novel, O'Reedy hides behind his whiteness for social acceptance and becomes dislocated from his past while at the same time inadvertently showing his ties to his identity by perpetuating the stereotype about the Irish as drunks and violent gangsters. However, the price of assimilation is one that is too high to pay and he dies on the day of his retirement. In a futile attempt 'to grab on to the American flagpole', O'Reedy misses his grasp, loses consciousness and in an absurdist multicultural parody of the Day of Judgement, the ghosts of his victims inclusive of Puerto Ricans, Spaniards and blacks come to collect him (*RE*, 124). The suppression of the ethnic here suggests how the American emphasis on assimilation masks an essentialist view of identity. It is predicated on a wish for individuals of Black, Celtic and other 'ethnic' origins to reject their past and assume an Anglo identity. For Reed it is the hegemonic society that 'essentialises' not its constituent ethnic groups and by making this point he appears to make an overarching case for a dynamic and plural ethnic basis to society.

The experience of the fictional O'Reedy is linked to the third aspect of tension that is one experienced by Reed on a personal basis. Reed's statement on American multiculturalism is expressed as 'the world is here'.<sup>252</sup> Thus he was intent on exploring his multi-heritage in order to thwart the drive towards assimilation and thereafter monoculturalism. He refuted the category of being uniculturally black because he wished to move beyond Alex Haley's experience of only emphasising his African identity. As expressed by Hollinger, Haley identified himself solely with Africa and so accepted 'the categories of the white oppressors' but if he had chosen to identify with Ireland, he would deny 'in effect his social solidarity with people who most shared his social destiny'.<sup>253</sup> In fact Reed hired a professional genealogist for one hundred dollars to trace his ancestry. As a result he contemplated his African, Native American and Irish descent.<sup>254</sup> In the autobiographical essays 'Black Irishman' and 'Distant Cousins', he chronicles the state of 'Franklin, that was almost admitted to the Union', with 'its population of black, Indian, and white' comprising his

<sup>250</sup> Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>252</sup> Reed, *Writin' is Fightin'* (1990), p. 56.

<sup>253</sup> Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, p. 20.

<sup>254</sup> Both essays form part of Reed's personal disclosure of his ancestry and can be found in *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993). See pp. 238-241; 266-273.

‘ancestors [...] who roamed the mountains of Tennessee for thousands of years, Irish people who left the Irish frontier in the late 1700’s, and at least one Danish woman from Stonewall, Tennessee’.<sup>255</sup> By unearthing his Native American heritage he learns of his ‘Cherokee great-grandmother’ who had been ‘spared the trip west, the Trail of Tears, during which thousands of Cherokee Indians were uprooted from their traditional homelands in Tennessee’, and also, that his grandfather ‘attended Cherokee school’.<sup>256</sup> He traces his Celtic roots through his grandmother’s memories of the south where her Irish father, Marion Shaw Coleman, was a union organiser at the local pipe works in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He was a presumed renegade because, initially his attempt to organise the workers failed and secondly, he was excommunicated from his family for marrying a Tennessee black woman. Reed’s exclamation of how, ‘the surprises wouldn’t end’, reveal an even more rooted Celtic descent when he discovers that, from his male lineage, his great-grandfather was also an Irishman, ‘born in Alabama between 1854 and 1859’.<sup>257</sup> He concludes, ‘it’s quite possible that I am a twenty-plus generation southerner’.<sup>258</sup>

Yet, when Reed physically attempts to gain some legitimacy for his own cultural identities, he finds this is not easily achievable. As a self-declared ethnic gate-crasher, he attended many diverse cultural events and, through his Celtic descent, he found himself present many times at San Francisco’s Irish Centre, by invitation from his colleague, the San Francisco poet and publisher, Bob Callahan. On one occasion, over stew and dumplings, he became aware of the long interaction of Black and Irish life and noted the speeches outlining the eight hundred year old struggle between the Irish and the British. He absorbed the points made about the overlap of British slaveholding with colonial rule in Ireland and Marcus Garvey’s telegram of congratulation to the founders of the Irish Free State. Reed perceives links in both the civil rights movements of the Irish and African Americans, particularly how the marches in Londonderry and Belfast by the nationalists recall those in Selma and Montgomery, and how the hunger-strike protests of Bobby Sands and the IRA blanket detainees, although much fiercer in many respects, were inspired by the pacifist politics of Martin Luther King. Reed is comfortably anchored by the applause of the audience at his introduction and the agreeable company, but he later recalls how,

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p. 271.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

The late humanitarian John Maher introduced me at a meeting of the Celtic Foundation as an Irish American poet. His reasoning was that if a drop of black blood made me black, why didn't a drop of Irish blood make me Irish? The people at my table—Irish American celebrities—seemed stunned [...] Feminist Dierdre English stunned both me and the audience by announcing that I was an Irish American, all right, because I was a “liar and a thief.” I then understood why her last name was English. Ms. English is ignorant of the fact that blacks and whites have been sneaking back and forth across the racial fences since they came into contact with one another in the early seventeenth century.<sup>259</sup>

Reed inscribes this event into his essay to detail how this gesture towards inclusivity is not met with universal acceptance; rather it incurs the aggressive reaction of ethnic stereotyping, because it taps into the uneasiness of some European Americans, based on not knowing where they come from. Some of the group therefore cannot tolerate the idea of having a common lineage with one who, through the evidence of his colour, is obviously descended from slaves.

Reed's personal engagement with the mosaic of identity reveals that there is little give and take between the various ethnicities. This might be said to prove Hollinger's point about paving the way for adopting 'post-ethnic' identities and that it would better indeed to achieve this by voluntary affiliation. Of course Hollinger believed 'postethnicity' would work because it 'denies neither history nor biology, nor the need for affiliations, but it does deny that history and biology provide a set of clear orders for the affiliations we have to make'.<sup>260</sup>

The problem is that in practice this is not clear cut at all. Ethnicity as a term has a wider dynamic and an ever changing nature as Sollors discusses in his work, *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986). He draws attention to the factor of 'consent' relations, which relates to law or marriage relations, invoking questions about marital choice, personal destiny and what can be derived from culture.<sup>261</sup> Reed would favour this stance given that his expectations of adoption as an honorary Irishman are based on this code of 'consent', as an a priori assumption that ethnic difference can be culturally constructed and absorbed. However Sollors, in his later study, *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1989), points out that ethnicity is 'a process', and that ethnic groups, far from being 'eternal and essential, are [...] eminently

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>260</sup> Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*, p. 13.

<sup>261</sup> Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (1986), p. 6.

pliable and unstable'.<sup>262</sup> He implies that ethnicities emerge from a constant process of cultural struggle that might often involve symbolically creating, revising and reinforcing ethnic distinctions, and, moreover that these are continually re-invented under different historical and political circumstances. From both of his publications Sollors asserts that ethnicity is not a fixed entity and to prove his point he cites instructive examples to communicate this: 'a French surname doesn't make me an expert on Beaujolais'; 'the Chinese laundry man does not learn his trade in China, there are no laundries in China' and; though the 'political construction of African-American peoplehood' can be derived from the work of 'leaders such as Edward Blyden, W. E. B. Du Bois, and [...] Marcus Garvey', black "identity" [...] may reflect current ideas from the larger culture more than the black past and its specific traditions'.<sup>263</sup>

Reed invents his Irishness not only because his lineage shows a common descent but also because he wishes to show a close alliance with this group due to their historical status. In 1978 he recalled the American history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when 'WASPS hated everybody, they figured the Irish were tramps' and this last point is important for Reed because at this time, 'the Irish are not white'.<sup>264</sup> There was evidence of co-habitation between the Irish and the blacks and the fact 'they were always chosen to do the dirty work' gave them the same status as African American slaves.<sup>265</sup> It was only the later processes of assimilation that made the Irish white which is why Reed depicts O'Reedy, the Irish detective who represses his own ethnicity to avoid that nineteenth century association with blacks even to the point of murdering them. O'Reedy suffers as a result yet 'what really' haunts him at every opportunity is the black 'jogger's name: O'Reedy, same as his' (*RE*, 9). The ghostly presence of the jogger he shot in the park is intended to suggest that O'Reedy, far from being pure Irish, may well have a black descendant himself or this is meant to highlight the practice of intermarriage between the Irish and African Americans in general. Yet when O'Reedy is in grave danger it is Brown, his black Lieutenant, who saves him leading the former to re-evaluate the presence of 'the other blacks [...and], the Hispanics' in the police force (*RE*, 123). During his retirement speech he concludes, 'now that they're here I'm wondering, hey, how did we get along without them' (*RE*, 123).

<sup>262</sup> Sollors, ed., 'Introduction', in *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1989), pp, xv, xiv.

<sup>263</sup> Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986), p. 6; Sollors, ed., 'Introduction', in *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1989), pp. xvi, xviii. Here Sollors explains that the example of the Chinese laundryman is an assertion of Lee Chew in Hamilton Holt's, *Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans* (1906).

<sup>264</sup> Callahan, and others, 'Before Columbus Interview' 1978, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, p. 172.

<sup>265</sup> Presson, 'Ishmael Reed Interview' 1988, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, p. 306.

The transformation of this fictional Irish detective is symptomatic of how throughout Reed's writing career he has attempted to cultivate new perceptions about multiculturalism and about the need to find ways of more open cultural dialogue. He advocates a harmonious future for Americans if they accept their plural heritages in the 'land of distant cousins'.<sup>266</sup> Reed remains highly optimistic and although a number of people still deny their ethnic origins and divisiveness is commonplace, he believes that multiculturalism in the form of a mosaic will always have a place because it can accord ethnic America a concept of identity that is self-negotiated and always under construction.

### **Embracing the Tensions: Cultural Nationalism *And* Multiculturalism**

Although Reed primarily regards himself as an African American promoting the views of the average black citizen he also favours workable practices of ethnic interaction. Therefore he appears to endorse *both* ethnocentrism *and* a global multiculturalism at various points in his writing. If his range of pluralistic activities promotes a sense of Multi America, where could the black experience be placed within that? It is difficult to pinpoint Reed's social vision since he appears to occupy both positions at once. Two critics have tried to explain the complexities in his stance. Robert Elliot Fox argues that Reed has been 'both Afrocentric and multicentric without contradiction' because he 'was able to go black' while, at the same time keeping 'his understanding of the mix and flow of cultures'.<sup>267</sup> Patrick McGee believes that, 'for Reed, "blackness" is a dimension of a larger process or formation that he sometimes identifies as multiculturalism'.<sup>268</sup> The latter suggests that while Reed identifies with the African American tradition, he also 'aims to produce the transnational and cross-cultural viewpoint' presented in the writings of Paul Gilroy.<sup>269</sup> Indeed Gilroy's vision of cultural hybridity through the eponym 'black atlantic' is based on the premise that the phenomenon of the African diaspora was so intertwined with the influence of western culture that both could not remain separate and monolithic. For McGee, the issue of Reed's hybridity/multiculturalism is seen in the special place awarded to 'vodun' in his writings, which he

<sup>266</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. 273.

<sup>267</sup> Robert Elliot Fox, 'Mumbo Gumbo', *Transition*, 0 (1995), 102-112 (p. 104).

<sup>268</sup> Patrick McGee, *Ishmael Reed and The Ends of Race* (London: Macmillan, 1997) p. 10.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

'uses as an antidote to the master narratives of western culture'.<sup>270</sup> Both Fox and McGee therefore imply that Reed's tendency to syncretise multiple elements, because of his awareness of the complexity and hybridity of African American ancestry, allows him to engage with a multicultural agenda so each perspective can seemingly co-exist in Reed's worldview.

Of much interest for this discussion is a point made by Stephen Howe when he initially confirmed the presence of a strong link between the separatist aspects of nationalism and Afrocentrism, only to quickly temper his view with an acute perception which merits quoting at some length,

[...] present day Afrocentrists [...] have not normally used the term "internal colony" to describe their position [...] invocations of the idea of Afro-American nationality did not necessarily involve advocacy of a political programme of nationalism, let alone separatism. Their uses were often, perhaps, mainly tactical: asserting a collective identity as a means to stake claims to greater respect, resources or power within American society, or to rally a constituency as a power base for such ambitions - not to separate from it entirely. The conception of nationality was thus nearly always a cultural one [...] This is as true of Afrocentrism as of its precursors: very few of its spokespeople appear to have any serious desire either for mass emigration to Africa or for full political and geographical separation within the Americas.<sup>271</sup>

This is significant for Reed's position, namely that an African American need not be wholly disposed towards particularism in order to be both nationalist and Afrocentrist. Indeed Howe's point about the black tactician asserting African descent in order to highlight racial inequalities for the purpose of claiming a fairer distribution of resources has much in common with Reed's pragmatically engaged racial expressions to secure social reform. Reed has made the connection himself when he confirms that he 'is interested in African psychology and mythology, just as Irish writers were interested in finding an alternative to Colonial literature' but very significantly he explains that there is 'a connection between multiculturalism and the West African processes' because 'African American religion' in the form of Hoodoo tends to 'include materials from many cultures'.<sup>272</sup> This constitutes Reed's attempt to syncretise these oppositional stances and fuse them into one cultural mosaic while he retains his minority emphasis on the periphery as a means of disrupting the mandates of

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>271</sup> Howe, *Afrocentrism*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>272</sup> Cannon and others, 'A *Gathering of the Tribes: Conversation with Ishmael Reed*' 1995, pp. 372, 374.

the white hegemony. One might say what Reed does is to conjoin the best of both possible worlds by professing an insidership that allows for American cultural unity but on an outsider basis he remains true to his roots. With this in mind I propose to examine a number of extracts from four of his novels which question whether there is a form of discrepancy here, and whether Reed's embrace of cultural nationalism can really be affiliated with the cultural mosaic.

Reed's multiculturalism and the issue of hybridity are most powerfully expressed in *Mumbo Jumbo* through the presence of voodoo or HooDoo as it is known in the novel, and this could be perceived as a postmodern desire to expose the racist underpinnings of how America conceives of itself as a white nation. In one sense the novel could be understood as a textbook for it appears with illustrations, footnotes, bibliography, dictionary definitions and charts and graphs in order to parody the documentary conventions of realism and naturalism in black literature. The text also satirises the Western conventions of the detective novel to advocate the importance of all cultures rather than the hegemony of one. Together HooDoo and Reed's inscription of jazz demonstrate both an eclecticism and syncretism in a pluralistic context. Significantly in *Mumbo Jumbo* these strands signify a break with Europe and Africa as both became American music and religion and therefore they are anarchic in their own way with mass improvisations of worship, rituals, sounds and rhythms. As a synonym for the black spirit Jes Grew pervades the novel almost as a leading character while the jazz phenomenon appears as its alter-ego. Just as the birthplace of jazz is Storyville in New Orleans, the novel commences the narrative there and this epidemic of spirit and sound quickly takes hold. People are infected with dance, 'wriggling like fish, doing something called the "Eagle Rock" and the "Sassy Bump" [...] cutting a mean "Mooche"' thus demonstrating the itinerant nature of Jazz.<sup>273</sup> Jes Grew initially identifies Charlie Parker as a major 'houngan', it moves on to touch the tenor of John Coltrane and then encourages Black Herman to write a dictionary of dreams.<sup>274</sup> The conjoined streams of jazz and voodoo are presented as the inspiring sources of black cultural vitality, a merger that is perceived humorously through the depiction of Osiris, who through Isis his sister, is identified with Erzulie, a voodoo deity. From this connection Osiris is identified as the first great jazz improviser whose experiments are seen as so successful that he receives the accolade of 'the man who did dances that caught-on'

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<sup>273</sup> Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, p. 4. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically after quotations in the text.

<sup>274</sup> A houngan is a voodoo priest whose power derives from his connections with the spirit world.



(MJ,162). After touring Egypt with his musicians he eventually travels throughout ‘the world with his International Nile Root Orchestra’ (MJ,165). In *Mumbo Jumbo* ‘Kathedral’, the home of Papa La Bas, the imagery of jazz and voodoo converge into numerous rooms with names evoking jazz history: Dark Tower, Weary Blues, Groove Bang and Jive Around. Just like Jes Grew, jazz was viewed as subversive, beginning on the margin as a defiant reinterpretation of cultural vitality. Yet jazz moves like voodoo to the centre of consciousness in *Mumbo Jumbo* so that together they signify the endless possibilities of cultural diversity.

In the novel there is a strong emphasis on the multicultural legacy of the Americas which is an echo of the views espoused by Paul Gilroy. He argues that it is not so easy to draw a line between black and white. He claims that ‘much of the precious intellectual legacy claimed by African-American intellectuals as the substance of their particularity is in fact only partly their absolute ethnic property [...] there are other claims to it which can be based on the structure of the African diaspora into the western hemisphere.’<sup>43</sup> Reed is well aware of the notion of the diaspora being differential and the issue of hybridity is seen in the special place awarded to Haiti in the novel. As the first slave colony to achieve independence, Haiti represents not only the ideal but the actual possibility of political autonomy and liberation and Reed wished to highlight this fact. When Papa La Bas is on his quest to find the Text of Jes Grew he meets Benoit Battraville on board the liner, the *Black Plume*. By using the image of a ship, Reed could be alluding to the Middle Passage, for Gilroy notes that the ship has to ‘be thought of as a cultural and political unit’, an emblem for the circulation of ideas and activists’.<sup>44</sup> It is feasible that Reed wished the reader to read the symbolism of the ‘black plume’ in this way, especially when Battraville expounds the mysteries of western civilisation. Interestingly, Von Vampton, the white negrophile imposter is captured and returned to Haiti on board this ship, taking back the mysteries of western civilization to the third world. The ship, for Reed, united Africa, Haiti, and Harlem in a ‘gumboesque’ welding of history to myth.

One senses that *Mumbo Jumbo* is aimed primarily at the conversion of a general American audience towards the acceptance of an American cultural mosaic where there could be no blinkered understanding of American racial history, and no victimization of minority

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<sup>43</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York and London: Verso, 1993), p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p.17.

cultures. In spite of this there is a resilient ethnocentric emphasis in Reed's master plan. Papa La Bas, a houngan detective figure, who is derived chiefly from African sources, delivers a thirty one page freewheeling mythical history of western civilization toward the end of the novel. Thus begins Reed's counter-narrative where the origin of culture resolutely begins in Africa, with the nomadic travels of the Egyptian prince (Osiris) into Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen (*MJ*, 161). After exploiting the 'mysteries of agriculture' throughout these lands, a fertility cult erupts in Egypt in direct opposition to the governance of Osiris's brother Set. This announces the birth and the birthplace of the creative, spontaneous energy of Jes Grew and the plot makes clear that in order to perpetuate the 'mysteries' qualified by music, dance and festival, they should be ordered into a text. This resulted in the Egyptian Book of Thoth, 'the 1<sup>st</sup> anthology written by the 1<sup>st</sup> choreographer' which inflames the tensions between Osiris (Dionysus) and Set (Apollo) (*MJ*, 164). The novel presents this conflict as a series of binary oppositions epitomized by the struggle between the Wallflower Order and the Jes Grew carriers: order versus anarchy, knowledge versus 'mumbo jumbo', light versus dark, which subtextually signifies white versus black, Europe versus Africa.

The remainder of Reed's history is devoted to tracing how the secrets of the Book of Thoth and hence voodoo are passed on, for since Jes Grew is designated as a force which 'knows no class, no race, no consciousness' it is not restricted to any particular place or time (*MJ*, 5). Therefore in Reed's mythology, the line of Pharaonic descent passes to Moses, as the adopted son of a royal dynasty in order to establish a link with Judaeo Christian myth and eventually these find their way into Greece, bringing Europe into the frame. After a number of centuries the secrets are passed to a line of descendants from the Knights Templars in the middle ages and from that point they pass to Hinckle Von Vampton, who eventually brings the book to Manhattan, where the 'symptoms of Jes Grew [...] began to rise as they sensed a potential coming together with the Text' (*MJ*, 189). At the heart of this parody is the conviction that the source of western civilisation and black spirituality and jazz lies in Africa.

Stephen Howe has noted that Egypt 'has a huge and specific emotional weight' in African American thought because scholars wished to make 'the claim that civilization was African in origin a centrepiece of their efforts to vindicate the reputation and enhance the self-esteem of African-descended peoples.'<sup>275</sup> He argues that a number of African Americans, including

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<sup>275</sup> Howe, *Afrocentrism*, p. 32.

Du Bois, tended towards a ‘romanticized enthusiasm for Africa’ because of a desire to ‘emphasize the African contribution to world civilization’, and he comments that, concomitant with this fascination in modern times, the publication of *Mumbo Jumbo* in the nineteen seventies is one of a number of literary attempts to revive the ancient mysteries of Egypt.<sup>276</sup> Given these points I would argue that Reed’s main intention is to disrupt the centre. He certainly foregrounds a strong sense of cultural nationalism in a desire to satire America and its hegemonic leadership in a way that he hopes will blend and meet with his desire for a cultural pluralism. There is no defined pattern of resolution in *Mumbo Jumbo*, the showdowns between the Wallflower Order and Jes Grew fade and leave behind the outline of an America with large separations in society. The epilogue presents La Bas in the nineteen sixties presenting a lecture on the Harlem Renaissance in the university. He is intent on drawing on his own cultural traditions and when he warms to the theme of Jes Grew, he commends that it, ‘has no end and no beginning [...] We will make our own future Text’ (*MJ*,204). This does not strike a chord with his host who commends La Bas to modernize and throw in his hat with the Atonists who, ‘need something palpable [...] a firm background in the Classics. Serious works ’ (*MJ*,217). Thus while La Bas might have ambitions for an American pluralism that in part owes its legacy to African culture, his experience tells him this in practice this will incur great struggle.

In the novel *Flight to Canada* (1976) Reed’s characterization and discourse closely interrogate how notions of race, nation and ethnicity can militate against the possibility of embracing hybrid forms of identity, by seeking to fix diaspora peoples into certain positions and indigenous peoples into others. The work is primarily a slave narrative from the point of view of Raven Quickskill who is, ‘the first one of Swille’s slaves to read, the first to write and the first to run away’.<sup>277</sup> He has to contend with two white enemies who, from Reed’s imagination, are one-dimensional types that transpose into capitalist, mafia type figures: Arthur Swille, the plantation owner of the absurd Camelot who ‘couldn’t conceive of a world without slaves. That was his grand scheme’ (*FTC*, 177) and the pirate, Yankee Jack, who is resonant of *Mumbo Jumbo*’s mercenary Hinkle Von Vampton. He owns Emancipation City or “‘Jack’s Plaza” (*FTC*, 93).<sup>278</sup> This becomes Jack’s locus operandi for appropriating and

<sup>276</sup> Ibid., pp. 52-53.

<sup>277</sup> Reed, *Flight to Canada* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), p. 23. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically after quotations in the text.

<sup>278</sup> Jack is likely to be a thinly veiled caricature of Harlem Renaissance cultist Carl Van Vechten. He was a white writer, critic, and photographer who served almost as a ‘PR’ man between Harlem and white New York.

distributing ethnic commodities. He marries the Native American Princess, Quaw Quaw Tralaralara, and capitalises upon her ethnicity for commercial gain. When she considers leaving Jack to go to Canada with her lover, Quickskill, the former sneers at her search for identity, directly warning her that she will be exposed to poverty and oppression,

Canadian parents refusing to send their children to school with 'coloreds.'  
And have you ever heard of the Mounted Police? Vicious. After those huskies, you'd welcome the bloodhounds. Like wolves. They catch the flesh and won't let go [...] And don't let the Prime Minister fool you. He may throw a Potlatch once in a while, but he's still a white man (*FTC*, 150).

This episode works as a prolepsis: racism and segregation will be found in Canada, and Reed wishes to highlight the issue that these are universal phenomena after all. The predatory canine imagery reinforces the violent and fugitive quality of life that will befall anyone of colour. Jack warns Quaw Quaw that although the Native American winter festival might be celebrated by the enlightened Prime Minister to suggest diverse cultural interests, it is a politician's sham to conceal the ethnic minorities' exclusion to the periphery of society.

Through the relationship of Quickskill and Quaw Quaw, Reed constructs a complex series of debates in the novel, which attempt to repudiate racial obsession and simultaneously question the meaning of ethnic descent. Theirs is not primarily a romantic union, instead it is usually riddled with tensions,

'You're just not broad enough, Quickskill. You're...you're too...too ethnic. You should be more universal. More universal' (95) [...] 'Race', Quaw Quaw said. 'Always race. You and Quickskill always boxing yourself in. What does race have to do with it? People are people.' (*FTC*, 150)

The novel emphasises the racial structures and experiences of the past that still seem to militate against African American inclusivity in the present even though culture is a variable dynamic that does not prescribe specific beliefs and practices. Thus Quickskill counters Quaw Quaw's views by saying, 'How can I be universal with a steel collar around my neck and my hands cuffed all the time and my feet bound? I can't be universal, gagged' (*FTC*, 95-96). His retaliation accentuates his reality: race in the material brutality of slavery. By declaring Quickskill's concern with race obsessional, Quaw Quaw establishes herself as a multiculturalist and even though the nature of universalism is one that anticipates melting ethnic divisions away as a resolution, hypocritically she enjoys the fame she receives from

her ethnic dances on college campuses and her tightrope walk over the Niagara Falls. When the free slave, Carpenter, warns her again later that in Canada ‘they beat up Chinamen and Pakistanis in the streets’ (*FTC*, 160), the novel hints at a hierarchy of subjugation, but Quaw Quaw believes that her Native American ethnicity will ensure fair treatment. These tensions are based on different cultural orientations and they appear to be structured to expose the ontological insecurities of the novel in terms of how various cultural groups might co-exist.

What is simultaneously interesting and difficult about such debates is the conflation of assumptions pinpointing culture in terms of learned behaviour while race remains controversially in the sphere of biology, signifying ‘difference’ or ‘otherness’. The debate above features Quickskill as the hard-nosed sceptic, who believes ultimately in himself and his destiny as an anti-slavery writer, in opposition to Quaw Quaw, who adopts a more liberal multicultural stance. Quickskill, in a mode somewhat reminiscent of Black Nationalism, assumes that slaves will always be unsuccessful in challenging racial constructs, and that the cultural majority will never accept black people on an equal basis. Yet Quaw Quaw, reserves for herself an idealistic optimism based on her ethnicity. These polarities have several implications. Firstly they impinge on the issue of whether a person believes racial identity is a biological reality or not. When the theorist, Walter Benn Michaels debated the issue of American identity he pointed to a pinnacle moment in the nineteen twenties when ‘citizenship in the “new nation” [...] became *essentially* racial’ and was guaranteed by whiteness.<sup>279</sup> He argues that the development of cultural identity depends on the offsetting of whiteness against otherness and that in, ‘Freeing racism from slavery, it dissolved the sectional differences between North and South [...] but] replaced them with the racial difference between black and white’.<sup>280</sup> When applied to African American culture it can indeed be argued that the forcible abduction of the original slaves from Africa meant that they were supplanted *into* the nation and were technically alien, and thus could be perceived as a threat to the homogeneity and organic unity of the state. Their identity had to be forcibly established, initially through their own efforts in penmanship, and through individual efforts to escape from slaveholders.

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<sup>279</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, ‘Race into culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity’, in *IDENTITIES*, ed. by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1995), p. 35.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

Secondly, I pose an epistemological question here: in present times does knowing the past really matter in terms of one's identity? Benn Michaels concludes that it is 'instead the ontological claim that we need to know who we are in order to know which past is ours [...] When, however we claim it as ours, we commit ourselves to the ontology of the Negro [...] and the primacy of race.'<sup>281</sup> Though Reed has argued that "'Blacks," in the United States, have a multi-ethnic heritage', thus dispelling any specific link with a racial group, he problematizes this issue in *Flight to Canada* so that Quaw Quaw affords herself the luxury of a non-racial perspective. When she tries to bury the issue of race within the 'all people are the same' notion, she might be speaking for Reed who is emphatic that 'the real black aesthetic is international and multicultural'.<sup>282</sup> But to complicate this issue Reed inscribes the question of why Native Americanism could signify acceptance of heritage and indigenous cultural form, as the 'exotic of the new feudalism' (*FTC*, 96), when racial otherness is still enshrined in the African American experience. Indeed Quickskill rounds on her posturing double standards, 'Whenever someone confuses you with some other race, why don't you tell them you don't care about race [...] and that you don't identify with any group. Ha' (*FTC*, 165). Her ethnicity might be evidence of America's plural culture but Quickskill's identity remains rooted in the past in racial terms. Although Reed might be an active proponent of cultural pluralism these double perspectives seems to suggest that any erasure of racism is nothing less than utopian.

Thirdly, as Christine Levecq has insightfully observed, 'the problem of combining cultural pluralism within American cultural nationalism is [...] inherent in any analysis of American culture along ethnic rather than racial lines.'<sup>283</sup> The former might signify limitless possibilities which enable Quaw Quaw, for instance, to 'become an international event' travelling to far flung places such as 'Trinidad, Majorca and Sausalito' (*FTC*, 12-13) but Quickskill's activities remained confined by racist practices. Significantly these polarities were aired much later in Reed's work *MultiAmerica*, when Reed approvingly quotes from T. S. Eliot's essay, 'American literature and Language': 'And though it is only too easy for a writer to be local without being universal, I doubt whether a poet or novelist can be universal without being local too'.<sup>284</sup> This apparently reinforces Reed's model of the cultural mosaic where one might retain one's ethnicity within a larger diversity, but by the end of *Flight to*

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>282</sup> Zamir, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1988, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, p. 291.

<sup>283</sup> Christine Levecq, 'Nation, Race and Postmodern Gestures in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 35 (2002), 281-298 (p. 296).

<sup>284</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'American Literature and Language', in *Multi-America* (1997) ed., by Ishmael Reed, p. xxi.

*Canada* it is clear from Quaw Quaw's fury, that her universalism has ultimately acceded to Quickskill's racial and therefore localised way of thinking. Much to Quickskill's disgust he is subject to even further restrictions. At an anti-slavery lecture in Buffalo, he felt the hostility of the audience because they 'wanted more fire' (FTC, 144) in his performance. Angrily he countered that slaves, 'often in subtle ways enslaved each other' and that they 'judged other slaves like the auctioneer and his clients judged them [...] Slaves held each other in bondage' (FTC, 144). This is Reed's indictment of the narrow-minded black nationalism that he has always regarded to be as insidious as general patterns of racial thinking. But, in spite of this the novel leaves one in part agreement with Christine Levecq's comment that Reed's attempt 'to combine a multicultural desire with forms of American cultural nationalism' gives rise to a hope that 'a cultural pluralism that will transcend separatism and [...] meet in the higher regions of a national common culture'.<sup>285</sup> Yet throughout *Flight to Canada* Reed implies that slavery never really ended to counter Quaw Quaw's cant that 'slavery was a state of mind, metaphysical' (FTC, 95). The debates between Quickskill and Quaw Quaw show that the desire to free African Americans from the fixed essentialism of 'race' proved almost impossible in spite of their enforced acculturation into American values and beliefs. Reed's hopes for a cultural mosaic remain bound to propounding his sense of nationalism here due to the fact that America's identity has been founded on racism.

In the run-up to the publication of Reed's seventh novel, *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986), he announced that it would be 'basically about the parallelism between the Jewish and African American experiences' while seven years later, against the backdrop of the acrimonious state of black-Jewish relations, he confirmed that it was his intention to expose 'the absurdity of the Jewish-black feud' in this novel.<sup>286</sup> His more recent statement evolved because of an article published by Gates in *The New York Times* in 1992 stating that anti-Semitism 'has been on the rise among black Americans'.<sup>287</sup> At that time his views generated a huge debate among African American scholars in which Gates and West generally concluded that black-Jewish relations had, 'reached a nadir [...] since the late sixties' while others, including Reed and the scholar Henrik Clarke, issued counter arguments that this was untrue.<sup>288</sup> Of

<sup>285</sup> Levecq, 'Nation, Race and Postmodern Gestures in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*', p. 296.

<sup>286</sup> Mel Watkins, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed', 1985, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 245-257 (p. 254); Reed, 'Is There a Black Jewish-Feud?' in *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), pp. 33-42 (p. 41).

<sup>287</sup> Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., 'Black Demagogues and Pseudo-Scholars', *The New York Times*, OP-ED, July 20, 1992 in <<http://www.raceandhistory.com/historicviews/gates22.htm>> [accessed 21 October 2011]

<sup>288</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 71.; John Henrik Clarke, *A Dissenting View*, <[http://www.africawithin.com/clarke/clarke\\_response.htm](http://www.africawithin.com/clarke/clarke_response.htm)> [accessed 21 October 2011]

pertinence to this discussion are not so much the details of this acrimonious name calling but the way in which Reed keenly appraises the place of the Jews in America both from a historical and an ethnic/universalist perspective. He reveals that he consciously depicts ‘black characters who mouth certain arguments—some of them anti-Semitic and others pro-Semitic [...] heard from black New York intellectuals’.<sup>289</sup> In *Reckless Eyeballing* Jews and blacks are in conversation with each other, and this offers Reed the opportunity to simultaneously insult and empathise with Jews, a paradoxical feature that is alluded to in the novel as ‘two-headedness’ (*RE*, 147).

The novel is set in a literary context where the protagonist, Ian Ball, a struggling African American playwright, attempts to take his play, *Reckless Eyeballing*, to Broadway. His encounters with two black writers, Jake Brashford and Randy Shrank, constitute the most anti-Semitic moments of the text. Brashford attempts to tutor Ball but instead he reveals his frustration about the current state of playwriting because,

The Jews have stolen all of the black material so there’s nothing for me to write about. Every time you turn on the TV or go the movies or read a new play or novel, there’s some Jewish writer, director, or producer who thinks he knows more about niggers than they know about themselves, and who’s cashing in on the need of Americans to consume the black style without having anything to do with niggers [...] We’re just a natural resource to them. Their views of us haven’t changed since the days of slavery (*RE*, 30).

These accusations establish a historical context for the antipathy between blacks and Jews. Cornel West claims that, ‘like other European immigrants, Jews for the most part became complicitous with the American racial caste system’, because although some might have had some empathy for the plight of oppressed African Americans the majority preferred to avoid any prospect of antagonism themselves by buying into the widespread use of racial chauvinism in order to gain a foothold into American society.<sup>290</sup> The second aspect of Brashford’s complaint arises from the Jewish cultural and literary appropriation of black style in a manner that is meant to echo the high handed methods of the original western colonizers. In Brashford’s estimation Jews are the modern day slave masters, the commoditizers and consumers of African American ethnics, presented here as the white hegemonic Von

<sup>289</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. 41.

<sup>290</sup> West, *Race Matters*, p. 72.



Vamptons and Yankee Jacks schematizing for power and control.<sup>291</sup> Brashford's accusation is designed to highlight the remarkable success of Jews in achieving an upward mobility in American society, and certainly it is possible to distinguish the 'high visibility of Jews in the upper reaches of the academy, journalism, the entertainment industry, and the professions'. According to West many blacks would perceive Jewish ascendancy as 'less as a result of hard work and success fairly won [...but] more of a matter of favoritism and nepotism'.<sup>292</sup> Part of the problem might be, according to Glazer, that Jews consider themselves to be a 'minority in numbers [...] because of their history, and occasional bouts of anti-Semitism [...] but in the minds of everyone else [...] they are now part of the majority'.<sup>293</sup> This partly explains the pervasive generalizations and stereotypes imposed on Jews that inevitably harbour deep enmities and in Reed's case could also be conditioned by his personal legacy of resentment towards east coast reviewing circles and publishing houses.

Brashford's extremist attitude is later rationalised by his wife, Delilah, who explains that his, 'anti-Semitic tirade [...] always happens when he's drunk or feeling sorry [for] himself. It's crazy because I'm Jewish and he has a Jewish son. He's trying to write a play of universal values but everywhere he turns, he runs into ethnicity' (*RE*, 117). In fact Brashford's attitude puzzles Ball to the extent that he wonders at the former's praise of their friend, Jim Minsk, when, 'he knew he was Jewish. How could Brashford have it both ways, put Jews down for an hour or so and then praise one?' (*RE*, 32). Later he commends Minsk as, 'one of the best directors on the New York scene' (*RE*, 46). Brashford's attitude to his wife's ethnicity and his friendship with Minsk provide some of the best examples of two-headedness in the novel, thus showing the ambivalence of Reed's perceptions towards this ethnic group, as we perceive his broadside against the extreme difficulties people run into when they abandon their ethnic roots in deference to the pressure from American society. The consequence is that, just like the detective figure, O'Reedy, they become capable of the worst kind of bigotry and ethnic generalizations. Even Minsk it seems is hardly anxious to foreground his Jewishness, preferring like Brashford, 'to argue about universality and the minimal importance of ethnicity' (*RE*, 14). Yet conversely, Minsk might be prepared to forego his ethnicity, but he nevertheless talks of the older generation who 'would read and discuss the newspapers and talk about the old days in Russia', and how his father 'wrote poetry in

<sup>291</sup> Hinkle Von Vampton and the pirate Yankee Jack appear as manipulative traders of ethnicity in Reed's earlier novels *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Flight to Canada* respectively.

<sup>292</sup> West, *Race Matters*, p. 77.

<sup>293</sup> Glazer, *Multicultural Questions*, pp. 188-189.

Yiddish', clinging to the 'old ways while everybody else became assimilated' (*RE*, 15-16). It is possible that many Jews reject their background because the past is too painful but the rejection of the ethnic is clearly perceived by many individuals as a route to success and is derived from the American value placed on assimilation and universalism. These examples also imply that the forsaking of one's ethnicity is doubly detrimental when individuals also abandon their ethnic literature for this becomes a reality that threatens to overwhelm their identity. The result is a two-headedness that leaves individuals broken and unhappy whereas the older generations who perpetuate their links with their original customs derive a more ordered, if unfashionable, way of life.

One suspects that the reader is meant to exercise historical empathy when Minsk announces, 'the Europeans were massacring Jews before they went into Africa after the blacks' (*RE*, 15).<sup>294</sup> Ball contends that, 'all of the Jews over here seem to be eating good. Nobody's herding them into ghettos' (*RE*, 15). This form of inter-ethnic resentment had already surfaced ten years earlier in *Flight to Canada*, when Reed similarly juxtaposed these views in a furious argument between Raven Quickskill and Mel Leer, the Russian Jew:

'Your people think that you corner the market on the business of atrocity. My relatives were dragged through the streets of St. Petersburg weren't permitted to go to school in Moscow, were pogrommed in Poland' [...] 'Nobody has suffered as much as my people,' says Quickskill calmly' [...] 'We suffered under the hateful Czar Nicholas!' 'We suffered under Swille and Legree, the most notorious Masters in the annals of slavery!' (*RE*, 67-68)

In Reed's novels African Americans and Jews are pitted against one another to bring forth counter claims about who has suffered the most intense form of physical, emotional and economic deprivation. The argument between Quickskill and Leer is meant to be an echo of the holocaust from the twentieth century in which the generally accepted figure for the number of Jewish deaths is six million. This vexed form of competition is also implicit in the epigraph to the novel *Beloved*, which reads as 'sixty million or more'.<sup>295</sup> Here Toni Morrison implies that slavery was a black holocaust, a tragic phenomenon beyond the scale of the

<sup>294</sup> This rests on the extreme anti-Semitism to be found in medieval and modern European culture, from the Jewish massacres during the Crusades in the thirteenth century to the attempted genocide of Jews during the Nazi occupation of central Europe during the first half of the twentieth century.

<sup>295</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 1997).

atrocities suffered by those victims of European history.<sup>296</sup> It is clear from these examples that in many respects Jews are regarded in a different category to other ethnic groups although both African Americans and Jews both suffered extreme cruelty, degradation and huge loss of life in the hands of brutal and oppressive regimes. Even in this extreme ethical context an atmosphere of mistrust and contempt pervades specific group interests. Yet historically through the examples of Jewish slavery in the Book of Exodus from biblical times and through the political work of Du Bois and Martin Luther King in the twentieth century many sympathetic and supportive links were forged between African Americans and Jews.<sup>297</sup> Reed allows the plight of white European Jews to surface in these furious dialogues because whether minority groups have been subject to voluntary immigration, enforced migration or colonization he is prepared to highlight their competing claims for suffering and enslavement. He portrays the movements of people between countries to exemplify his larger purpose of portraying the diaspora as part of the multicultural legacy of the Americas.

The multi-perspectival frame of this novel gives Reed the opportunity to re-invigorate the once strong relationship between blacks and Jews. This is partly achieved through the character of Minsk, who at least wishes to explode the value judgements and set the record straight by announcing, 'I just hate misinformation [...] the Jews own the media [...] the Jews own this, the Jews own that. They just libel Jews with that shit [...] the same shit they use against you blacks' (*RE*, 16). This remark is almost prescient in the light of the dispute between Gates and other leading African American intellectuals in later years. In the essay, 'Is There a Black-Jewish Feud?', Reed challenges Gates on a similar charge of accuracy. He contends that Gates's article was issued from a false premise, 'I checked with Jack Cohen, assistant director of the San Francisco Anti-Defamation League, who told me that anti-Semitism rose by 11 per cent between 1990 and 1991 [...] later in 1992, the statistics revealed that contrary to what Gates said, anti-Semitism among blacks had declined since 1964'.<sup>298</sup> Reed is not prepared to see the alternative view here, for so fervent is his attempt to

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<sup>296</sup> It is highly likely that the number 60 million is meant to remind the reader of the deaths of 6 million Jews during World War Two. The number 60 million points to the historical fact of the Middle Passage, though Morrison learned from historians that this was conservative figure. The number of deaths, estimated to be nearer to 200 million, was thought to be deemed unworthy of recording by academic historians in the nineteenth century due to the status of African slaves in America. This is still a little known fact in comparison to the official historical recognition of the horrors of the Jewish Holocaust.

<sup>297</sup> For a more detailed discussion see West, *Race Matters*, p. 72, and, Clarke, *A Dissenting View*, <[http://www.africawithin.com/clarke/clarke\\_response.htm](http://www.africawithin.com/clarke/clarke_response.htm)> [accessed 21 October 2011]

<sup>298</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), pp. 33-34. Reed adds that, 'Why my friend Gates—one of the nation's most publicised scholars—would make such an assertion without checking the facts, and why the *New York*

counter Gates by ascertaining the facts that he becomes mired in detail in some respects. On the national stage Robert Elliot Fox points out that it is 'important that concerned African Americans refuse to ignore or to tolerate anti-Semitism, or other forms of prejudice in their midst'.<sup>299</sup> The latter believes that Reed, while an intrepid spokesperson for the black community, has overreacted in this case.

Indeed Reed believes that it is most counter-productive to focus on alleged black expressions of anti-Semitism when actually this has its basis within the history of western culture. In the undercurrent of violence that pervades *Reckless Eyeballing* it is not blacks who threaten the welfare of Jews, for when Minsk is invited to Mary Phegan College in the south a grotesque fate awaits him from white fundamentalists. He is lured to present himself as 'a celebrity spectator at an annual play performed by [...] the drama department since 1912' (*RE*, 35), but Minsk becomes the sacrificial victim who is beaten to death in a surreal ceremony designed to eradicate the Jews as the culprits implicated in the killing of Christ. With gallows like humour this scene could be a re-enactment of the Leo Frank trial and lynching in Georgia in 1915.<sup>300</sup> The significance of this event is vital to Reed who argues that in spite of the disbelief shown by some of his readers, 'there are regions of the country where people still embrace medieval attitudes toward Jews, and to blame anti-Semitism solely on blacks is to engage in similar medieval thinking'.<sup>301</sup> According to Reed it is the danger from the white hegemony that threatens the inter-ethnic alliances and he has this in mind when he states that, 'Jewish Americans and black Americans face far more problems from members of "white" ethnic groups than from each other'.<sup>302</sup>

The tirade of the character Randy Shrank, whose status has been reduced to a doorman, is further fuel for thought,

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*Times* would fail to check his implication that the last vestiges of anti-Semitism exist only among African Americans is puzzling [...] Every time I've submitted an article to the *Times*, it has been fact-checked to death'.

<sup>299</sup> Fox, 'Mumbo Gumbo', *Transition*, pp. 111-112

<sup>300</sup> Adam Zachary Newton, *Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), p. 153. Leo Frank was a Jewish-American factory superintendent who was convicted in 1913, for murdering one of his factory workers, 13-year-old Mary Phagan. His trial became the focus of powerful class, regional and political interests. When he was found guilty and sentenced to death there was much celebration which turned into a public outcry as the Governor protested there had been a miscarriage of justice. Consequently the sentence was changed to life imprisonment. Frank was later kidnapped from prison by an armed mob, known as the 'Knights of Mary Phagan' who drove him to Frey's Gin, near Phagan's home in Marietta, and lynched him.

<sup>301</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. 42.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

The Jews over here ain't the real Jews anyway [...] How are these Hymies over here supposed to be Jews when Abraham was a black man who fucked black women and had babies by them? [...] Just like the Jew. The Black people invented Judaism and then these Europeans take it over and water it down into some stale crossover religion. Next the white Jews say they the only Jews and the original Jews (*RE*, 56).

This scathingly hostile rant towards American Jews is the prelude to yet another example of 'two-headedness' for when Shrank encounters the wealthy and influential Epsteins at the front of their apartment block, he opens the door for them in a most 'gushingly' (*RE*, 57) sycophantic manner. Shrank's sterile generalization in many ways provides that Afrocentric outlook, which was first aired by Reed through Papa La Bas in *Mumbo Jumbo*. His observation is that all Jews ultimately owe their lineage to Abraham who is linked to the genetic pool of Africa so there may be a connection between Jews and blacks that goes beyond the mirrored experience of annihilation, exile and diaspora. This allows Reed to establish a common link between the two minorities, for in this context the adjective 'black' is meant to denote origins and an ancient rootedness beyond the usual pejorative association of colour. However, Adam Newton has pointed out that unlike the term 'black', the word Jew, is actually, 'a proper name linked to [...] a chain of familial descent', though there are indeed multiple shades of black, many of which might be applied to the Jews of the diaspora.<sup>303</sup> He points to the configuration of a complex asymmetry between the two groups through the fact of the arrivals of 'Blacks (as slaves) and Jews (as merchants) onto North American soil'.<sup>304</sup> While blacks tilled the soil, the Jews 'were of the city' and were able to muster a more fortuitous connection with the American dream.<sup>305</sup> Nevertheless Newton accepts that in the past a connection between the two groups was established that foregrounded their complex entanglement in American history and culture.

Throughout this novel Reed's portrayal of the Jews is parodic and his stance often seems contradictory. In some ways he could be said to present a case for understanding American Jews as a metaphor for the white hegemony, but at the same time he seems to link them with

<sup>303</sup> Ibid. The word is derived from the Hebrew Yehudi (Judean) referring to a number of patriarchal tribes residing in this area of the Middle East.

<sup>304</sup> Newton, *Facing Black and Jew: Literature as Public Space in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 17. Newton explains that a group of Portugese Jews from Brazil settled in New Amsterdam in 1654; Blacks first arrived in the Virginian colony on 1619. Apart from American history, anti-Semitism has been endemic to the European past of Jews, resting on religious and social hatred, for being generally regarded as culpable in the arrest, trial and execution of Christ.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

the blacks in their historical struggle for equality and recognition. He interrogates black /Jewish relations by allowing them to engage in ethnic discourse that is often sympathetic, but at other times it focuses on those very stereotypes that threaten to undermine any sense of harmony. By continually foregrounding the phenomenon of 'two-headedness', in no sense does Reed deflect the charges of black anti-Semitism. He presents the very real and complex tissue of relations between these two ethnic groups and it could be argued that this is a form of discrepant multiculturalism. Rather than accept the anti-Semitic slurs against blacks that had presented themselves since the nineteen sixties he exposes the clashes in order to understand them and he strives to re-vitalize the cultural debates. Ultimately he seeks to weave the Jews into his multicultural tapestry, but always with the coda that African Americans and Jews share common black ancestors who have always been fundamental to this affiliation.

With the publication of Reed's ninth novel, *Japanese by Spring*, in 1993, he inscribes a strong sense of the heated debates that took place in American academia about the meaning of multiculturalism in the nineteen eighties and nineties. Ambivalent attitudes towards multiculturalism emerge. It comes to appear at once as a problem and a potential solution to a divided culture; Reed provides a contrast between the exclusivity of monoculturalism and the more inclusive agenda of multiculturalism. The perennial metaphor of battle emerges in the novel as Reed draws attention to the media coverage about universities which consists of 'telling lies about diversity [...] they do a quick tour of the campus and decide that it's undergoing a black takeover'.<sup>306</sup> The plot evolves as Chappie Puttbutt, a junior black professor, attempts to gain tenure at the mainly white Jack London College in Oakland, California, where the president was hired 'because he vowed to put an end to capricious demands for a global university' (*JBS*, 41).<sup>307</sup> In the face of Jack London's 'values of the West' (*JBS*, 41), where Chappie encounters racism from every aspect of the institution, he takes a pragmatic decision to suppress his ethnic identity in order to improve his long term employment prospects. This exposes a problematic white power structure that could almost

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<sup>306</sup> Reed, *Japanese by Spring* (1996), p. 131. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically after quotations in the text.

<sup>307</sup> The college is aptly named after the white author Jack London, who was a socialist and famed for his novels, *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*. Many of his critics charged him with racism after he wrote an essay in 1904 entitled, 'The Yellow Peril', which aired a number of Californian concerns about Asian immigration. A year later this theme was also the subject of a story called 'The Unparalleled Invasion'. London was highly critical of Asians and believed that China posed a threat to world stability because of the potential of its ever increasing population to colonize its close neighbours with the intention of world domination.

belong to the Civil Rights era, thus typically it is Reed's elevation of the ideology on racism that subordinates the plot.

Although Chappie is a former Black Panther he distances himself from his black associates to become 'a black pathology merchant' who 'no longer suffered from the double consciousness that Du Bois spoke of' (*JBS*, 10). Inconsiderately he refuses to declare any prejudicial acts against black students as racist and, echoing the two-headedness that was so prevalent in *Reckless Eyeballing*, he becomes a campaigner for white chauvinism,

Blacks students, and indeed black faculty should stop their confrontational tactics [...] They should stop worrying these poor whites with their excessive demands [...] Affirmative Action. Quotas [...] 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's 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' (*JBS*, 6-7).

By airing this propaganda through Chappie, Reed deliberately uses him as a spokesperson for the current and very trenchant debates about minorities. Glazer, points out that when minority status became a legal category in the late nineteen sixties it encouraged affirmative action initially, 'to raise the economic and educational level of blacks' but in 1999 Glazer felt this was a mistake since many African Americans had not taken advantage of this and he gives the example of an educational failing in Reed's hometown of Oakland.<sup>308</sup> Glazer notes that a decision was made for teachers to take account of lower-class black English in their teaching, and to treat this as a separate language. He records that this policy was denounced by many black leaders because it further exacerbated the 'remarkable degree of [...linguistic] separation between inner-city blacks and the rest of the population'.<sup>309</sup> Glazer concludes that most Americans, 'perhaps even most African Americans', believe that 'multiculturalism in education is not the answer [...] they would prefer an effective education regardless of its multicultural character'.<sup>310</sup> It may well be that Reed has this type of view in mind as he plays devil's advocate by portraying blacks as the one group who could effectively harm all prospects of achieving an education of high standard and uniting the campus. Yet this

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<sup>308</sup> Glazer, 'Multiculturalism and American Exceptionalism' in *Multicultural Questions*, p. 187. He adds that government agencies added other categories including American Indians, Asians, and Hispanics groups to benefit from this status.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

reversal is really meant to show the absurdity of white claims about the preferential treatment of African Americans.

Chappie is forced to teach within three academic departments: the African American Studies, the English, and the strangely named 'Humanity' department only to discover that each are divided by rivalries that unsettle him. Two of these have a strict monocultural agenda. In the African American department Chappie encounters Charles Obi, who champions Afrocentrism through the language of Yoruba, while his colleagues accentuate the merits of Swahili; in the English section he meets a vanguard of professors whose insistence on foregrounding Shakespeare and Milton in the curriculum gives a resolutely Eurocentric approach to literature. Obi derides Puttbutt totally, 'Man, you one serious motherfucker [...] You never come to the black faculty cocktail parties, and the liberals in the Humanity department say you don't mix with them. How do you expect to get ahead of you're not collegial' (*JBS*, 31). Chappie angers Obi even further when he explicitly favours the white hegemony to such an extent that, 'on a panel about Afrocentricity' he adopts the view that 'the idea of the blacks discovering America before Columbus amounted to little more than elevated feelgoodism' (*JBS*, 69). Chappie is trapped in a difficult racial malaise and he worries that he is 'caught between the struggle between the black and white nationalists' and imagines that he might, 'write about the humiliating experience he had working in a department dominated by nationalists, Afrocentrics, and accuse them of thought control and the like' (*JBS*, 82-83). Yet since he has re-styled his image as 'a team player' (*JBS*, 18), he suppresses this impulse in his bid for tenure. Robert Hurt, the Dean of Humanity, is a type representing the white, 'post-hippie' (*JBS*, 77) radical, a former liberal sympathiser of the Civil Rights movements and though he vigorously objects, on Chappie's behalf, to the racism directed at Chappie by the white students, the latter pointedly ignores the discrimination. Chappie becomes an accommodationist who gives no other thought to ingratiating himself with the dominant ideology. Opportunistically he takes Japanese lessons from a Dr. Yamoto with the view that he might prepare himself for the anticipated ascendancy of the Japanese in the global economy, which could be understood as his covert identification with a multicultural agenda.

This form of ethnic pragmatism does not advantage Chappie in any way. He is eventually denied tenure, but due to an extraordinary turn of fate, a Japanese consortium take over the college and this board appoints none other than Chappie's Japanese tutor as the new president. As Yamoto's assistant, he is able to gain his revenge against his racist colleagues



which means that he can listen to his colleague's complaints about the Japanese management with scepticism,

'It's just going too fast. A few months ago we were wondering about whether our admissions policy was unfair to Asians. Now the Japanese have bought the school [...] What's going to happen to white men? And, not only that, they're buying think tanks, politicians. I mean, in a few years people in this country will be speaking Japanese.' I'm way ahead of you, Puttbutt thought. 'There won't be a place for us. They're already the biggest investors in California. California is going to become a suburb of Tokyo. What are they going to do with us. First, they buy Radio City Music Hall, the Empire State Building. Next thing you know, they'll be leasing the White House to the president. Hell, this is nothing about multiculturalism versus high art or Afrocentricity versus Eurocentricity. This is about civilization against barbarism.' (*JBS*, 78)

Hurt represents a voice that was formerly mindful of multicultural admissions policies which duly considered the rights of minorities, but faced with his department's closure, he exposes the replacement of the old xenophobic regime with another – ironically the Japanese takeover will be symbolic of the original problems of white on black racism. A new brand of monoculturalism, fuelled by the Japanese consortium's 'occupation' of the college, will now subject the whites to racial chauvinism. Former histories are now reversed, for it is the white Europeans who are disempowered and Hurt compares the takeover to a battle waged between the civilizing forces of the west attempting to repel the heathen hordes from the east. Thus Reed begins to reveal the dangers of replacing one monocultural regime for another.

At this point Chappie is unmoved by Hurt's tirade. He has been hand-picked by the new Japanese governance precisely because he knows some Japanese and because he looks to the future in defiance of the old regime, where only the 'whites looked out for each other in business, politics and culture' (*JBS*, 82). He is fully in accord with Yamoto's new mission 'to civilize' white Americans and 'show them that there are some things that all educated people must know in order to be culturally literate [...] that there's more to life than Captain Video' (*JBS*, 89). In practice Yamoto's strategy is to demonstrate how 'conciliatory' the Japanese might be by creating a new 'European Studies' department which collapses together the former African, Chicano, Asian-American, Native-American and African American studies departments in order to avoid the delusion the encouraged people to 'glorify some mythic past and to promote such dubious claims that Europe is the birthplace of science, religion, technology and philosophy' (*JBS*, 90). In yet another switch of sides, Chappie becomes the

spokesperson for what is a veiled attempt by the Japanese to impose an egalitarian power structure and he is exhilarated by the prospect of re-defining the cultural ethos of Jack London University. However the reader is meant to understand that he is driven by contradictory impulses: with his 'Black Panther beret lying next to his plate [...] he was endorsing the study of African ancestry, saying that each ethnic culture would receive equal status' (*JBS*, 131). Reed provides the reader with another caricature: Chappie, the revolutionary freedom fighter, goes back to his roots to instigate a counter movement against the Japanese. Some of the students believe that he is addressing the former racist structure of the college and they refer to him as 'Black Fang [...] the head nigger on campus' from whom 'the racists have to take their orders' (*JBS*, 133-134).

Matters come to a head when Chappie is informed that Dr. Yamamoto is expelling all American-born Chinese and Japanese students because he believes that they might 'be agents for the foreign devils' (*JBS*, 146).<sup>311</sup> Further rumours materialise of the routine torture of dissident students by the Japanese guards that surround the campus. Ironically these forms of humiliation are identical to those suffered by the black students and faculty members when the university was run and funded by whites. Presumably it is Reed's intention that these actions are meant to show the white university staff the error of their previous racist practices and the dangers of an enforced supremacy. All American interests now become subordinate to a Japanese supremacy and it is these aspects of the plot which have attracted several criticisms. In a review of *Japanese by Spring*, Tsunehiko Kato comments that Reed has a rather obsessive agenda, 'What troubles me about Reed's position is not that he criticizes Eurocentrists, Afrocentrists, or accommodationists among black intellectuals, but rather the way in which he creates the impression that he is the only one doing the right thing'.<sup>312</sup> Typically as an outsider representing a minority, Reed regards everyone who opposes him as hostile and in order to champion multiculturalism he utilizes a number of Japanese stereotypes. He is never prepared to concede that possibly monoculturalism in some form could ever be a valid perspective, for some might view multiculturalism as being partly responsible for perpetuating 'a deep divide in the population, separating a more prosperous

<sup>311</sup> Other bizarre events unfold when Yamamoto renames the university after Hideki Tojo, who was the prime minister of Japan during the Second World War before he was later executed for war crimes. The statue of Jack London is removed from the centre of the campus and the student union building is renamed after Isoroku Yamamoto, 'the mastermind behind the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour' (*JBS*, 137).

<sup>312</sup> Tsunehiko Kato, 'Japanese by Spring by Ishmael Reed', *MELUS*, 18 (1993), 125-127 (p. 127).

and educated majority from a less prosperous and more poorly educated minority'.<sup>313</sup> It is this sort of drive which Fox has in mind when he counters, 'the danger for Reed [...] as sometimes seems evident from his recent work, is that of self-caricature as a form of closure'.<sup>314</sup> In other words, Reed is so fixed on his path to the cultural mosaic his fictional strategy becomes, according to Fox, 'automatic' and 'repetitious'.<sup>315</sup>

Fox's observation certainly has some resonance in this novel when the American forces come to arrest Yamamoto and close down the university. As Chappie's importance as the main protagonist declines, he fades from the novel and so it takes the entrance of the author Ishmael Reed, as a fictional character, to really provide that sense of outrage with this situation of exclusivity. As in life and fiction, Reed provides that vehicle for championing multiculturalism,

The millions of dollars that were going to multiculturalism were being exploited by some whites in another way. He was told by a person in Berkeley's American Cultures office that some departments were taking the funds earmarked for multicultural courses and transferring these funds to the traditional-courses budget. This is the irony. While neoconservative Eastern intellectuals, fearful that re-ethnicity would reveal their having undergone an identity transplant (many of those who were writing angry op-eds about black culture had changed their names), were pushing back to basics and denouncing multiculturalism as an infidel movement, millions of multicultural dollars were being spent on traditional courses [...] Only in America. (*JBS*, 110)

In the course of this satire Reed reveals the paranoia about multiculturalism in American universities. He foregrounds the issue: the multicultural ideal is being severely undermined by institutional racism. The hard won fight to obtain monetary awards enabling students to take at least one Ethnic studies course in the University of California is not being upheld because concealed within the vagaries of various educational budgets, the grants are re-channelled to more traditional courses. Neo-conservatives are awarded culpability by Reed as the main enemy of multiculturalism and their *raison d'être* is based in excluding all people of colour from university programmes. The reasoning is based on the idea that historically so many minorities preferred to change their names and assimilate totally into American culture that the very idea of re-embracing ethnicities is rendered illogical. Black America is still

<sup>313</sup> Glazer, 'Multiculturalism and American Exceptionalism', in *Multicultural Questions*, p. 196.

<sup>314</sup> Fox, *Conscientious Sorcerers: The Black Postmodernist Fiction of LeRoi Jones, Ishmael Reed, and Samuel R. Delaney*, p. 6.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

viewed as the problem, the one aspect of American culture that holds back the unification of the nation.

In character Reed attempts to rectify these views and show that multiculturalism is and always has been a fundamental dimension of America's cultural fabric. Reed establishes himself as the head of, 'Glossos United, an organization of artists' (*JBS*, 127). They,

[...] were using the term 'multicultural' in the middle seventies, a few years before the right brought Dinza from India, and before its co-optation by the academic jargon planting machine. Look at it this way, using the central antidiversity argument that freedom and democracy are Western inventions. Suppose that André Derain, Maurice de Vlaminck, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris, Georges Braque, Constantin Brancusi, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Pechstein, Erich Heckel, Emil Nolde, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Franz Marc had denied themselves to borrow the art of Africa because the countries which contributed the African sculpture which influenced their art had no history of democracy [...] Or Maurice Ravel: 'I can't borrow from the rhythms of North Africa or from Le Jazz Hot, because these are marginal cultures.' Or Charlie Parker: 'I can't record Fiesta because the Latins have never experimented with a democratic form of government.' [...] If artists had paid attention to the central diversity argument, the tanka and the haiku would never have been introduced into American poetry and so on. (*JBS*, 127)

In a moment of absurd caricature, Reed lays the blame for much of the opposition to multiculturalism and ethnic studies on 'Dinza'. He is meant to represent Dinesh de Souza, the right wing republican.<sup>316</sup> In one of Reed's recent essays he classes de Souza, with being a 'Nigger Breaker' because he accused blacks of monopolising all the affirmative action programmes', and in the novel Reed denounces 'Dinza' for his 'high-pitched and high-strung profile' as a right wing critic of 'antidiversity on panels and talk shows' (*JBS*, 126-127)..<sup>317</sup> In real life of course Reed has been and is one of the most active publishers and promoters of multicultural literature and even though the publications have been perceived as minority works they have been taken up by mainstream publishing since the nineteen seventies. His fiction mirrors this fact since, 'Glossos', from the Greek etymology of 'glossolalia', can be

<sup>316</sup> Dinesh D'Souza was a policy adviser to the former Treasury Secretary, William Simon, in the George W. Bush presidency. His publications, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1991), and, *The End of Racism* (1995) allegedly fuelled the controversy of the culture wars.

<sup>317</sup> Reed, *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media: The Return of the Nigger Breakers* (2010), p. 31. Reed criticises de Souza for betraying those of his own ethnic background by ignoring the problems of child poverty in Mumbai and for 'implying that blacks are at the bottom of the genetic tree'. See pp. 30-31.

translated into English as ‘tongues’, and so Glossos United directly attempts to draw together a wide range of artist’s ‘tongues’ from American culture and further afield.

In this passage Reed highlights and attempts to counter the problematic aspects of the culture wars. Firstly, he proposes that monoculturalism cannot be offered by the detractors of multiculturalism as a feasible and sustainable alternative. Secondly, artists from all cultures even those classically European artists and Western intellectuals have drawn on African, Latin American or Far Eastern culture for their inspiration. Reed attests to the autonomy of artistic expression which is universal and immemorial pointing out that these artists were inspired by their own sense of creativity rather than being moved by ideologies and politics. Their artistry attests to the spirit of freedom and diversity. Reed does not offer any comment on art as a vehicle for political expression, rather his argument here is that American culture would have been impoverished if there had been no international and multicultural exchange of artistic and literary forms.

*Japanese by Spring* portrays a battle of conflicted interests between the monoculturalists and multiculturalists in academia. The latter is championed by issuing a glimpse of the prospect of a disquieting fascist regime in power. Unsurprisingly the Coda of *Japanese by Spring* proceeds to address the benefits of appreciating racial difference. Reed attends a service to celebrate the resurrection of the Yoruban god, Olódùmarè in a shopping mall. The narrator explains that the latter is ‘Ọlọrun [...] Owner of the Heavens’ (*JBS*, 215), an omnipotent being who ‘lies dormant in the African-American experience’ (*JBS*, 217). The inference is that this loss of contact with an ancient culture is the cause of despair in black communities, regardless of class. At this service, and later at the Festival of the Lake, Reed observes as African Americans re-connect with their original cultural underpinnings and re-juvenate their spirituality by participating in a multicultural exchange of food, clothing, dance and music. African, African American, American Indian, South American, Caribbean, Asian and European cultures are represented in this festival of diversity, attended by ‘ninety-eight thousand people’ (*JBS*, 223). Reed does not forget to particularly highlight that ‘there is a lot of Malcolm X clothing for sale’ and that vendors are ‘selling ‘African’ clothing. Shirts, sweaters, dashikis’ (*JBS*, 224). For Reed this means that ‘in the battle of multiculturalism, California has fallen to the enemy’ (*JBS*, 224) which suggests that the Neo-conservatives and those opponents to diversity have lost out. He implies that a reconciliation of all the cultures currently represented in America is possible and that this could be achievable through future

educational programmes which should make 'the condition of children' the top priority (*JBS*, 224).

Rather than give up in the face of all the grievances surrounding the culture wars Reed preaches a multiculturalism that must be free to honour the values of honesty and spirituality rather than materialism but of course he does not articulate clearly which body would take collective ownership and responsibility for this. The novel's final meaning might appear contradictory and Patrick McGee comments that 'it is almost impossible to decide whether the work criticizes the xenophobia of contemporary American culture or merely reproduces it. Probably the truth is that it does both'.<sup>318</sup> Ishmael Reed, the character, decides after discussing 'the universal appeal of Yoruba [...] that the North American "Afrocentric" faction that preaches racial hatred is probably heretical' (*JBS*, 223), which means that Reed disapproves when Afrocentrism is expounded in monocultural terms. But the final irony materialises as, 'a beautiful black butterfly with yellow spots collided with [...Reed's] chin and flew away' (*JBS*, 225). Traditionally butterflies have been symbolically associated with resurrection and re-birth. I invoke the prospect of Reed's cultural mosaic here briefly, but the overwhelming blackness of the butterfly seems to imply a resurgence of cultural nationalism that overpowers even any sense of parallel minority emphasis. This may be Reed's joke so that the blacks are in the majority while the other minorities, particularly the Japanese, appear to have been reduced to mere spots. This appears to be his double take on remaining loyal to heritage and the margins thus supporting Chin's ascription of a discrepant multiculturalism at best.

Throughout these novels Reed brings together different ethnicities and civic groups. Blacks have conversations with European whites, American Indians, Jews, and Asians in the midst of cultural and political conspiracies. His particular concerns about the ideology of racism and multiculturalism are unfolded at the expense of the narrative issues of plot and characterisation. His characters suffer variously for their pursuit of recognition and equality which means they have to expedite uncomfortable debates and interact with hostile factions. But generally they find some solace in art and culture because these offer an imaginative space to transform their experience. Thus the novels attempt to provide a bridge between that

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<sup>318</sup> McGee, *Ishmael Reed and the Ends of Race*, p. 139.

individual's experience of their unique culture and their participation within a set of multicultural perspectives. Yet Reed's championing of the black experience remains paramount and the major implication of his discourse is that 'black' cannot fit into the American mosaic. While the racial code of blackness continues to exist the multi-ethnic mosaic is incomplete. The rich multi-ethnic heritage of African Americans needs to be recognised and accepted for Reed's vision to be realized.

## Conclusion

Clearly Reed feels compelled to address the inequalities suffered by African Americans, because one of his perennial concerns is that the systematic tyranny of white domination has pre-occupied and damaged the psyche of African Americans through the ensuing generations. This has resulted in what James Tar Tsaaior describes as a particular literary tradition where 'its canon of texts inescapably operates at the interstitial intersection of an eternal struggle against cultural erasure and the determined quest to register cultural presence'.<sup>319</sup> Reed has dealt with this experience of social occlusion by drawing clamorous attention to a major paradox in American life: blacks are vilified through colour profiling and the 'one drop rule' of African descent which means that the racial divide is as prevalent as ever. Yet this takes place within a nation that celebrates its inherent multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism on the world stage.

Determining Reed's stance is difficult nonetheless because he occupies a number of contradictory subject positions and his fiction exploits a diverse number of character types in the most absurdist of worlds. Firstly, for example, there is his close correspondence between Nationalism and Afrocentrism which allows him to foreground 'blackness' and the African contribution to national life as tools to dismantle what he sees as the destructive hegemony of white America. Thus in his writing, the terms black and white operate as powerful dualisms to counter the hard hitting aspects of racial tension. Secondly, to facilitate his belief in the dynamic flux of cultures he presents an ethically laden model of the cultural mosaic. This optimistic metaphor best explains his particular view of multiculturalism as an attempt to reconcile the legacy of American indiginity, slavery and immigration and the consequent

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<sup>319</sup> James Tar Tsaaior, 'Themes in African American Literature', in *An Encyclopaedia of The Arts*, 4 (2006), 601-609 (p. 603).

creolisation of peoples through time. Reed's experience of ethnic life demonstrates that a participative mosaic is very difficult to put into practice because of the domination of the idea of a single American identity and culture that constitutes 'Americanness'. Reed's nationalist platform facilitates a way of contending with the racist reality of life on a daily basis whereas his mosaic theory of multiculturalism appears to be a goal that ethnic groups can only strive towards. His argument is that African Americans are naturally disposed to dynamic cultural exchange, because of the syncretising abilities of Hoodoo but this is a sticking point for many other ethnic groups. For blending blackness into the mosaic is not yet an option when ethnic gradations are subsumed by the racial binary of black and white.

These counter currents run conterminously through Reed's work and it is feasible to debate whether Reed is a true multiculturalist, since his Afrocentric thought is a residual presence from which he represents black minority interests. It is certainly questionable whether Reed can really bring all these perspectives together and it might be said that this occurs only on an artistic/spiritual level which looks to a future example of reconciliation rather than one that will work in the present. His pragmatic tendency is also present for he attempts to persuade those who see 'multiculturalism as a threat to Western values' by arguing that 'multiculturalism may, in the end, do more to preserve Western values than all of the defenders of Greece or Rome'.<sup>320</sup> This is a hope for the future for the model of the cultural mosaic offers no easy or certain pattern of resolution, yet ironically through a nascent sense of American Exceptionalism, Reed is convinced that America is the only nation in the world where a fully functioning multicultural state can possibly exist. Finally, let Reed have the last word, for it is one of hope,

Reforms in the media and educational establishments and the rise of a new multicultural intelligentsia will help to change the perceptions Americans of different racial and ethnic backgrounds hold of one another [...] "Can we get along?" I believe we can.<sup>321</sup>

<sup>320</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. xvii.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.



## Chapter Three:

### 'Why can't I be a Masculinist?': Reed and the Gender Wars

#### Introduction

For Reed, the black struggle for identity takes place in a society where it seems only whites are allowed to have a range of ethnic characteristics whereas African Americans are collectively subsumed under the racial category of blackness. Ultimately Reed wishes to transcend the black/white binary so that African Americans can achieve equality in a truly pluralistic nation although he realises that in order to achieve this there is an absolute necessity to establish a strong black identity. This issue has specific resonance for the interface between race and gender in the black community, a feature recognised not only by Reed but a number of black feminist theorists. Catherine Harnois expresses the point most succinctly: the 'intersecting hierarchies of race, gender and class' are 'marked by an intersectional understanding of oppression and a "legacy of struggles" against such oppression.'<sup>1</sup> Difficulties stem from the determinist view that gender, like race, is grounded in unchanging and timeless categories related to the essence of patriarchy or femininity and masculinity. Coupled with a pervasive racial imagery, this oppression still seems to be prevalent, for Marian Meyers observes that 'only white women are allowed to signify as "women"', while the black woman tends to be stereotyped as the "'oversexed-black-Jezebel'"—the mammie, the welfare cheat [...] as well as the over-achieving "black lady" who emasculates the Black males in her life.'<sup>2</sup> Similarly Reed notes that black males tend to be over-represented as criminals or potential criminals because they appear to be more threatening and violent than white people.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless Reed argues that there has been little empathy between black males and females because in the nineteen seventies black feminists,

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine E. Harnois, 'Race, Gender and the Black Woman's Standpoint', *Sociological Forum*, 25 (2010), 68-85 (p. 68). See also Marian Meyers, 'African American Women and Violence: Gender, Race and Class in the News', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 21 (2004), 95-118 (p. 97-99). ; Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Winchester and London: Pluto Press, 1982), p. 120-125.

<sup>2</sup> Meyers, 'African American Women and Violence: Gender, Race and Class in the News', p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> Reed writes that in contemporary society 'the image of blacks goes along with drugs' and that black men are routinely shot down in the street precisely because of the white fear of them. He also recounts a personal encounter with a white woman in a car park who engaged in a 'stare of terror and hate' in reaction to him, leading Reed to conclude that this was the sort of gaze 'that's gotten thousands of black men incarcerated, maimed or lynched'. See Reed, *Another Day at the Front: Dispatches from the Race War* (2003), pp. xxxix, 74.

sometimes prompted by white feminists, criticised black men publicly.<sup>4</sup> The resulting hostility between black women and men culminated in an acidic gender politics and this will be the focus of this chapter. I will consider to what extent Reed considered black feminist criticism as a form of betrayal, a critique of blackness, where black feminists were seen to undermine the black struggle for identity and cohesion.

While reflecting on the critical aftermath of his novel *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974), Reed noted,

I was confronted by a new group who would insist that the characters of their gender be treated with deference. To depart from this latest of a series of “blueprints” required of African American writers would invite the label “misogynist,” which in time would be like being called a communist in the 50’s; you couldn’t work. This new crowd had infinitely more clout than the black nationalists, and they could place stiff impediments in the path of a writer’s career.<sup>5</sup>

The consternation expressed by Reed above mirrors the intensity of his artistic feuds at the opening of his career in the nineteen sixties when he condemned the imposition of the *Black Art for Black People* rule on creative writing that exhorted black writers to present only positive portraits of African Americans.<sup>6</sup> By drawing attention to the latest ‘blueprints’, Reed refers to two developments in literary culture and publishing that saw, firstly, the ascent of a new generation of influential white New York feminists, theorists and intellectuals such as Susan Brownmiller and Gloria Steinem.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, during the second wave of feminism

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<sup>4</sup> Bell Hooks writes that from the seventies black men and women have had ‘an ongoing adversarial relationship’ that stemmed from ‘black men gaining access to male privilege that would enable them to assert power over black women. See *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston and London: Turnaround Press, 1991), p.16-18.

<sup>5</sup> Reed, *The Reed Reader*, 2000, p. xvii; Reed possibly invokes Richard Wright’s essay, ‘Blueprint for Negro Writing’ (1937). Wright attempted to validate an appropriate ideological ‘perspective’ for African-American literature. He argued that this should be socially engaged without resorting to the insular and racially compromised nature of the writings of what he referred to as the ‘so-called Harlem school of expression’ (47). See Terry Rowden, ‘Blueprint for Negro Writing’ in *Encyclopedia of African-American Literature* ed. by Wilfred D. Samuels, *African-American History Online* < <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?> > [accessed 6 October 2012]

<sup>6</sup> Reed refers to the Black Aesthetic propounded by critics such as Hoyt Fuller (the editor of *Black World*) and commended by the Black Nationalist movement. He argues that it was the East Coast Intellectuals and publishing houses who were determining trends in black writing in the nineteen fifties. See *Another Day at the Front* p. 22; ‘Interview with Ishmael Reed’, Mel Watkins, 1985 in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, ed. by Bruce Dick and Amrjit Singh (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), pp. 245-257 (p. 247).

<sup>7</sup> Gloria Steinem and Susan Brownmiller are feminists, activists and journalists. The former is the founder of *Ms. Magazine* and sits on the Advisory Board of Fairness and Accuracy of Reporting. Brownmiller is a cultural critic and is best known for her work on the politics of rape in her 1975 publication, *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape*.

there was a development of what Calvin Hernton described as, ‘the prodigious progeny of new black women authors [...] pounding the traditional sexual mountain of Afro-American Literature’.<sup>8</sup> Indeed black men found themselves confronted with a number of black women who questioned the authority and political rights of black men.<sup>9</sup> Since this time the writing career and reputation of Reed has been overshadowed by a series of gender feuds with black and white feminists on the grounds of his perceived misogyny. Both groups of feminists successfully made their mark on American print and visual culture but at that time Reed perceived them as a ‘fashionable’ trend, where the notion of a good female character in fiction was encouraged. He became infuriated that black women writers were ‘even more fashionable’ than their white counterparts, however, and he took up the mantle of opposition by contending that this is ‘all political as opposed to human’, suggesting that this blueprint was not at all representative of human experience.<sup>10</sup> Reed has compared his targeting by feminists to the Joe McCarthy era in the nineteen fifties when any American suspected of being a communist was subjected to intense scrutiny and harassment by the State. He has likened feminists to ‘fascists’, ‘divas’ and ‘academic femirazzi’ who ‘tried to run [...him] out of business’.<sup>11</sup> Reed even went so far as to claim that feminists ‘practice censorship’ and award the label of misogynist to ‘any black or white male writer who disagrees with them’ and he has written of proposed boycotts of his personal appearances at literary conferences.<sup>12</sup>

These oppositions have arisen because Gender is a cultural construct that defines how masculinity and femininity (as opposed to the biological distinction between the sexes) may ideologically support the status quo in any society. Patriarchy is a dominant power structure

<sup>8</sup> Calvin C. Hernton, ‘The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers’, *Black American Literature Forum*, 18 (1984), 139-145 (p. 140).

<sup>9</sup> The rise of the women’s movement took place in the 1960’s but it was not until the second wave of feminism in the 1970’s that attempts to theorise the wider problems of male dominance as an entrenched patriarchy got underway. A woman’s right to freedom from violence became the cornerstone of feminist enquiry. See Tim Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 55, 173; F. W. Connell notes how heterosexual men appeared to feminists as a ruling class, thus the ‘term ‘patriarchy came into widespread use around 1970’. See *Masculinities* (Oxford: Polity, 1995), pp. 41-42 .

<sup>10</sup> John Domini, ‘Ishmael Reed: A Conversation with John Domini’, 1977, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 128- 143 (p. 139).

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Dick, ‘A Conversation with Ishmael Reed’ 1997, in *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed*, pp. 228-250 (pp. 233, 246, 238).

<sup>12</sup> Reed discusses other examples of male exclusion. In an interview with Jon Ewing in 1977 Reed cites an article by Keith Mano in *Esquire*. Mano complained that the publicity department is controlled by feminists. See also the interview with Judith Moore, 1983, p. 227. Both references are to be found in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, 1995. ; At the University of Baton Rouge in the late nineteen eighties, a boycott was organised against Reed’s appearance by white feminists from the northeast. This collapsed when someone asked if any of the boycotters had read his books. See Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (New York: Atheneum Macmillan, 1989), p. xvii. See also Bruce Dick, ‘Ishmael Reed: An Interview’ 1993, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 344-356 (p. 349).

in American society, presupposing that strong, wise, virile and independent males will maintain gender codes by ruling families and females. Both white and black men have subscribed to this code and according to Hernton, 'black men have historically defined themselves as the sole interpreters of the black experience. They have set priorities, mapped out the strategies, and sought to enforce the rules'.<sup>13</sup> Indeed Reed was radicalised by the nineteen sixties Black Power and Arts movements, where he located himself within an assertive form of black masculinity constructed on notions of fearlessness and strength. Fictionally he appears to base his position within this sphere claiming in 1976 that his key male protagonists tend to reflect African or Haitian cultures. Reed confirms that, 'many of the African cultures we come from are patriarchal. So I'm just abiding by these ideas'.<sup>14</sup> He also accounts for his chauvinism because of his belief that 'the tragedy of the Afro-American male is that he can't articulate the full extent of his oppression' which is why he is determined to ask questions and write about white men's racial aggression and the critiques of feminists.<sup>15</sup> He defines the black male experience as one of marginality and 'absence'. However women as a whole have been marginalised in America because the cultural codes of femininity require submissive, homely and dependent women. Yet black women have found their experiences doubly difficult to contend with because of 'the twin burden of being Black and female', a form of 'double jeopardy' that continues to demand strength, durability and patriarchy to be able to sustain themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless Reed has been consistent in his opposition to feminism and his portrayal of Chappie Puttbutt, the young black professor, in *Japanese by Spring* (1993), is most illuminating in this respect. When Chappie is denied tenure at Jack London University because of the preferential appointment of a black woman, he decides to gain his revenge against Jack Milch, his head of department, by exclaiming, 'Well, if you're a feminist, then why can't I be a masculinist?'<sup>17</sup> This is a thinly veiled snub to Alice Walker's notion of 'womanism' for by definition a 'womanist' is meant to identify, 'a black feminist or feminist of color [...] who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers

<sup>13</sup> Hernton, 'The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers', p. 140.

<sup>14</sup> Stanley Crouch, 'Interview with Ishmael Reed', 1976, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 96-110 (pp. 103-4).

<sup>15</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p. 144.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Bryce Bjork, 'Cultural Reconstruction in the African-American Novel' in *The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place within the Community* (New York: Lang, 1992), pp. 17-30 (p. 17).

<sup>17</sup> Reed, *Japanese by Spring* (New York and London: Penguin, 1996), p. 93.

women's culture'.<sup>18</sup> Since women are therefore allowed to bond together, Chappie implies that he is absolutely vindicated in staking a claim for 'masculinism' and men's rights by fighting back against the gender repression of black men. Milch is represented as a white spokesperson for the black women's movement who is about to be sacked for his biased treatment against black men and for denying their access to academic scholarship. Both characters are types that Reed deploys to parody the tensions between black men and feminists in the gender conflict stemming from the nineteen seventies and eighties when black women were increasingly publishing novels and works of criticism. Yet does this question of being a masculinist ring true for Reed? He perennially champions the agenda for black male equality in the face of unrelenting criticism and many of his statements indicate that in 'real' life, with its urgent economic, political and social needs and consequences, it is the men who should dominate. Reed therefore could hardly be classed as a marginalist for espousing views that many other black men share about feminists. Reed also has much in common with those modern white authors such as Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and John Updike who have been confronted by American feminists for their alleged misogyny. The central question addressed in this chapter is whether the postmodernist, multicultural, humanist Reed can be reconciled with the bitterly anti-feminist, masculinist, conservative and at times patriarchal Reed.

This chapter will be arranged in three parts and in the first I seek to examine how Reed has provocatively targeted black women and feminists in his fictional representation of women. His portrayal of the relationships between black men and women and between black men and white women reveal an intense restlessness and uneasiness to the point where the critic Kathryn Hume observes, 'one assumes that Reed's blaming women for his protagonists' problems reflects a personal hang-up.'<sup>19</sup> In fact Reed's fiction is replete with countless two dimensional character types who suit his primary purpose of parody and in his own defence he argues that, 'I try to show a variety of people, blacks, and whites, good and evil, because that's, after all, what I've experienced'.<sup>20</sup> But Reed has been condemned for what many perceive as his misogynistic traits; particularly that his consistent derogation of women and feminists in his desire to privilege black men. I will draw upon feminist critiques of his

<sup>18</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (London: The Women's Press 1984), p. xi. It is likely that Walker developed this term in order to differentiate herself from the early agendas of the women's movement which did not take account of cultural difference and racism.

<sup>19</sup> Kathryn Hume, 'Ishmael Reed and the Problematics of Control', *PMLA* 108 (1993), 506-518 (p. 512).

<sup>20</sup> Domini, 'Ishmael Reed: A Conversation with John Domini', 1977, p.139

novels to explore whether Reed is intentionally misogynistic in his writing, or whether, as he claims, he is trying to defend the precarious space occupied by the black male in American culture. I propose to argue that when Reed jabs away at anyone who criticises him personally, or criticises African American men in general, he appears to negotiate with a masculinity that seems uncompromising in its attitude to women. Further I will contend that Reed does not attempt to accommodate women and their feminist struggles with any conviction.

Having analysed Reed's contentious portrayal of black women I intend to turn to the issue of how he deals with the social legacy of feminism. I am particularly interested in exploring the tensions between Reed's perception of black and white women in the critical aftermath of their feminist publications and the public denigration of black men in the wider historical context. One of the major consequences of feminism was a heightened interest in gender as the basis for a political movement.<sup>21</sup> In the early days of women's liberation white middle class women were the most energetic about advocating women's rights and changing the American social structure, whereas black women's involvement was very low key due to the pressures of the black liberation programme.<sup>22</sup> As the women's movement evolved, white and black feminists became sharply differentiated because of racial factors but as educational prospects improved by 1970 black women found their voices and a sense of collective identity.<sup>23</sup> From 1969 the range of Women's Studies courses proliferated and by the nineteen eighties there were hundreds of women's journals in circulation, one of which, *Ms. Magazine*, began to publish work by ethnic women writers.<sup>24</sup> A number of black female activists embraced the changes and Alice Walker commented that 'it has been like being born

<sup>21</sup> The Civil Rights Movement was the catalyst and future paradigm of other political movements inclusive of women's liberation.

<sup>22</sup> Francis Beale, one of the key players in the SNCC's Black Women's Liberation Committee, pointed out that there were no 'common bonds' between the two because of the middle class aspirations of white women which meant that very few had experienced the economic deprivation and racism suffered by black women on a daily basis. Black women were feminists, activists and writers throughout the Civil Rights years but they were in a double bind: did they support the white women or did they stay within their own community and submit to a patriarchal order for the sake of black liberation. Their options were very limited. See 'Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female' in *The Black Woman: An Anthology* ed. by Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), pp. 109-122 (p. 120-122). See also Calvin Hernton, who comments that the 'macho philosophy of the Black Power/Black Arts Movement resulted in so many demeaning experiences for the women that many of them began to protest and eventually break away'. Hernton, 'The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers', p. 140.

<sup>23</sup> To rally the call for black women's liberation Toni Cade Bambara published an anthology entitled *The Black Woman* in 1970, comprising contributions from twenty seven feminist writers. She envisaged the work as 'a beginning' but more importantly it highlighted the contributors as diverse individuals including 'professional writers [...] mothers [...] students' who wished to 'address themselves to issues that seem to be relevant to the sisterhood'. See *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, pp. 4-7.

<sup>24</sup> See Rochelle Gatlin, *American Women since 1945* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 153-158.

again, literally' and by 1972 she 'offered the first course on black women writers at Wellesley College'.<sup>25</sup>

The point is that as the feminist movement flooded the marketplace with diverse writings, black women's publications flourished enacting far reaching and devastating social consequences for Reed and other black men. There was the intense animosity between the black genders because the men felt threatened on two counts. Initially, the sheer volume of interest in black women's writings led black men to claim that their works were being ignored. Hernton described this period as one which saw the 'decline of the historical inequality of women writers in Afro-American Literature'.<sup>26</sup> The suggestion seems to be that, black males were aggrieved because traditionally they had exercised an intellectual and physical hegemony over the black community. Secondly, Reed began to issue his perennial complaint that feminist writing was an agitation because, 'the faults of black males [...] have been exposed by black female writers, in what sometimes resembles a literary marathon dance'.<sup>27</sup> The catalyst for this was the publication of Walker's novel *The Color Purple* in 1982 which Reed believes initiated an intense social pathologizing of black men evidenced by highly unfavourable media profiles. These issues led to a series of very bitter disputes between Reed and feminists from which some very salient points emerged on both sides. We might have expected Reed to be sympathetic to the Women's Movement's emphasis on participative democracy, given that he promoted a plurality of voices in his discourse on race and ethnicity. But in his more acerbic writing, Reed does not appear to desire any contribution from women or feminists and he views the movement itself as one that silences men.

Black men and women, as gendered subjects, cannot be separated from the discussion of black men and women in relation to race. Vigorous debates arise because the socially constructed differences within racial and gender identities tend to carry with them a symbolic system of meanings that are expressed through particular social values and hierarchies. Also, both race and gender are ideologies that are prone to an inherent essentialism where blackness is associated with evil and absence, while masculinity/ femininity are correlated with strength and weakness. Respectively these views subscribe to a system of limitations

<sup>25</sup> Alice Walker, 'The Civil Rights movement: What Good Was It?', *The American Scholar* 36 (1967), 550-554 (p. 551). ; Gatlin, *American Women since 1945*, p. 154.

<sup>26</sup> Hernton, 'The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers', p. 140.

<sup>27</sup> Reed, *God Made Alaska for the Indians* (1982), p. 73.

which are a matter of contention and discrimination for black manhood and womanhood. Reed tends to focus on the challenges white American culture has presented to black males, and thus much of his discourse is structured as a promotion and defence of black men. I intend to explore Reed's appraisal of the masculinist presence of white and black men and to consider certain key concepts of white and black masculinity that usually present themselves as a binary of the masculine 'affirmed' and the masculine 'denied'. I hope to analyse the repercussions of masculine ideals for white feminists and in the light of this the tangled aftermath for black feminists. This manifests itself when other prominent black individuals appear to critique black men. Reed lambasts such cultural icons as Henry Louis Gates and Alice Walker, who appear, in his view, to comply with society's denigration of African American males. The former, Reed argues, has shaped the very canon of African American literature around the development of women's literature at the expense of omitting significant works by black men. From Reed's position it is clear that feminism, as an ideology, would only be acceptable to him if it acknowledged both the legitimacy of blackness and the precarious situation of black men as well as women.

## Literary Representations of Black Women

Significantly the critic Edmund White notes that in Reed's early fiction he tended to urge African Americans to 'reject Christianity and rationalism and return to African hoodoo and intuition'.<sup>28</sup> The implication for White is that Reed believes 'women's liberation [...] is disrespectful of the patriarchal dignity of African society'.<sup>29</sup> This leads one to consider, then how, as a woman, one might read and de-centre the maleness of Reed's fiction. According to a number of critics the process of reading cannot be neutral or innocent and one's gender will always initiate a particular response when one steps into the arena of literary sexual politics.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, when faced with the American canon, Judith Fetterley argues that a woman has to engage in confrontation because of the 'pervasive male bias of this literature' and that she

<sup>28</sup> Edmund White, 'A Fantasia on Black Suffering', *The Nation* (1976) in *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed* ed. by Bruce Dick (Connecticut and London: Greenwood, 1999), pp. 122-126 (p. 125).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> See the excellent summary of feminist criticism in Catherine Belsey, and Jane Moore in, *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989). They argue that all interpretation is political. Also they suggest that processing texts that consciously reflect a tradition of female oppression in the face of patriarchy will nearly always induce a feminist reading where both male and female readers will confirm or challenge certain cultural norms.



will by hermeneutical necessity be required to 'identify as male [...] with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her'.<sup>31</sup> This notion appears contradictory but male identification is unavoidable since the reader is obliged to empathise with male heroism in opposition to what is often perceived as the problematic behaviour of the females in their texts. If one amplifies this issue by reading a male African American author, who has been charged with misogyny by a number of sources, then confrontation is certainly bound to exist. Far from countering the stereotypes ascribed to women in general I argue that Reed the outcast, who has largely dedicated himself to a critique of white ethnic chauvinism, appears to draw on the structural and political aspects of the gender bias against women evident in the American mainstream white centre.

This leads one to ask the rather pointed question: are all the females in Reed's fiction problematic? Even in his often absurdist fictional universe, there is a perennial undercurrent of difficult women for the black or white men who encounter them, or form relationships with them. Indeed throughout the course of plot resolutions men are perceived as having some justification in resorting to some form of chauvinistic control or as a neat denouement some of the female characters eventually find themselves consumed by the attractions of traditional motherhood and renewing kinship ties. Reed's representation of women reinforces Michelle Wallace's analysis of the imaging of black women in American society as 'too domineering, too strong, too aggressive, too outspoken, too castrating, too masculine'.<sup>32</sup> In Reed's world women can be portrayed sympathetically, but only if they assist and support rather than deflect the authority of the male protagonist. Reed admits that he is 'not big on characterization' preferring to 'deal in types' gauged from his own experiences, a formula that provides him with insights into the current and historical experiences of blacks and whites from an African American perspective. He admits his stereotyping is nearly always undergirded by his desire to 'make serious points'.<sup>33</sup> Yet the academic, Toril Moi, points to the danger of 'delving into one's own self' because it reinforces the 'principle made by feminist critics that no position is neutral, and that we therefore have a responsibility to make

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<sup>31</sup> Judith Fetterley discusses a number of authors who are representative of 'great' American literature inclusive of Henry James, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Scott Fitzgerald, Hawthorne and Hemingway. They collectivise the face of male American universalism to the point where the female reader is obliged to participate 'in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded'. See Judith Fetterley, 'Introduction: On the Politics of Literature', in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* ed. by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University, 1991), pp. 492-501 (p. 493).

<sup>32</sup> Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman* (New York and London: Verso, 1990), p. 91.

<sup>33</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p. 232. ; Reed, *The Reed Reader* ((New York: Basic Books 2000), p. xvii.

our position reasonably apparent to our readers'.<sup>34</sup> She continues that 'whether this is necessarily always best done through autobiographical statements about the critic's emotional and personal life is a more debatable point.'<sup>35</sup>

Much of Reed's fiction tends to set down certain blueprints for a series of emboldened, difficult, insuppressibly headstrong, and largely unmanageable females. His first novel *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967) is emblematic of the American Dream, representing the main protagonist and narrator Bukka Doopeyduk as a naïve, hapless and idealistic young black man with traditional values who sets out to establish a comfortable life for himself and his future family. Yet his marriage is marred by domestic conflict because of the conflicting expectations between himself and his wife Fannie Mae, a bride from a HooDoo family. As the traditional male breadwinner and patriarch he expects her to support him by managing the household affairs. However in a parody of the nineteenth century white plantation mistress, Fannie Mae prefers to languish by spending her days watching television or reading 'movie magazines' from the comfort of the sofa.<sup>36</sup> She suggests that 'If you want somebody to clean dis place, why don't you get somebody to come in and do daywork' (*TFLP*, 24). She is described as a 'scourge of a scrounge', a 'tramp' (*TFLP*, 24, 33). Her behaviour leads to multiple confrontations and when Doopeyduk complains about the unhygienic state of the kitchen and the lack of food she reacts explosively so that the balance of power falls to her. Her dictum rules that instead of working as a hospital orderly he should get a job at the 'Harry Sam Ear Muffle Factory' where she exclaims he will earn more money 'to pay for the fun I like's to have' (*TFLP*, 22). This apparently conforms to her traditional expectations of the black man's place in the labour market. Doopeyduk's trenchant response is to demand that Fannie Mae finds employment like many other black women instead of 'lying on the floor reading comic books like some empty half-wit' (*TFLP*, 33). Unfazed by this her reaction is one of retaliation: to glamorise her appearance in order to go out with a friend. Her priorities exclude her marriage and she is portrayed as a woman who leads her husband to hell.

<sup>34</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Reed, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999), p. 21. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically after quotations in the text.

Reed wrote this novel in 1967, which is a time, as Wallace most skilfully outlines, when black leaders such as Stokely Carmichael and Adam Clayton Powell were agitating for Black Power as a means of forcibly accessing human and civil rights and gaining freedom.<sup>37</sup> Riots had erupted in Los Angeles and the university campuses at Fisk, Nashville, and Jackson State and Newark in 1965, culminating with riots in Detroit in 1967. She notes that the black woman was perceived as,

one of the main reasons [...why] the black man had never been able to properly take hold of his situation in this country. The black man had troubles and he would have to fight the white man to get them solved but how would he ever have the strength if his own house was not in proper order, if his wife, his woman, his mother, his sisters, who should have been his faithful servants, were undermining him at every opportunity [...].<sup>38</sup>

Wallace's analysis is presented through the lens of black men and Reed appears to subscribe to these views even though in the late nineteen sixties he might not have had gender relations between black men and women exclusively at the forefront of his mind. In *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* he mainly focused on the question of the racial hegemony operated by white people represented in the novel through the dictatorship of HARRY SAM.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless he depicts Doopeyduk as a black male who is derailed by domestic conflict with his wife.

Doopeyduk assumes an aggressive stance when Fannie Mae spends the grocery money on 'Screen Gems magazines and liquor' (*TFLP*, 43) and violence ensues to the point where he rips the apartment door from its hinges and restrains her with a jugular hold. By now the relationship has irretrievably broken down and far from acquiescing to Doopeyduk's demands Fannie Mae returns to her parent's home, feigns a suicide attempt and ends up badly

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<sup>37</sup> Carmichael and Powell were activists who had different conceptions of Black Power. In a speech in 1966 the former coined the phrase 'Black Power' from sheer frustration at being arrested for the twenty seventh time and because he was dissatisfied with Martin Luther King's pacifist methods of protest. Carmichael advocated black separatism and urged African Americans to totally reject the values of white American society. Powell was the first black Congressman to take a forceful stand on the issues of civil and political rights and he made the point that many African Americans embraced the phrase 'black power' more for their own ill-advised and selfish reasons than in any genuine attempt to support the black public. He did not advocate Black Nationalism but promoted the idea of 'Audacious power', as the power that begins with the stand-up-and-be-counted racial pride in being black and thinking black. See Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., 'Black Power: A Form of Godly Power' (1967) <<http://www.milestonedocuments.com/documents/view/adam-clayton-powell-jrs-black-power-a-form-of-godly-power/text>> [accessed 21 October 2012]

<sup>38</sup> Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman*, p. 91.

<sup>39</sup> The setting of the novel is within the city of 'HARRYSAM' (a parody of Uncle Sam and therefore America) and this is ruled despotically by the identically named figure of 'SAM' who is a 'self-made Pole and former used-car salesman'. See pp. 1-2.

burned in the process. Her protests against Doopeyduk are constantly made public, a factor that Reed inscribes through capitalisation, 'HELP/ LAWDY/ JESUS/ MOSES/ ELIJAH/ DANIEL/ MERCY/ MAMMA/ DADDY/ HELP ME! DA MAN GONE APESHIT' (*TFLP*, 43). Thus Fannie Mae attempts to draw attention to the justification of her case, calling on various religious figures and her parents to bear witness to her cruel treatment by her husband. It soon emerges that Doopeyduk's physical transformation into a werewolf is the result of a HooDoo curse laid down by Fannie Mae's family, because they believe he is a 'loser and a creep' (*TFLP*, 45). Soon he is summoned to court because his wife applies for a divorce. Under the watchful eye of Judge Whimplewopper Fannie Mae's testimony is demure and rests on Doopeyduk's rudeness and his attempt to 'viscerate' her (*TFLP*, 85), while Doopeyduk's defence erupts into farce. His account of events, as a result of being placed under the curse, becomes increasingly incoherent. He exclaims, 'YOU KNOW THIS PLACE IS NOWHERE. NOTHIN BUT A BIG KLANG-A-LANG-A-DING-DONG-A-RAZZ-A-MA-TAZZ' (*TFLP*, 88). For uttering his contempt of the courtroom procedure Doopeyduk loses his case and thus Fannie Mae is duly granted a divorce with financial support on the grounds of mental cruelty

The development of Fannie Mae's character is symptomatic of a trend in American male authors that Kathryn Hume identifies as a control issue.<sup>40</sup> She notes that Reed, in common with the white authors Norman Mailer and Thomas Pynchon, presents codes where 'a true man must resist all attempts to control him'.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore in their texts 'powerful or independent women are a problem' so that 'masculine identity, particularly with regard to women, seems to be one of the commonplace problematics of control'.<sup>42</sup> In fact Wallace, writing reflectively of Reed notes in 1986 that 'there is a definite tendency in all his books, beginning with *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, to blame women characters for every evil that comes into the world'.<sup>43</sup> Certainly in Reed's fiction the relationships of his protagonists with women are nearly always troubled and followed by periods of instability. In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* the reader is introduced to the dynamic male protagonist, Loop Garou, a black cowboy and self-acclaimed 'sorcerer' who has joined a circus company.<sup>44</sup> His long lost

<sup>40</sup> Hume, 'Ishmael Reed and the Problematics of Control', p. 506.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 513.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Michelle Wallace, 'Female Troubles: Ishmael Reed's Tunnel Vision', *The Village Voice Literary Supplement* 51 (1986) in *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed*, pp. 183-191 (p. 190).

<sup>44</sup> Reed, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), p. 60. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically after quotations in the text.

love is Black Diane, who is 'a constant guest in his dreams' (YBRBD, 11). In the novel his sexual potency is legendary but her lack of faithfulness and desertion has 'humiliated' him and 'emboldened the others to likewise' (YBRBD, 11) so his other sexual partners, Mustache Sal and Mighty Dike, are inspired to become independent women. Although she is never encountered in the text Black Diane overshadows the other female characters because she is the one really at the heart of Loop's troubles and his inability to settle down. Her treachery is downplayed as the Pope, the corrupt head of the western roman catholic church who has already disregarded his vows of celibacy, pleads with Loop to return home with him to placate Black Diane who, 'since her ascension she's been with the blues' (YBRBD, 161). It seems that Loop is needed to quell an over abundant feminine power, one that might overrule the Godhead and Christ and be 'about to take over' (YBRBD, 163).

*Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* represents Reed's interest in multiculturalism and through challenging Western Christianity he attempts a syncretism of Catholicism and Hoodoo. Therefore saints from the Catholic pantheon are juxtaposed with or even transformed into the gods from the voodoo cults practised in Haiti and other countries in the New World.<sup>45</sup> Loop Garou is depicted as the elder brother of Christ while Black Diane is represented as a complex archetype of the Madonna figure, a perverse Virgin Mary, who has metamorphosed into an avenging earth goddess, though as Zozo, a voodoo priestess, drily observes, 'sometimes it's hard to tell, Loop, the bitch has so many aliases' (YBRBD, 13). Far from being virginal, homely, loyal and supportive Diane is defined by her appetite for power. In fact Reed invokes the idea of the eternal feminine, symbolic of the mother archetype who figuratively might be viewed as the Christian Queen of Heaven or alternatively as the Great Earth Mother.<sup>46</sup> Here her misdeed is to be disloyal to God, 'him, with as big a reputation as he had' (YBRBD, 11), yet in her negative aspect she is parodied as both the instigator of a rival church and the leader of a women's cult. Really she is a suffragette who presents a threat to the spiritual dominion of God and Christ because, according to the Pope, 'she's getting a following up there' and 'both of them are afraid she might start something'

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<sup>45</sup> Reed explains that 'Hoodoo is an American version of the Ju-Ju religion that originated in Africa' and in particular 'Dahomey and Angola'. The Pope comments that 'our insipid and uninspiring saints were no match for theirs: Damballah, Legba and other deities which are their Loa'. See *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, pp. 152-153.

<sup>46</sup> C. G. Jung notes that this figure can be associated with 'things and places standing for fertility and fruitfulness' and might incur ambivalent aspects so that 'this type is an unpleasant, exacting, and anything but satisfactory partner for her husband, since she rebels in every fibre of her being against everything'. See Carl Gustav Jung, *Four Archetypes: Mother; Rebirth; Spirit; Trickster* (London: Ark, 1989), pp. 15-44.

(YBRBD, 165). Above all male chauvinism has to triumph, Diane has to be suppressed and Loop unites with the Pope. In spite of Loop's former Hoodoo spells and curses the Pope grants him an amnesty: 'anything you want Loop, just so you satisfy the wench' (YBRBD, 166).

Black Diane, whose power has to be quashed, completely contrasts with the portrayal of the 'New Orleans Hoodooin Zozo Labrique' (YBRBD, 14), who has been cast out of her native Louisiana by her arch enemy, the famed voodoo priestess Marie Laveau.<sup>47</sup> Zozo presents no problems for Loop because her voodoo spells, described variously as her 'mojo', her magical rites, wangols' (YBRBD, 26), have supported him in the past. She is co-operative and a trusted confidante so that even in death her voodoo power, in the form of a dog's tooth, is bestowed upon Loop as her final gift. In fact Zozo is the first of a series of highly compliant black women in Reed's fiction. Sister Yellings, in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, is 'an industrious girl who was good with the needle, she sewed clothes for the family'.<sup>48</sup> She is described as 'wee plump', 'solid' and 'wrapped up in long skirts, jewelry and a white turban so that much of her original self is hidden' while Aunt Judy from *Flight to Canada* is similarly supportive of her mate, the head slave, Uncle Robin.<sup>49</sup> She is the epitome of traditional femininity, a home maker who even after emancipation is happy to fulfil Robin's expectations: 'You're supposed to raise lilacs, sew flags and have teas for the ladies nearby'.<sup>50</sup> The point is that these characters are submissive women who pose no threat to the men. They follow the rules of patriarchy and perhaps unsurprisingly Reed portrays them with minimalist detail.

Reed's depiction of black women appears to reinforce a masculine hegemony and Reed generally draws on female types that are persistently negative for they cannot be trusted and they are disloyal and lazy. Even the goddess figure, Black Diane, is characterised by her more sinister feminine traits and when her sexual activities spiral out of control they have to be subdued.<sup>51</sup> In effect Reed draws on gender codes that have shown resilience for a number of

<sup>47</sup> Zozo is at the same time synonymous with and is embodied in Marie Laveau, for they are the 'the Grand Improvisers'. See p. 63.

<sup>48</sup> Reed, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive, 2000), p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>50</sup> Reed, *Flight to Canada* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), p.172.

<sup>51</sup> Reed has continued to deploy difficult female figures throughout his writings. Henry Gates Jr., observes this was a trend in the Black Arts Movement in the nineteen seventies, though he comments that 'black women's writing tended to reject the 'Black Goddess/Black Queen stereotypes [...] and the corresponding Black Warrior/Black Prince as cardboard stereotypes just as pernicious as the Sambo-Mammy types of the white

centuries and it is instructive to consider how far Reed's men reflect Victorian codes of masculinity. John Ruskin, for instance, commented thus: 'The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention: his energy for invention, for war, and for conquest'.<sup>52</sup> Indeed Reed tends to invoke a continuous opposition between his fictional men and women so that most of the former will reflect the generally active and heroic qualities identified by Ruskin at some point in their development. Consider Loop Garou for example, the shape shifting black cowboy, who epitomizes a favourite figure of Reed's because of the direct link to the notion of the American working class hero who refuses to bow to the white establishment. This implies a strong identification with Reed himself as the outlaw figure living on the edge of society, for Garou flees from his white enemies and lives in exile in a cave decked out as a voodoo shrine with typical offerings to the gods including shells, skulls, a rattle, food and alcohol and most oddly placed of all, 'a pair of Everlast boxing gloves [...] on the calabashes' (YBRBD, 63). That he can have a sexually voracious appetite for women is glossed over in the text for presumably it is Reed's intention that this figure should exhibit classic traits of masculinity to trope as a 'strong man' who is resourceful enough to battle with those figures who conspire against his race and gender. Correspondingly social theorists have noted how 'in times of war, men and masculinity operate symbolically and materially as protectors and aggressors', and Wallace noted how in the nineteen sixties black men tended to 'define their masculinity [...] in terms of [...] demonstrable sexuality; physical prowess; the capacity for warlike behaviour'.<sup>53</sup> Therefore it would be no exaggeration to exclaim that in order to champion and uphold the status of the African American male Reed, in the nineteen seventies, appeared to instigate a war with feminists that he is still currently battling, four decades later.

Reed reveals a similar confidence in the patriarchal mastery of Papa LaBas, the black male, voodoo priest, he recycled from *Mumbo Jumbo* to appear in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, (1974). Here he resumes his detective role to find the murderer of Ed Yellings, a black business man who founded the 'Solid Gumbo Works' as a means of eradicating the menacing

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plantation tradition'. See Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* (New York and London: Meridian, 1990), p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Christopher Craft, "'Kiss me with Those Red Lips": Gender and Inversion' in *Speaking of Gender*, ed. by E Showalter (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 216-242 (p. 217).

<sup>53</sup> Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman*, pp. xix-xx.

Louisiana Red.<sup>54</sup> Notably La Bas is even appointed as the executor of Ed's will rather than the remainder of the family. The colour 'red' is a motif referring to the rise of left wing ideology and politics which divided the black community in Oakland, California, in the late nineteen sixties and early seventies. Reed critiques the integrity of the black revolutionary movements, inclusive of Black Power, because he believed that some of the militants were driven by self-interest and power rather than by any genuine concern for oppressed people. Reed described the exponents of such politics as the Moochers,

Moochers tell other people what to do. Men Moochers blame everything on women. Women Moochers blame everything on men. Old Moochers say it's the young's fault; Moochers say the old messed up the world they have to live in [...] Moochers are a special order of parasite, not even a beneficial parasite but one that takes—takes energy, takes supplies [...] Moochers feel that generosity should flow one way: from you to them. You owe it to them. If you call a Mocher wrong, he will say, "I'm not wrong, you're paranoid" [...] Moochers are predators at the nesting ground of industry. Moochers decided to start an organization themselves [...] In Berkeley, Mochism was becoming the thing to be. Minnie was happy about the outpouring of Mocher buttons. She was particularly pleased with one which read: "I am A Mocher" (*LDLR*, 17-19).<sup>55</sup>

Collectively Reed portrays Moochers as political opportunists, and one senses his disapproval of radicalism for radicalism's sake declaring them to be social parasites that infest the integral spirit of communities without actually achieving anything. But more importantly the quotation is timely for it hints at the acrimonious relationships between black men and women when, according to Wallace black masculinity was often over-privileged as a true and reliable signifier of political freedom. She notes, for example, how in the SNCC movement, 'women, both black and white, handled an inordinate amount of typing, coffee making and housework' and that after Ruby Doris Smith Robinson wrote a paper 'protesting the relegation of women to [...] clerical work [...] reputedly it prompted Stokely Carmichael to

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<sup>54</sup> Reed, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2000), p. 10. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically after quotations in the text. Louisiana Red is figuratively envisaged as a stress plague where African Americans become prey to an evil, self-destructive state of mind causing numerous cancers. Literally the term refers to a popular hot sauce that Reed deploys in a Hoodoo context when it alludes to the danger of overdosing and spoiling the Gumbo (the African American community) with a peppery consumption that represents the 'hot air' and selfish needs of some black revolutionary individuals, including feminists

<sup>55</sup> The character Minnie alludes to a type of femme fatale, who lures men with her fateful charms, epitomized in the Cab Calloway song, 'Minnie the Mocher'. Calloway was an African American jazz singer and bandleader who performed regularly at the Cotton Club in Harlem from the nineteen thirties. 'Minnie the Mocher' was his most famous song, recorded in 1930.



respond, “The only position of women in SNCC is prone.”<sup>56</sup> Black activists did not relish the prospect of women’s independence so a clear division of labour was imposed where women were expected to perform the menial tasks.

Above all *Louisiana Red* is the first novel to herald Reed’s altogether more aggressive stance on feminism, corresponding with what he retrospectively regards as his first gender feud with black feminists in 1974.<sup>57</sup> The Moochers are largely dominated by a black radical feminist group led by Minnie, ‘the Queen of the Moochers’ (*LDLR*, 22), who distinguishes ‘herself as orator and rhetorician’ and is accompanied by ‘female bodyguards known as the Dahomeyan Softball Team who dressed in black knee-length pea jackets, dark pants and waffle stomper shoes’ (*LDLR*, 19). Reed portrays Minnie’s group as antagonistic with dangerously militant leanings: ‘they were some fierce, rough-looking women led by this big old 6-foot bruiser they all called the “REICHSFUHRER”’ (*LDLR*, 20). This ridiculous parody of the German Nazi elite is intended to suggest that feminists are cruel fascists who prey on black men and women, and as a belligerent matriarchy it is assumed that they have no intention of finding solutions to the social problems of the African American community. The depiction of Minnie is a complex one for she is a composite character comprising the rebellious, youngest daughter of the Yellings family, the powerful woman of the Cab Calloway song, the political activist- intellectual Angela Davis and the figure of Antigone from the ancient Greek tragedy by Sophocles.

Within Minnie’s triple identity it is possible to trace types of women, who from a patriarchal perspective, seem to represent a free spiritedness that results in familial defiance, wilfulness and even lawlessness. Reed admits that Minnie is a ‘prototypical character in an Afro-American culture’ and, although he does not specify which one, it would appear that she strongly resembles the stereotype, Sapphire, who is regarded as an overly ‘aggressive, domineering, emasculating female’.<sup>58</sup> Curiously her origins are to be found in the very same *Amos ‘n’ Andy* radio serial from which Reed draws two minor *Louisiana Red* characters,

<sup>56</sup> Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman*, pp. 6-7. The SNCC is an acronym for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee which was founded by black students in 1960 at Shaw University at North Carolina. Wallace claims that this peaceful organization eventually became, ‘the all-black nationalistic Snick for Black Power’. See pp. 5-6.

<sup>57</sup> Reed, *The Reed Reader* (2000), pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>58</sup> Crouch, ‘Interview with Ishmael Reed’, 1976, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, p.103. ; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ‘Sapphire’ in *The Oxford companion to African American literature*, p. 644.

George Kingfish Stevens and Andy Brown.<sup>59</sup> In the novel these men are petty thieves, who are meant to provide a comedic interlude in the novel in contrast to the presence of Minnie, under her Sapphiric influence. This link could hardly be more derogatory since Beverly Sheftall comments that the latter ‘became a pervasive image in African American folk culture and one of the most damaging stereotypes in the mass media, one that influences contemporary conceptions of Black womanhood’.<sup>60</sup>

In her domestic context Minnie conspires against her father Ed Yellings, because he did not consider her to be a fitting candidate for any involvement in his Gumbo business, preferring to pass this role directly to his eldest son, Wolf. It soon emerges that Minnie has been schooled in traits of disobedience by her mother, Ruby Yellings, who had a tendency to ‘control people and abuse them’ (*LDLR*, 11), the latter typically falling pregnant with four children against the wishes of her husband. When Ruby is deflected from any business involvement in the Gumbo Works by Ed she turns her attention to local politics and later elopes to Washington with ‘an up an coming Democrat [...] to enter national politics’ (*LDLR*, 12). Minnie and her mother are described as so alike ‘that they could have been twins’ and Minnie unsurprisingly invites conflicts with her father since ‘she went out of her way to come on “field” just like her mother’ (*LDLR*, 13). Thus when Ed is murdered for attempting to find a cure for heroin addiction, Minnie is investigated by Papa La Bas. He traces her origins through Reed’s characterisation of the siren in the Calloway song, ‘Minnie the Moocher’. The lyrics chosen to be reproduced in the novel are significant: ‘She was a low down hoochy coocher/She messed around wid a bloke named Smokey/She loved him tho’ he was a “cokey”’ (*LDLR*, 34).<sup>61</sup> La Bas infers clues from these lines that prompt a sense of Minnie’s nature: that she was attached to a drug addict; that she was ‘a classic emotional vamp’ (*LDLR*, 34); and even when feigning religion to seduce a bishop, ‘she was still as hard as nails’ (*LDLR*, 35). La Bas suspects that the song will help him to detect the true Minnie as,

no helpless object swept away by forces beyond her control but a dedicated agent of a sphinx’s jinx, an acolyte of an ugly cause [...] a lot of people’s

<sup>59</sup> The original radio play in 1926 was based around minstrel shows where the two main characters, Amos and Andy were played by white men to portray African Americans who migrated from the Deep South to Chicago. Sapphire was later introduced as the wife of a character named Kingfish and her portrayal by Ernestine Wade projected a derogatory type who was ‘loud talking, abrasive, overbearing, bossy, controlling and emasculating’.

<sup>60</sup> Guy-Sheftall, ‘Sapphire’, p. 644.

<sup>61</sup> Calloway, ‘Minnie the Moocher’, <[http://home.uchicago.edu/narusso/shack/data/cc\\_minn.htm](http://home.uchicago.edu/narusso/shack/data/cc_minn.htm)> [accessed 28 March 2012]; Reed even derives a footnote from the ‘*Dictionary of Afro-American slang*’ which explains that the term, ‘Hoochy-Coochy’ denotes ‘one who practices Voodoo’. See *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* p. 34.

eyes will be opened and they will be on the lookout for this character posing as a victim of history while all the time she is a cruel jinx [...] sent to destroy patriarchy [...] She's the worst of tyrants. Like the Black Widow spider that draws its prey, loves it, then drains it [...] She deprives the victim of the ability to express itself. The victim becomes a hollow zombie thing, enlisted into her ranks as slaves. She takes the energy of her subjects and lives off it (*LDLR*, 35-36).

Of course Reed's interpretation diverges from the original Calloway lyrics for while those confirm Minnie's liaison with Smokey and other men, the refrain, 'But Minnie had a heart as big as a whale' is suggestive of a woman who was disreputable but also likeable and not altogether dangerous.<sup>62</sup> Reed, through his alter ego La Bas, on the other hand, builds a portrait of a black female that potentially engages in a treacherous form of Hoodoo for her own benefit and who, like Black Diane, cold bloodedly sets about stalking and seducing her victims.

The quotation above also provides clues to Minnie's links to ancient and contemporary prototypes of female power. Firstly, as an agent of a 'sphinx's jinx', she is interwoven with Antigone. According to Sophocles's drama, Antigone defies her uncle Creon, the ruler of Thebes, by securing a ritualised burial for her brother Polynices, regarded by Creon as a traitorous rebel in the civil war.<sup>63</sup> Reed traces Antigone's connection with Thebes through an earlier play in which her father, Oedipus, encounters and disposes of the Sphinx, a merciless and cruel female creature, outside the city.<sup>64</sup> Through the voice of his mouthpiece, the character Chorus, Reed comments indirectly that this act of violence by Oedipus affects the next generation thus inviting in 'the revenge of the Ethiopian Sphinx' (*LDLR*, 29).<sup>65</sup> This

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Reed comments that the 'archaic story' of Antigone was treated 'by 18 prose writers, dramatists, poets and even the musician Felix Mendelssohn' but he draws from the Greek version (*LDLR*, 28). According to this Antigone and her sister, Ismene, return to Thebes in order to help their brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, avoid a prophecy that predicts they will kill each other in a battle for the throne of Thebes. However on arrival Antigone discovers that both her brothers are dead and while her uncle, Creon allows Eteocles a proper burial, Polynices was perceived as the traitorous rebel and remained unburied at Creon's behest. Antigone disobeys Creon and seeks a respectable burial for Polynices, however when her act is discovered she is thrown into prison and her punishment is to be buried alive.

<sup>64</sup> This legend is dramatized in *Oedipus the King*, the second in a series of plays. See Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus At Colonus* (New York and London: Penguin, 1984, repr. 1982).

<sup>65</sup> The Sphinx is an important image in Egyptian and Greek mythology. While the former portrays the Sphinx with a lion's body and a male head the Greek version is pictured with a lion's body, powerful wings and a woman's face. In the legend adapted by Sophocles the latter was 'said to have terrorized the people of Thebes by demanding the answer to a riddle taught her by the Muses—What is it that has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?—and devouring a man each time the riddle was answered incorrectly. Eventually Oedipus gave the proper answer: man, who crawls on all fours in infancy, walks on two

begs the question of why Reed should revise Greek drama, for the author informs the reader that the play ‘closely parallels the Egyptian story of Osiris and Isis, so there were probably Egyptian writers who had a hand at it first’ (*LDLR*, 28). It is possible that Reed chose not to develop the original Egyptian myth in order to develop a vehicle to support his view that classical Western civilization was founded on recycling but ultimately rejecting African culture.<sup>66</sup> Yet it would appear more likely that Reed’s agenda is to offer a critique of feminism and of the sisterhood of females who have thwarted masculine dominance. In spite of the fact that Sophocles profiled the issue of Antigone’s disobedience, the villain of his play was unquestionably Creon whose dedication to absolutism in terms of loyalty and state law brings about the downfall and death of much of his family.<sup>67</sup> However in Reed’s version of the drama he exploits the character of Antigone as a malevolent pseudo Sphinx ‘who ate men raw’ (*LDLR*, 105), a woman who ‘violated [...] order’, who ‘was so beautiful [...] we lost our objectivity’ (*LDLR*, 29). This allowed Chorus to opine: ‘she went too far’ thus getting ‘what she deserved’ (*LDLR*, 30). Minnie, as the femme fatale in Reed’s narrative closely mirrors Antigone, while La Bas (who is loosely based on Creon) is deployed as the patriarch, restoring and supporting the black community.

Antigone/Minnie belongs to Reed’s gallery of female recalcitrants including Fannie Mae and Black Diane, who from a black male perspective, pervert womanhood in a bid to garner power in defiance of patriarchal tradition. In *Louisiana Red* much outrage is expressed by Chorus whose own identity is defined by the ‘Black Problem’ (*LDLR*, 26), and, his version of *Antigone* is clearly meant to perform as a metaphor for the social condition of the African

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feet when grown, and leans on a staff in old age. The sphinx thereupon killed herself’. See ‘Sphinx’ in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/559722/sphinx>> [accessed 2 April 2012]. Scholarly debate about the origin of the sphinx approves the view that the Egyptian figure is the most ancient belonging to a period ‘c. 2575–c. 2465 BCE’. According to Greek mythology, the sphinx ‘is said to have come from the most distant part of Ethiopia’. See the *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*. <<http://www.theoi.com/Ther/Sphinx.html>> [accessed 2 April 2012].

<sup>66</sup> This view is not unique to Reed. The scholar Martin Bernal took the Egyptian influence on ancient Greek culture very seriously. He disputed the conventional ‘European or Aryan model’ of Greek history, which developed for racist reasons in the ‘first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century’, and instead researched and embraced what he calls the ‘Ancient Model’. In ‘*Black Athena*’, Bernal focuses intensively on archaeological and linguistic evidence to support the theory of ‘Greek cultural borrowings from Egypt and the Levant in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC’. See Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, Vol. 1 (London: Vintage, 1987), pp. 1-2, 17.

<sup>67</sup> Creon demands obedience to the law above all else and as a result, a series of tragic acts unfolds: Antigone kills herself in prison, her fiancé Haemon learns of her death and commits suicide. He is also the son of Creon and when Haemon’s mother discovers this she kills herself from despair. The point is that Creon’s edict has wreaked devastation on his family and he is left distraught, a broken man. In *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* a number of characters parallel the personae of *Antigone*: Ed Yellings is Oedipus, Sister is Ismene, Street is Polynices and Wolf is Eteocles.

American male. He is incensed because Antigone 'led the pack' creating, 'the beginning of my difficulties' (*LDLR*, 54) thus intimating that she had ambitions to become a feminist icon for rebelliousness. In the original Greek tragedies, the Chorus was meant to be played by a group of older Theban men though some scholars have noted how Sophocles 'created a faster-moving type of tragedy for which he introduced, and perhaps needed a third actor' in order to illustrate the 'heroic temper'.<sup>68</sup> Thus the role of the chorus was much diminished for dramatic motives, but Reed's counterpoint version is to portray a single character who contends, 'Sophocles edited out many of my good lines because of this woman and her big mouth' (*LDLR*, 55). Possibly Reed intended that Chorus would also represent the community as opposed to Antigone the individual. Certainly Chorus ascertains Antigone to be the root cause of his redundancy, and this is a thinly veiled reference to the rise of black feminism in America which, according to Reed, has dislocated the drive of black liberation and is the cause of the major oppositions between black men and women.

Chorus finds great difficulty in coming to terms with Antigone's status even to the point of disputing her motivation for saving her brother by querying why 'didn't she try to bring Eteocles and Polynices together to settle their differences? No [...] she wanted the whole family dead [...] the first family of Hades with herself as Queen' (*LDLR*, 87). He foregrounds her half-heartedness and 'insincerity' by stating that she 'could argue a man to a standstill' (*LDLR*, 87). Later, when Chorus performs on stage, his description of Antigone's presence in the audience is uncompromising: 'she is raising her voice and folding her arms [...] she looks like a rotten hag with crowsfeet and craggy wrinkles. She heaps viperous words, she sneers' (*LDLR*, 105). He resorts to associating her with images of monstrosity, the crone and the snake. While she is associated with decay and evil, Chorus is meant to represent the new hope for the deeply embedded patriarchal society defined by the drama and the novel. He rants: 'in the former times when the Theban elders had manhood, a man would have leaped across that stage and whipped the shit out of this bitch, but this is considered bad form these days' (*LDLR*, 105). He is not prepared to endure any further emasculation and this becomes clear when he finally encounters Minnie, as the modern Antigone. This is evident when they both resort to the language of street black vernacular. Minnie belligerently addresses Chorus

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<sup>68</sup> Stephen Esposito, 'The Changing Roles of the Sophoclean Chorus', *Arion*, 4 (1996), 85-114 (p. 85). Esposito compares the plays of Aeschylus to those of Sophocles and Euripides. While the contribution of the Chorus amounted to fifty per cent in the plays of Aeschylus, in the other playwrights the role was diminished to approximately twenty per cent, thus finally ending 'the long struggle for supremacy between actor and chorus'. See pp. 86-87.

as an irrelevance, 'calling him obscene names' and screaming, 'YOU LISTEN TO ME, NIGGER. LET ME FINISH' (*LDLR*, 159). In Minnie's world the woman has the last word, but Chorus does not allow this and he shoots her with the invective, 'I'm sick of you cutting into my lines, bitch' (*LDLR*, 160).

The impetus has changed back to 'Antigone as Minnie' in the context of the more contemporary protest movements in America in the nineteen seventies, and the lines above parody the misogynistic attitude of the male Black panthers to black women. Chorus is meant to imitate the voices of the black militants who were resolute in their determination for black men to re-establish their manhood. Eldridge Cleaver, for example, in the essay, 'The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs' invents a troubled conversation between himself and three other black prison inmates. They discuss their uneasy relationships with black women exclaiming, 'I had to knock her out every Saturday night [...] How're you supposed to treat a bitch who can't live with you without fighting? [...] a 'nigger bitch seems to be full of steel, granite-hard and resisting, not soft and submissive like a white woman'.<sup>69</sup> Their conclusion appears to be that 'there is no love left between a black man and a black woman'.<sup>70</sup> The essay is meant to reflect the forbidden desire black men have for white women, but notably black women who are striving for more independence are dismissed out of hand as worthy only for sexual experimentation. Even if *Louisiana Red* is meant to satirise these attitudes to black women, Reed himself is not above subscribing to a similar language and imagery. In a 1981 essay, when mounting a case against black emasculation and attempting to dispel racist notions about black male potency, Reed cited an unnamed woman writer from *Essence* magazine who asserted that 'black men were subject to premature ejaculation'.<sup>71</sup> He affects outrage at this demeaning implication as 'the most crushing blow of all. At least black men had this. Their sexual macho. Could knock this or that bitch out. This was before we heard another point of view. The point of view of the Prone'.<sup>72</sup> Reed's words unconsciously perhaps echo Cleaver's language and the metaphor of the prone can be attributed to Carmichael's infamous innuendo that all black women should be sexually available for their men. Even if Reed's outburst begins to accept the political incorrectness of such a view the fact that he includes this form of chauvinist rhetoric from the nineteen sixties, in an essay

<sup>69</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, 'The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs' in *Soul on Ice* (New York: Delta Paperbacks, 1992), pp. 183-204 (pp. 196, 187-188). The term 'eunuch' is meant to refer to a young, black radical imprisoned in America.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>71</sup> Reed, 'Black Macho, White Macho: The Stale Drama' in *God Made Alaska for the Indians* (1982), p. 72.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

penned in the nineteen eighties when the woman's movement was at its height, is hardly going to endear him to feminists.

Bearing in mind the veiled references to black power many critics have assumed that the 'Minnie/Antigone' prototype is underpinned by a parody of Angela Davis, the feminist intellectual and activist.<sup>73</sup> Indeed in the novel Minnie is often exasperated at Sister's passivity and the latter's lack of understanding for her left wing aims. Hence Minnie exclaims,

'Nothing can stop my Moochers [...] We Moochers understand nothing but blood [...] La Bas and our kind will be locked in interminable struggle against the fascist insect [...] My slogans know everything. With my slogans I can change the look of the future any time I wish [...] Sisters and Brothers are going into every part of the nation carrying the good word. Our name is on everyone's tongue, and after that most recent shoot-out in which our brothers fled into the arms of glorious Hades, our popularity has increased manifold.' (*LDLR*, 57-58)

If we read this passage as a critique of Davis then Reed hints very strongly at her involvement with the Communist Party, and her activities as part of the Black Panther group. Linguistically Reed's words bear a remarkable correspondence to a speech of Davis's delivered at a Black Panther rally in 1969. Initially she exclaimed how she preferred 'to be called sister much more than professor' and in the context of protesting against the Vietnam war she affirmed the inevitability of revolution: 'I feel that it is our responsibility to fight on all fronts, to fight on all fronts simultaneously to defeat and to humiliate the US Government and all the fascist tactics by which it is repressing liberation fighters in this country'.<sup>74</sup> The character Minnie appears to embrace the prospect of death in order to further her revolutionary objectives. Indeed Davis along with a number of Black Panthers at that time also preferred to risk passing away than submit to the oppressive authority of white society.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> See Peter Nazareth, *In the Trickster Tradition: The Novels of Andrew Salkey, Francis Ebejar and Ishmael Reed* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Press, 1994), pp. 180-183; Lorenzo Thomas, 'Two Crowns of Thoth: A Study of Ishmael Reed's *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*', in *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed*, pp. 85-104 (pp. 93-95); Crouch, 'Interview with Ishmael Reed' 1976, pp. 96-110.

<sup>74</sup> Angela Davis, 'The Liberation of Our People', in *East Bay History* <<http://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2009/04/15/18589458>> [accessed 11 April 2012]. These extracts are to be found in Davis's speech, delivered at a Black Panther rally in Bobby Hutton Park, Oakland, California in November 1969.

<sup>75</sup> Davis's membership of radical groups caused her to be watched very closely by the United States government, and her links to the Communist party resulted in her dismissal from the post of assistant professor of philosophy at the University of California. Eventually she was charged by the authorities with conspiracy to free George Jackson, a black political prisoner, which involved a bloody shootout in front of a courthouse in California in 1970. This resulted in a conviction when the FBI asserted that Davis armed prisoners in the Marin County courthouse with guns that were registered in her name. When a warrant was issued for her arrest, she

Reed certainly concentrates on what he believes to be the misguided objectives of Black liberation towards violence and bloodshed and through the hands of a female spokesperson he seems to be addressing the futility of the black woman's protest and voice.

The most controversial aspect of the novel arises when Minnie sets fire to the Gumbo works and she is captured and brought before La Bas. In a furious altercation he accuses her firstly of harbouring an ambition to set up a feminist cult in the business premises she will inherit, and secondly, of sabotaging black men's attempts to build a business that benefitted the community. He roars,

“Women use our children as hostages against us. We walk the streets in need of women and make fools of ourselves over women: fight each other, put Louisiana Red on each other, shoot and maim each other. The original blood-sucking vampire was a woman. You flirt with us, tease us, provoke us...then you furtively pretend you don't want it [...] I can't understand why you want to be liberated. Hell. You already free—you already liberated. Liberated and powerful. We're the ones who are slaves; two-thirds of the men on skid row were driven there by their mothers, wives, daughters, their mistresses and their sisters”.

“I don't believe that. The sisters have been wronged, and it's time for us to take over; we've held the family together for all these years.”

“Every time I hear you say that I get sick. Inaccurate as usual. Your ideas seem to come from your spleen and not your head. For you to say that is an insult to the millions of Negro men who've supported their families; freemen who bought their families freedom, negro men who are parking-lot attendants, busboys, slop emptiers, performing every despicable deed to make ends meet against tremendous odds [...]”

“Aw, negro, you must be tripping. It's the negro man who is to blame. He's like an insect that fertilizes a woman and then deserts her. All he knows is basketball and pussy [...] I don't have to stay here and listen to this.”  
(*LDLR*, 126-129)

This extraordinarily vicious outburst from La Bas can be understood on a number of levels. Firstly, his attack on women could be explained through the metaphor of Louisiana Red since it points to the destructive potential within the black community. However in this context, it seems to be specifically premised on the belief that the real vitality and diligence of black

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spent two weeks as a fugitive avoiding the police. Davis's eventual trial and conviction rested on the charge of the murder of 6 people, as well as kidnapping, even though she was not actually present at the shootings. The fact that Davis owned some of the firearms involved meant that she spent sixteen months in prison after which she was acquitted of all charges in 1972. During this period an intense amount of national and international support was garnered for Davis's release. See 'Voices from the Gaps', Minnesota University < <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/artistpages/davisAngela.php> > [accessed 11 April 2012]



culture is male. At the same time La Bas reveals a number of anxieties about masculinity that centre on the issue of the perpetual emasculation of black men by black women. He purports that the black female is modelled on a 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' figure, a vampyric parasite of sexuality, who lures men into servitude and drudgery. It is worthwhile noting that when the black activist Toni Cade Bambara, was rallying the call for women's liberation in 1970 she observed 'that if a woman is tough, she's a rough mamma, a strident bitch, a ballbreaker, a castrator', which confirms that a number of black males envisaged feminism as a problem that would divide and hinder the progress of the black community.<sup>76</sup> In counterpoint Minnie is allowed to have her say. She depicts the black male at the other end of the scale, as one who enslaves himself on account of his voracious potency and desire, a feature that ultimately leads to the abandonment of women and children. She maintains that it was only due to the tenacity of black women that the family unit survived thus providing a historical reason for the rise of black matriarchy and eventually feminism.

Secondly, the quotation exemplifies how, as a black spokeswoman, the figure of Minnie/Antigone/Angela is now fused into one 'uber' matriarch who seriously threatens the autonomy and status of black men. Davis was one of the first individuals to connect the struggle for women's liberation with black people and in one of her early publications, *Women, Race and Class*, she drew attention to the culture of slavery and focused on the historical details of black women's subjugation.<sup>77</sup> She argued that the latter 'were equal to their men in the oppression they suffered' and furthermore they resisted slavery with a passion equal to their men's'.<sup>78</sup> From Davis's perspective the real image of black women meant that they had a voice in the political arena when battling against slavery and that they suffered the same punishments as the men. One can only assume that Reed was aware of the political and feminist issues that Davis was involved in for famously she was prepared to fight to the same extent as the men, and she urged other black women in the liberation

<sup>76</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: Washington Square, 1970), p. 125.

<sup>77</sup> There were some antecedents. In 1925 Marita Bonner wrote her first essay, 'On Being Young-A Woman-And Colored' which detailed the distressing conditions suffered by black women during the Harlem Renaissance period. She identified the tensions operating between race, gender and society and the contradiction between 'the emancipatory promise of an *ultimately masculine* "New Negro" and the disappointing reality of the female urban experience'. Bonner spoke of the 'paralysis, the frustration and the feminine confinement' of black middle-class women in Harlem society. See Yolanda Williams, 'Marita Bonner (1898-1971)' in *Encyclopaedia of African American Women Writers* (Westport CT: Greenwood, 2007), pp. 39-42. By the nineteen seventies Davis drew attention to the two independent women's movements based on differences in class and she makes the point that up until that point the black woman had been excluded from the debates.

<sup>78</sup> Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (London and New York: The Women's Press, 1981, repr. 1986)

movement to be more aggressive and not to capitulate to what she saw as black male dominance in the Civil Rights movement.

To add further acrimony La Bas contemptuously raises the issue of male-on-female violence later in his speech. By adding the contention, ‘you say it was all rape, huh?’ (*LDLR*, 127).

This implies that he was mistrustful of the claims of rape throughout history suggesting that this was often a feigned excuse by black women who wished to wreak revenge on black males. Yet Davis was emphatic in her analysis of slavery that,

the accumulated experiences of all those women who toiled under the lash of their masters, worked for and protected their families, fought against slavery, and who were beaten and raped, but never subdued. It was those women who passed on to their nominally free female descendants a legacy of hard work, perseverance and reliance, a legacy of tenacity, resistance and insistence on sexual equality—in short, a legacy spelling out standards for a new womanhood.<sup>79</sup>

She affirms that black women never capitulated to slavery in spite of being routinely attacked, thus raising the question of why would they surrender to the continuing chauvinism of white society and the resurgent patriarchy of black men. Slave women set out a blueprint for black feminists to follow in the gender battles of the nineteen seventies and La Bas’s tirade seems to deliberately draw attention to these facts in a bid to set the record straight for black men while undermining the achievements of black women.

Thirdly, it is possible to comprehend La Bas’s outburst as wholly misogynistic and it was precisely this form of reading that caused Barbara Smith, the critic, scholar and black feminist, to pen an indignant review of the novel. Although she commended Reed on writing ‘a textbook on irony’ she also noted that,

Reed appears deeply concerned with the relationship between the sexes, but on this topic his views are frighteningly distorted. Throughout *Louisiana Red* there is joking contempt toward women, particularly black women. When he satirizes the women’s movement his originality disappears and he falls back on the tired stereotype of feminists as man-hating dykes [...] Reed’s views on a difficult problem are antediluvian and for this reader they cloud the entire impact of his work. If he is so insensitive in this area, how can he be so incisive in others? (Can I laugh with a man who seems so hostile towards

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

me?) As a critic I found *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* brilliant. As a black woman I am not nearly so enthusiastic.<sup>80</sup>

Pointedly Smith attempts to review the novel on the grounds of its contribution to satire in the black literary tradition but her main response is one of unease and disappointment with Reed's representation of black women and furthermore it is this overriding reaction that dominates the conclusion of her article. Her offence stems from the fact that although one might attempt to regard the novel as an attempt to address the historical issue of black male emasculation there seems to be no humour whatsoever in La Bas's speech. Presumably Reed intended the reader to take these remarks straight from the hip and to provoke debate, even doubts, about the efficacy of black feminism. Smith clearly alludes to this as Reed's hangup since he has undoubtedly used the novel as a platform for expounding chauvinist material and for denouncing what he considers to be the wrong steps taken along the road to black liberation.

Reed's responses to the critiques of his novel have been remarkably varied ranging from wry amusement to testiness. In a self-interview, recorded in 1974, he comments that 'I get my strongest criticism from some of the "Sisters". I guess this is because they want me to improve and do better, god bless them'.<sup>81</sup> This sanguine appraisal greatly contrasts with an interview he gave to Stanley Crouch in 1976 when the latter confronts Reed with what he purported to be the common view that *Louisiana Red* is 'an extremely reactionary book, one that proposes the beating of recalcitrant women [...and] opposes women's liberation'.<sup>82</sup> Reed's reaction led him to condemn these viewpoints as 'ridiculous', and he dismissed the comments as the work of African American intellectuals who wax lyrical about politics without actually encountering real individuals on the street. He concedes that there is 'a patriarchal character' because 'there are patriarchs all over the place' but he is dismissive of his portrayal of particular individuals claiming, 'I didn't have Angela Davis in mind'.<sup>83</sup> Contradictorily in 1984, he appears to be more direct and acknowledges that the 'Minnie/Antigone/Angela' figure was based on a,

<sup>80</sup> Barbara Smith, 'New Republic', 1974, in *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed*, pp. 83-85 (p. 84-85).

<sup>81</sup> Reed, 'Writer as Seer: Ishmael Reed on Ishmael Reed', 1974, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 59-73 (p. 67).

<sup>82</sup> Crouch, 'Interview with Ishmael Reed', 1976, pp. 101-102.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

Self-indulgent female; solipsistic, I guess. That was my attitude toward the feminist movement at the time and some of the feminists at the time [...] I had a patriarch in there and people objected to La Bas getting in his good lines. There are patriarchs and you can't sweep them under the rug just because there's a new political movement on the scene [...] That was a very controversial book. One feminist jumped on me, and I've never recovered from that attack. She called me a misogynist.<sup>84</sup>

Reed therefore claims that he portrays a feminist type rather than Davis specifically yet he appears to show great resentment about the attention her status accrued. Very pointedly he queried her status back in 1972 by asking, 'Why does Angela Davis get more publicity than George Scala, the other point of view?'<sup>85</sup> Generally Reed's responses demonstrate his tendency to condone the conservative outlook of La Bas, one that is in accord with a dominant chauvinist conservatism that all women should ultimately accede to.

The feminist issues of *Louisiana Red* resonate even more intensively in Reed's 1986 novel, *Reckless Eyeballing*. The publication of the latter was an event that many critics perceived as initiating a literary tornado because it almost exclusively focuses on the debates associated with nineteen eighties feminism. The setting of the novel is the New York theatre scene, and one of the central characters is the feted black female writer, Tremonisha Smarts, who is the author of a celebrated feminist play, '*Wrong Headed Man*'.<sup>86</sup> In this she depicts the lead male character, Mose, as 'the big black ape' who 'throws his missionary wife down the stairs [...] goes on a spree of woman-bashing rape and incest' as well as selling his mother-in law into bondage and having bestial relations with his pets (*RE*, 9-10). Tremonisha is encouraged in her literary endeavours by Becky French, a white feminist producer, but as a result of her success, at black men's expense, Tremonisha is assaulted in her apartment by a serial attacker called the Flower Phantom who ties her up and shaves her head. This figure strikes again and again even 'tying up at gunpoint and shaving the head of a feminist writer who had suggested in a book that the typical rapist was a black man' (*RE*, 50). The main male protagonist of *Reckless Eyeballing*, Ian Ball, is a struggling black playwright, who outwardly despises the actions of the Phantom, and at the same time, even though his 'head told him that this man

<sup>84</sup> Reginald Martin, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed' 1983, pp. 235- 244, <<http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/book/?fa=customcontent&GCOI=15647100621780&extrasfile=A09F7FE6-B0D0-B086-B6D5054DCAA9826A.html>> [accessed 21 November 2008]

<sup>85</sup> Al Young, 'Interview: Ishmael Reed', 1972, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 41-50 (p. 50). George Scala was a young African American jazz artist.

<sup>86</sup> Reed, *Reckless Eyeballing* (London: W.H. Allen, 1989), p. 9. Further references to this edition are given parenthetically after quotations in the text.

was a lunatic who should be put away for a long time [...] his gut was cheering the man on' (RE, 51). Thus secretly Ball approves of the Phantom for responding so aggressively to black feminism.

On the whole Ball is consumed by his desire for the opposite sex, commenting in the early part of the text that 'my mom always taught me to respect women' (RE, 17). However he tends to sexually objectify all women and his interactions with females suggest a mercenary outlook: 'Ball's postcoital manners were bad. He'd like whoever he'd balled the night before to clear out before dawn' (RE, 111). In terms of the professional literary scene, and, as a mouthpiece for Reed to a major extent, Ball deeply resents the literary success of black women and they in turn regard him as a misogynist because of the sexism within his first play, 'Suzanna'. As a result he becomes very bitter from the experience of being placed on the theatre 'sex list' (RE, 26) by Becky who spends her time in the novel blacklisting and boycotting male writers who refuse to adhere to the new gender political correctness. This is taken directly from Reed's own experience: 'In the 1950's, you had the black list [...] Now you have the sexist list. I'm on that one'.<sup>87</sup> Ball knows that his reputation as a male writer is in jeopardy and, moreover, he and his friends,

the black male writers whom he referred to as the fellas, had observed that since the film version of *Wrong Headed Man* was being produced, directed, and written by white males, that they, the fellas, could look forward to a good media head-whipping just about the time the film came out. They imagined that the white feminist critics were already lining up to review it [...] even feuding about which one was going to be the first to [...] skin Mose—the American black man—alive (RE, 12).

The plot of the play '*Wrong Headed Man*' is rather transparent in its resemblance to aspects of Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, for both texts depict black men as dangerous brutes who abuse women and children. This quotation shows how Reed's form of parody sails uncomfortably close to reality when one considers that *Reckless Eyeballing* could be his revenge novel to address what he believed to be the overestimation of black female writers.

Previously Reed denied, when challenged, that Minnie Mocher was based on Angela Davis in *Louisiana Red*, and similarly Reed denies that he was thinking of Walker when he created the character Tremonisha, arguing that she comes under the radar of 'pastiche' and that he

<sup>87</sup> Dick, 'Interview with Ishmael Reed', 1997, p. 244. See also Reed, *The Reed Reader*, 2000, p. xvii.

was 'thinking about five or six different people'.<sup>88</sup> His only defence is that Tremonisha was depicted as 'a playwright, not a novelist'.<sup>89</sup> However in a series of interviews throughout the eighties, Reed's crusade on behalf of black manhood intensified as he declared, 'I'm more and more beginning to express the Black male point of view, because it's being left out' on the grounds that feminists were excluding the male voice through their hegemonic access to 'publishing and publicity departments'.<sup>90</sup> As in life, the problem with the character, Tremonisha, is that she is a confident, capable and highly successful black female writer who threatens to dominate the black literary market ahead of the male writers. It is generally the case that if Reed is irked by something he will offer a critique through the guise of fiction and this appraisal will be supplemented in his essays and interviews. When Reed feels that African American men have been insulted or slighted then he usually targets those he believes to be the detractors. He might hold the cultural establishment culpable for creating and strengthening the stereotypes but in *Reckless Eyeballing* he pinpoints the white feminists who encourage female black writers to depict black men in such a negative way that the reader is almost bound to be reminded of Walker's novel.

As a result of Reed's contempt for *The Color Purple*, the barely suppressed anger throughout *Reckless Eyeballing* suggests that this work could be loosely classed as Reed's semi-autobiographical novel based on his experience with black feminists. Reed's alter ego, Ball, is forced to adopt a Machiavellian outlook in order to both keep working within the theatre and win literary acclaim. He manipulates the feminists by writing, 'Reckless Eyeballing', a play about a lynched black man who is posthumously tried for raping a woman with his lecherous stares.<sup>91</sup> He develops an uneasy relationship with Tremonisha who much to his disgust is appointed by Becky to mentor him and direct his new play. To provoke the former he remarks,

'some of the fellas say that they can't follow the dialect in *Wrong Headed Man*. I mean if they can't follow it how are these white women who praise it so enthusiastically able to follow it! [...] they say that you know as much about the way black people talk as Al Capp knew about Indian languages' (*RE*, 70).

<sup>88</sup> Rebekah Presson, 'Ishmael Reed Interview', 1988, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 303-313 (p. 308).

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Joseph Henry, 'A MELUS Interview: Ishmael Reed', 1982, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 205-218 (p. 214).

<sup>91</sup> The title, *Reckless Eyeballing*, pointedly refers to the practice of a black man looking at a white woman.

This critique of Tremonisha's black dialect mirrors Reed's objections to the favourable reviews of Walker's novel.<sup>92</sup> Tremonisha explodes at Ball's remarks though she is able to gauge his mettle by caustically remarking, 'You got a thing about black women. They're either vamps or being subservient to some man [...] and then you give the old whorish white bitches all the good lines, and don't leave no good lines for the sisters' (*RE*, 73). In the first part of this statement Reed could almost be engaging in self-parody, but dramatically this is meant to comprise Tremonisha's revenge against Ball's criticism as she insists that, 'I want you to do better' (*RE*, 73). Ball is surprised to hear her attack the white critics who supported her, but he agrees with her comments and curiously this is a turning point in his development, for by the opening night of his play he recognises that he admires Tremonisha for her professionalism in theatre ethics and management. When Ball discovers that she has recommended that he should be taken off the 'SEX LIST' because she classed him as 'a southerner', and therefore, 'not as bitter and as paranoid as some of his northern soul brothers' (*RE*, 101-102) he is elated enough to think of embracing her. Her recommendation also noted that Ball had shown much improvement in his attitude to women yet the irony is that privately Ball retains his chauvinist views throughout.

This moment of concession for a fellow black writer actually resonates with a moment in Reed's career when he admitted that not including female poets in the 1972 anthology, *19 Necromancers from Now*, 'was a mistake [...] I've changed. Our Before Columbus Foundation used to be called the Boys Club by various women. Now even our president is female [...] Now my publishing company, I. Reed Books, and our magazine, *Quilt*, publishes mostly women writers'.<sup>93</sup> Reed demonstrates a more reflective and conciliatory tone and he records that women are now empowered to work and contribute to the governance and literary input of these organizations. However, in fiction there seems to be much slippage in the way his black female characters fall from one role to another, and it appears that the same fate must befall all those black women who cause problems by attempting to control the men. In *Louisiana Red*, Minnie Mocher forgoes her voice and participation in the feminist movement firstly, because she is arrested and beaten, but secondly, because La Bas 'won her out' and in gratitude 'she cuddled up to his chest [...] and began to sob' (*RE*, 169). In shock

<sup>92</sup> See the next section: *The Social Legacy of Feminism*, pp. 42-56.

<sup>93</sup> Lee Bartlett, 'And That History Is Subject to the Will: Ishmael Reed', 1987, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 258-270 (p. 265).

Minnie slips into a coma but upon waking the assumption is made that she is now cleansed of her former feminist affiliations.

In *Reckless Eyeballing*, Tremonisha writes a letter to Ball, which reads more as a declaration from one of Reed's essays. She totally renounces her feminist views and undergoes a domestic metamorphosis. She moves to the rural farming area of Yuba City in northern California with her boyfriend, Dred Crème, an unemployed saxophonist and drug addict, who formerly attempted to strangle her. Her intention is to totally indulge him, 'get fat, have some babies and write, write, write' (*RE*, 130). This is not before she recants:

[...] when black came in I became that, and when the feminist thing was the hip lick I joined that and then the womanist fad. I was trying to please the sisterhood [...] The success of *Wrong Headed Man* turned into my curse. You know what those brothers said about me, and even some of the black women were hostile. I didn't care. What money or influence did they have? [...] I was writing about some brutal black guys who I knew in my life who beat women, abandoned their children, cynical, ignorant, and arrogant you know these types, but my critics and people who praised me took some of these characters and made them out to be *all* black men. That hurt me [...] Anyhow I've begun a new play. You remember how guys got on me because I went on TV that time and said that when black men weren't killing each other, they were killing women. Well, I was wrong and you were right. It's the other way around, according to statistics. The women are the ones who are killing the men, and they get off too, as though there was some kind of bounty on the black men (*RE*, 129-131).

This has to be the apex of Reed's parody and his life ideal: drawing out the epiphany of the successful black female writer where she turns her back on her former feminist principles and admits that the male chauvinist, Ball, was right all along. This extract, which actually amounts to four and a half pages of renunciation from Tremonisha, is underpinned by the voice of Reed. One might believe that one was reading one of his interviews or journalistic essays.

The quotation implies that black women were duped into joining various contemporary women's movements, and the 'womanist' reference has to be a snipe at the term, coined by Walker.<sup>94</sup> The inference is that Tremonisha was lured into joining a black feminist group that

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<sup>94</sup> Alice Walker published a collection of essays, articles, speeches and statements under the title, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* in 1983. In this she espoused her theory of 'Womanism', which focused on the liberation of black women and the physical and spiritual well-being of the black community, inclusive of black men. This



encouraged her to write of the black men that she had personally witnessed abusing and oppressing black women, to the point where this was regarded as normal behaviour for all black males. Oblivious to censure Tremonisha remains a feted writer by a number of black and white supporters until the point where she becomes disillusioned by the white women who question her continually about ‘the “raw sex” and how black men were’ (*RE*, 130), while others used Tremonisha’s perception of her black male characters to assuage themselves from the guilt of taking their jobs. Tremonisha even claims, with echoes of La Bas’s diatribe in *Louisiana Red*, that the women were ultimately responsible for the high number of black male deaths in America. Penned by Reed these words are pure propaganda but nevertheless they must be music to his ears, especially when Tremonisha admits that the working class characters she ‘tried to write about and their proletariat voices, I attempted to mime were phony’, because ‘all of us who grew up in the middle class want to romanticize people who are worse off than we are’ (*RE*, 131). This confirms Reed’s scathing views of *The Color Purple*.

Tremonisha’s statements can be contextualised from an interview given by Reed where he claimed that, ‘she’s the one with integrity in the book [...] the one who finally mans that scene of corruption, which is New York City, which is Babylon’.<sup>95</sup> Certainly she is a controlling, empowered and an artistically principled woman throughout and by contrast Reed claims that ‘the black male characters make off worse than she does. So why don’t people say I’m against black men’.<sup>96</sup> Reed’s point begs the question: does Tremonisha demonstrate integrity for Reed only because she renounces feminism to champion the cause of black men; because she admits her play has certain linguistic improbabilities, and because she exposes the spuriousness of the east coast hub of writing and publishing only to leave it for a life of conjugal bliss in the rural hinterland? These markers appear to suggest that Reed’s understands the virtue of integrity in terms of honesty, traditionalism and how much an individual is prepared to fight against ideologies or corruption. It appears that Reed approves of Tremonisha because she capitulates to the black male point of view.

Alternatively if we focus on Ian Ball then arguably he is a sinister character who generally treats all women as sex objects and who pretends to modify his writing in order to write ‘a play that’s guaranteed to please’ all women who ‘get the best parts and the best speeches’

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distanced itself from white feminists because this branch of the women’s liberation movement disregarded the issues of race and class.

<sup>95</sup> Presson, ‘Ishmael Reed Interview’, 1988, p. 308.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

(*RE*, 3).<sup>97</sup> Quite typically after his play was performed, a feminist who is depicted as ‘chairperson of women’s studies at a small obscure university in Cincinnati’, approaches and apologises to him for advising one of her students against choosing Ball’s plays to be the subject of her doctoral dissertation. She explains, ‘I said you were a notorious sexist even though I hadn’t seen any of your work’ (*RE*, 105). As she begins to cry on his chest Ball addresses the small crowd that gathers and pompously opines, ‘sometimes we feel that our goals are so righteous, so necessary for the benefit of personkind, that we in our haste make mistakes that we later regret’ (*RE*, 105). This is dishonourable conduct given that Ball still harbours his bigoted views of women and the fact that he has totally sold out to the New York feminist agents even induces Jake Brashford, to shout after him, ‘you ain’t nothin’ but a trickologist with your fuzzy quick lines’ (*RE*, 106). Again, Reed inscribes these dramatic incidents into the novel because they are true to his own experience of feminist boycotts, especially the incident referred to in the introductory chapter of this study, where Ralph Ellison shouted after Reed that he was a ‘con artist’.<sup>98</sup>

Even worse is the final disclosure of the novel when Ball’s mother discovers the costume of the Flower Phantom and a collection of his victims’ hair in his suitcase. That he is apparently unaware of his second identity means that clinically he could be suffering from a split personality disorder, which Reed classes as, ‘a two-head of two minds, the one not knowing what the other is up to’ (*RE*, 146).<sup>99</sup> The reader is informed that Ball’s ‘head was Dr. Jekyll, but his gut was Mr. Hyde’ (*RE*, 51), which relates to the Hoodoo curse laid on Ball’s pregnant mother, Martha, by his father’s first wife. Another explanation for this split could follow that as a result of women’s aggressive and controlling behaviour Ball is a victim who has been rendered mentally unstable and prone to bouts of revenge against the insults levelled at black men. The last explanation seems plausible especially given that Ball’s mother is portrayed as ‘a clairvoyant [...] who could look around corners and underneath the ground’

<sup>97</sup> Ball’s disingenuity is recycled by Reed into the character of Chappie Puttbutt in his 1993 novel, *Japanese by Spring*. Chappie feigns an interest in feminism in order to win tenure at Jack London University.

<sup>98</sup> Reed received a letter from a ‘feminist scholar’ at the University of Cincinnati, informing him, that ‘her choice of his work as subject was “disputed” by the chairperson of women’s studies on the grounds that I was a well-known sexist’. See Elizabeth and Thomas Settle, ed., *Ishmael Reed: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982), p. ix.

<sup>99</sup> A split personality disorder is normally described in psychiatric diagnosis as a dissociative identity disorder which means that the sufferer could experience at least two clear identities or personality states, sometimes referred to as alters. These personality states may have distinctly different ways of reacting, in terms of emotions, pulse, blood pressure, and blood flow to the brain. See Roxanne Dryden-Edwards, ‘Dissociative Identity Disorder’ <[www.medicinenet.com/dissociative\\_identity\\_disorder/article.htm](http://www.medicinenet.com/dissociative_identity_disorder/article.htm)> [accessed 23 April 2012]

(*RE*, 4). She is able to observe and monitor his behaviour from the West Indies which suggests that this is why Ball left for New York in the first place. Such is her oppressive nurturing that, in the beginning of the novel he dreams of ‘a snakeskinned hand [...] about to cut off a rattler’s head’ after he had been led to a gallows by a Puritan, who ‘wasn’t a guard at all but his mother’ (*RE*, 1). Wallace regards these dream factors as a ‘metaphorical castration’ and she alludes to ‘Neo-Freudian’ terminology when she comments, ‘the castrated female is so much an inevitability of this narrative that a man must occupy the space if a woman won’t’.<sup>100</sup> This means that, ‘Ian Ball is cast in a female or “feminine” role’ while his mother turns executioner.<sup>101</sup> Thus women are controlling every aspect of Ball’s life: his home, his psyche and his profession and the implication is that this factor leads him to commit literary deceptions and violent assaults.

If Ball is a thin parody of Reed, then so is Tremonisha to a lesser extent, because both characters bolster his requisite fantasy of ultimate victory over the feminist critics who must eventually recognise the offences that have been laid against black American men.

Unsurprisingly *Reckless Eyeballing* brought forth very strong critical reactions. The Japanese American critic, Michiko Kakutani, from the *New York Times* observed that to engender ‘full shock value, Mr. Reed himself employs stereotypes, creating a gallery of repellent characters’ and that ‘like much of his earlier fiction, it’s a nasty, idiosyncratic blend of invective, satire and social criticism, served up with lots of narrative pratfalls and jokes’.<sup>102</sup> Clearly she finds no humour whatsoever in this work, and she implies that no reader would be able to understand Reed’s discourse on a parodic or even a humorous level. She dismisses it as ‘ugly talk’ and her point is that even though this might be meant ‘to jar the reader into some new perceptions about bigotry’ it merely results in a work where the ‘sexist banter of the men comes off as a “boys will be boys” silliness whereas the feminist criticism of men takes on more sinister proportions’.<sup>103</sup> Finally she accuses Reed of a ‘paranoid position with disturbing implications’ that consequently ‘does a disservice to Mr. Reed’s own notable career’.<sup>104</sup> This extremely negative critique upset Reed greatly and he attempted to counter this twice in a 1988 interview by attesting that, ‘the insane idea that black men are just as guilty as the slavemaster for atrocities committed against black women [...] is the lie promoted by

<sup>100</sup> Wallace, ‘Female Troubles: Ishmael Reed’s Tunnel Vision’, 1986, p. 187.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Michiko Kakutani, ‘Gallery of the Repellent’, *The New York Times*, 1986, in *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed*, pp. 164-166 (p. 164).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p.166.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

Michiko Kakutani, who is an example of how “third world” tokens are used to do the dirty work that the establishment used to do’.<sup>105</sup> He augments this later with the view that, ‘the language that [...] Kakutani used in reviewing the book was the most violent language used against a black person since [...] her] hateful obituary for Malcolm X. It was the kind of public scolding which would never be used against a white author. I should be honoured’.<sup>106</sup>

Reed’s retort raises two concerns: his unwillingness to accept the legitimacy of a feminist from outside the black community offering comment on African American gender issues seems chauvinistic. Clearly Reed has no confidence in Kakutani’s criticism and in 1985 he accused her of being uninformed and failing to mention key black male writers in her articles on literature.<sup>107</sup> Then he argues that this degree of negative comment is unconstructive and damaging and is still reserved only for African American male authors. Yet Reed appears to be short sighted here, for Kakutani is well known for her prolific number of book reviews, and through the years she has attracted much censure for her harsh critiques of prominent white American authors including Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon and Jonathan Franzen, amongst others.<sup>108</sup>

Typically Reed unleashes his literary revenge against Kakutani in his following novel, *The Terrible Threes* (1989), where she is depicted as Beechiko (allowing for a determined wordplay on ‘bitch’) Mizuni, a feminist and writer who fights against the misogyny of Japanese American men by critiquing them on various television shows and in interviews for prestigious magazines. However Beechiko appears to be prepared to give up most of her ambitions by going to work for free for the unfashionable and outmoded white doyenne of

<sup>105</sup> Shamoan Zamir, ‘An Interview with Ishmael Reed’, 1988, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 271-302 (p. 296).

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>107</sup> Reed criticised Kakutani because she wrote an essay on detective novels and omitted to mention Chester Himes. Also in a piece on war novels she neglected the writer John A. Williams. Worst of all in Reed’s view was that she ‘wrote an article on faction, books in which fact and fiction are merged, and didn’t mention Alex Haley who invented the term’. See Mel Watkins, ‘An Interview with Ishmael Reed’, 1985, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 245-257 (p. 250).

<sup>108</sup> In a letter to Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, the publisher of *The New York Times*, in 2003, Mailer complains that for the previous ten years Kakutani had given bad reviews to each one of his books in that period (*Oswald’s Tale*, *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*, *The Gospel According to the Son*, *The Time of Our Time*, and *The Spooky Art*). He argues that her reviews were slovenly in their appraisal and he tentatively suggests that another journalist/critic might be assigned to this task in future. See

<<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2009/02/27/norman-mailer-vs-everybody-else.html>> [accessed 15 May 2012]; Of Pynchon’s text, *Against the Day*, (2006) Kakutani comments that it ‘is a humongous, bloated jigsaw puzzle of a story, pretentious without being provocative...’. See Michiko Kakutani, ‘A Pynchonesque Turn by Pynchon’, *The New York Times*, November 20, 2006. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/20/books/20kaku.html?pagewanted=all>> [accessed 15 May 2012]

the New York literary scene, Cedric Longsfellow. The same domestic fate befalls Beechiko as Tremonisha, since the former strives to please Longsfellow by ousting his black servants so that she might manage his household affairs, and instating an all-Japanese cuisine and culture instead. Wistfully she wears the blonde wigs of his first wife until he reveals, 'You don't have to be a blonde Beechiko. I love you the way you are [...] I like the texture of your skin. Your eyes [...] are so inscrutable'.<sup>109</sup> This form of parody is meant to resonate with authors who live in fear of never really knowing what Kakutani thinks about their work. Nevertheless Longsfellow's declaration culminates in a proposal of marriage which presumably for Beechiko is the fulfilment of all her dreams. It is worth noting that when the black critic, Gerald Early, reviewed *The Terrible Threes* in 1989, he commented that Reed's 'criticism of bourgeois feminism [...] seems unconnected to the novel's major theme. And that is precisely what is intriguing about this book: it has no real point or theme'.<sup>110</sup> Indeed the two chapters devoted to Beechiko and Longsfellow have no relevance to the plot or to the other protagonists, apart from a brief supernatural involvement with the trickster figure, Black Peter, who unveils the unpleasant characteristics of Longsfellow's first wife, thus acting as a cupid figure.<sup>111</sup> This suggests that Reed's agenda consisted of nothing more than trumping his critics and inferring that all feminists are or ought to be closet home-makers who secretly wish to settle down and look after their men.

When Michelle Wallace reviewed *Reckless Eyeballing* her article was no less hard hitting. She concentrated her early remarks on Alice Walker suggesting puzzlement over the latter's declaration of being a womanist in 1984 in order to distance herself from white feminists, but then Wallace asserts that Walker 'had the right idea after all' given the 'feminist-baiting of Reed and his cohorts'.<sup>112</sup> In fact Wallace insists that black feminism is grounded in the grim reality of a 'black female population that is disproportionately poor and voiceless'.<sup>113</sup> Like Kakutani, Wallace concluded that *Reckless Eyeballing* is:

the most extreme literary enactment so far of Reed's female trouble [...] the problem appears to be that Reed doesn't relish the idea of black women

<sup>109</sup> Reed, *The Terrible Threes* (New York: Atheneum Macmillan, 1989), p.101.

<sup>110</sup> Gerald Early, 'Still Subverting the Culture', *The New York Times*, 1989 in *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed*, pp. 192-194 (p. 193).

<sup>111</sup> There is a possibility that this narrative interlude could be loosely based on Kakutani's life when she studied under the noted Yale author and professor, John Hersey until 1976. Later she worked at *Time* magazine where he had previously held a post.

<sup>112</sup> Wallace, 'Female Troubles: Ishmael Reed's Tunnel Vision', 1986, p. 185.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

making public judgements about black men, although prominent black men, including Reed, can insist on the right to define and describe black women. With Reed, we're considering a kind of knee-jerk non-perceptiveness in which he mindlessly competes with white women for the number two spot, and will brook no interference from black women [...] Reed's determination to see feminism as a historical error reduces his black feminist characters to hand puppets mouthing his inane views [...] Is he proposing a game of the dozens as the final solution to the Woman's Question? Is he terror-struck by his relative proximity as a black male to the castration complex of femaleness? [...] Or is he sleepwalking. If any or all of these are the case, I suggest that a brief hibernation might not be totally unwarranted.<sup>114</sup>

Wallace firmly locates Reed in the space of black male misogyny and she infers that his writing is unwarranted and so frenzied that the quality of literature is marred by his own crass pre-occupations with feminism. Her remarks seem to have some merit when she maintains that Reed is adamant in his refusal to allow black feminists a voice. As a result she infers that Reed's career is in decline because of these traits and her question about Reed's gaming invokes the Trickster figure depicted by Ball as the Flower Phantom. This reveals that she believes that Reed's level of 'signifyin' is one step too far given the underlying connotation that all black feminists should be metaphorically beaten and exposed as traitors to the black community.<sup>115</sup> Wallace hints that Reed is in the same psychological bind as Ball, that he might feel his sexual and political identity to be threatened because he could be experiencing the very same sense of castration inadequacy as females.<sup>116</sup> Her conclusion, that Reed should temporarily refrain from writing, demonstrates her impatience with what she maintains are his aberrantly chauvinist views.

Wallace's remarks provoked Reed to respond in 1987 that her 'article was designed to make him feel bad because it contained a number of unfriendly remarks, many of them erroneous, about my writings, about my career, and about me'.<sup>117</sup> He particularly resented her use of the image of castration when critiquing the character of Ian Ball and he tries to expose this as a case of double standards since as a staunch feminist who generally vetoes patriarchy, Wallace appeared to be basing her ideas on 'one of the most notorious and misogynistic of patriarchs,

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., pp. 189-190.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>116</sup> Historically from the period of slavery black males were mentally castrated in many respects for they were generally forbidden to co-habit with the female slaves, or to marry or have families. This was the prerogative of the white slavemasters.

<sup>117</sup> Reed, *Writin' is Fightin'* (New York: Atheneum Macmillan, 1990), p. 153. It is also illuminating to discover that Reed claims to be the first to publish the fiction of Wallace, who he classed as a 'brilliant young writer'. See p. 151.

Sigmund Freud'.<sup>118</sup> Reed was also keen to point out that her analysis of the serpent fails to connect the great significance of the snake with 'Vodoun, a neo-African religion', which is one of his perennial cultural interests.<sup>119</sup> He also refers to her remarks about Walker and womanists as being unrepresentative of black women since he argues that they 'probably have over one hundred years of graduate school' between them and that 'there is no evidence that black men are better off than black women'.<sup>120</sup> Even though his final point might have some credibility Reed determines to hit back at Wallace, since presumably he perceives her as another aggressive black woman who must be countered.

On the whole it is difficult to defend Reed against such critiques especially when, quite apart from the issue of *Reckless Eyeballing*, a number of critics from the black and white community, both male and female, perceive him as an author who has problems with women. One can say with some assuredness that Reed's literary mission has been to establish an alternative African American aesthetic, known as Neo-HooDoo, and as part of this project he critiques Western culture including the academic critical terminology used about him which is often located in postmodernist techniques. Reed obviously anticipated criticism since his technique of satire allows him to explode the racial, ethnic and gender stereotypes that pervade literary perception and to lampoon the readings and mis-readings that can be produced by black and white readers' expectations and interpretations. Yet the persistent question arises of whether the novels examined here are genuine attempts by Reed to explore gender politics at key historical moments in the black experience or are we engaging with a writer who genuinely deserves the charges of perverse misogyny? It is particularly helpful to consider the incisive writing of Robert Elliot Fox in 1995 who, in spite of being a long-time critical supporter of Reed's work, writes that 'what irked me [...] was my perception of his treatment of women in his writings; in short I bought the argument that Reed was a misogynist'.<sup>121</sup> Fox continues that Reed's 'fiction and essays frequently betrayed what seemed to me [...] a paranoid tendency when it came to female assertiveness' but to round off his statements Fox concludes that Reed 'isn't against feminism, he's against feminine excess'.<sup>122</sup> These views are measured and suggest Fox's uneasiness with Reed's representation of women and of course it is highly questionable, depending on one's

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., pp.153-154.

<sup>121</sup> Robert Elliot Fox, 'Mumbo Gumbo', *Transition*, p. 104.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

perspective, what form of expression merits the description, 'feminist excess'. Whether this alludes to writing books that are critical of black men or whether it refers to the vast numbers of female black writers being published is not clear and needs further clarification and debate from Fox.

Similarly Pat McGee finds Reed's 'books to be full of misogynistic representations' however he makes a spirited case for considering 'the historical nature of misogyny' in order not to oversimplify Reed's works.<sup>123</sup> He argues for looking 'beyond the author' so that we are able to grasp that, 'the work is not the symptom of Reed but rather Reed [...] is the symptom of history [...] he is both a scapegoat onto which we can project our frustration and anger with social violence and an articulation of the truth of that violence.'<sup>124</sup> Although Reed has to be responsible for what he writes McGee continues to be very accommodating of him when he explains that misogyny is one ideology that Reed's writing 'does not transcend [...] but it does articulate its truth. Why do men hate women? Because they enjoy it.'<sup>125</sup> McGee concludes that he does not wish to make generalisations about all men but neither does he intend to scapegoat Reed for a patriarchal culture due to the omnipresent nature of this in Western culture. Nonetheless this leads one to speculate on the possibility that Reed does enjoy provoking a storm of protest from feminist critics. One of Reed's defences is that 'black women make out better in my books than men do in books by some feminists'.<sup>126</sup> But this is not strictly true. All his characters, whether male or female, are flawed in some way and none are particularly likeable. The white women in his novels mostly meet gruesome ends and as for black women, Fannie Mae suffers from the hexes inflicted on her from her Neo-HooDoo grandmother in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*. Minnie is humiliated and her tough Moocher followers are crushed by attack and rape in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. The black women are attacked in *Reckless Eyeballing* by a serial head-shaver and Fox notes that Reed's 'female characters are for the most part obnoxious, but the male characters are often drawn to them through desire nonetheless'.<sup>127</sup> The Japanese wife of Professor Miller in *Japanese by Spring* is decapitated for her adultery. These women are not renowned any more for their admirable characteristics than the men, and collectively the women are not allowed to develop more honourable qualities. They are controlled and manipulated, often under the

<sup>123</sup> Patrick McGee, *Ishmael Reed and the Ends of Race* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 59.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>126</sup> Presson, 'Ishmael Reed Interview', 1988, p. 308.

<sup>127</sup> Fox, *Conscientious Sorcerers*, p. 80.



auspices of Hoodoo, and one suspects that if some readers agree that the women 'make out better than the men' in Reed's works, this is because a number of the female characters convince themselves that really they ought to forego their ambition and career for what Reed deems to be more worthy domestic roles.

As for the male characters in black feminist novels, they are not all relentlessly evil. Consider for example, the depiction of black men in two of Walker's novels. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), Copeland is a selfish, cruel father and husband who leaves his family to its entrenched poverty in the South, so that he may achieve the promise of a better life in the North. But, after a number of difficult and violent experiences with white people an epiphany occurs allowing Copeland to re-evaluate his former life. Then he returns home as 'a reborn man' to care for the third generation of his family, particularly his granddaughter Ruth.<sup>128</sup> In *The Color Purple*, the character Mr. \_\_\_ demonstrates a boorish ferocity towards his wife, Celie, since she has to endure beatings and rape, even his duplicity, since he treats his mistress Shug, with love and respect. This nearly breaks Celie's spirit, but after she leaves for Memphis and returns as a confident, independent woman, Mr. \_\_\_ totally reforms exclaiming, 'I'm satisfied this is the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feel like a new experience'.<sup>129</sup> He realises that his meanness has cheated him from sharing a wonderful life with his family. He is henceforth known as Albert, thus awarding him a more personal identity and Celie notes how he is the only one who understands her feelings. Questionably these are detestable men who the reader is hardly likely to empathise with, but Walker allows these characters to evolve to overcome their inner and political conflicts, so they might develop into more caring individuals even grandfatherly figures, who find a place in the community. In speaking of her fiction, Toni Morrison explains that, 'I try to burrow as deeply as I can into characters. I don't come up with all good or all bad' thus a number of her black male characters exhibit a sense of transformation.<sup>130</sup> In the *Song of Solomon*, for example, Milkman is an egocentric, disrespectful young man who is indifferent to women's sensitivities and wisdom. Morrison grants the reader insights, however, to show that he was psychologically burdened with the experiences of slavery and racism passed down through his patrilineal generations. Once Milkman discovers his history he learns to value his ancestry

<sup>128</sup> See Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (London: The Women's Press, 1985), p. 157.

<sup>129</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple* (London: The Women's Press, 1992), p. 221.

<sup>130</sup> Nellie McKay, 'An Interview with Toni Morrison', 1983, in *Conversations with Toni Morrison* ed. by Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), pp. 138-155 (p. 145).

and his family, developing a selfhood that respects women's needs in the context of the wider community.

The question is whether Reed is being disingenuous when he claims that black men are depicted more harshly in the works of black feminists. The question of literary genre is often ignored when engaging with such issues. Reed is best seen as a parodist creating two dimensional female types who are caricatures with a limited number of characteristics.

Walker and Morrison, on the other hand, tend to develop complex male characters who can be understood on multiple levels thus allowing for character evolution. In Reed's fiction Fannie Mae, Black Diane and Mammy Barracuda are portrayed as materialistic, selfish, manipulating creatures that wittingly show no sense of transformation, whereas Minnie Moocher and Tremonisha are feminists who pursue political, business and literary careers. Arguably, the latter are focused on their individual goals at the expense, in Minnie's case, of her family, but even her aims are mainly theoretical ones. In Reed's literary world the strong implication arises that it is the feminist ideals that radicalise women and destroy the black community, so that when their transformation occurs they are obliged to renounce their feminism and relinquish control of their lives. The changes that occur are all about restoring manhood to figures such as Loop Garou, Papa La Bas and Ian Ball. Yet Walker and Morrison are saying something different about their male characters. Black men are valued for their complexity and they remain often as the head of the family with a renewed respect for women and more awareness of their role in the community. The lens through which Reed and black female writers view the world is different, and in their texts they register distinctive and unique expressions. Both present counter examples of strong women, who, in a post-racial world, could be a source of gendered solidarity for the black community. However in the present Reed firmly believes that black feminism has set in motion a series of social repercussions which have been highly detrimental for black men and ultimately African Americans.

## **The Social Legacy of Black Feminism**

Reed deployed stereotypes of difficult black women in his fiction as early as 1969, and

gradually throughout the decades he has levelled a number of caustic accusations against feminism:

Black male writers were left for literary roadkill in the late eighties because they were confronted by a powerful feminist movement that designated the black male as a mascot for male evil. Black critics, who saw an opportunity and sales in women's studies and consumers, signed on to this attitude.<sup>131</sup>

In Reed's estimation, the greatest feminist catalyst for unleashing a series of grave social consequences for black males was the publication of Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, in 1982. Since the subject matter dealt with issues of sexual abuse and incest in the period between 1916 and 1942 in the Deep South the novel's critical reception did much to re-ignite male-female antagonisms in the black community. This was soon followed and exacerbated by the publication of a highly influential article by Gloria Steinem in *Ms. Magazine* in the same year. Steinem dismissed the negative reviews of *The Color Purple* by black men on the grounds of envy for 'everything white men have had, including domination over women'.<sup>132</sup> But the most contentious point of the whole article for Reed was Steinem's statement that black men feared 'black women's truth-telling will be misused in a racist society'.<sup>133</sup> In effect this was a glowing tribute by the white editor of a leading feminist publication that was to secure Walker's literary and social reputation as the 'spokeswoman for black women' in America, but more insidiously as far as Reed was concerned, the article suggested that there were many heinous facts to reveal about black men.<sup>134</sup> In the following discussion I hope to show how Reed makes a case for rendering feminists culpable for the gender oppression of black men.

When Steven Spielberg took on the film production of Walker's novel three years later, thus further sensationalising the impact of *The Color Purple*, many in the black community felt that the die was cast forever—black males were now to be internationally renowned for their abusive and violent tendencies. Bearing in mind Reed's particular perception of the social repercussions of feminism this section will be structured around two themes: firstly the depiction of African American men in feminist polemics, and secondly, their targeting and criminalisation by the American media and justice system. By drawing on the texts

<sup>131</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. 152.

<sup>132</sup> Gloria Steinem, 'Do You Know This Woman?', *Ms. Magazine* (1982), 36-37, 89-94 (p. 37).

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> Trudier Harris, 'On *The Color Purple*: Stereotypes and Silence', *Black American Literature Forum*, 18 (1984), 155-161 (p.159).

mentioned above I propose to show how ultimately Reed, on behalf of all black males, believes that whereas the Black Liberation movement enabled black people to gain new sources of strength in society, feminism, as spearheaded by the acclaim of Walker's novel, appeared to be a major act of betrayal and an underlining of dangerous racial stereotypes that the Movement had attempted to overturn.

For many African Americans and white women, *The Color Purple* became a cause celebre in the nineteen eighties and though one could assume that Reed's disapproval could be indicted on a charge of envy or sour grapes, his was only one in a maelstrom of competitive voices and tensions all hinging on the issues of racial and gender identity and equality. Apart from Reed, the novelists Charles R. Johnson and David Bradley, and the critic Stanley Crouch, were most vociferous in their objections to the novel and the success of black women's writing.<sup>135</sup> In the immediate aftermath of *The Color Purple*'s publication Reed unleashed a series of jabs at Walker's work on the grounds of its literary unworthiness. In an interview with Reginald Martin, Reed describes how he challenged the white male critic, Robert Towers (the aptly re-named Towers Bathhurst, 'producer of the movie version of *Wrong Headed Man*' (58) in *Reckless Eyeballing*). Towers reviewed *The Color Purple* and Reed's novel, *The Terrible Twos*, together in the provocatively titled article, 'Good Men are Hard to Find' in 1982.<sup>136</sup> What Reed found particularly insulting was Towers' comment that Walker 'was the best practitioner of black English that had ever written' and in an exchange of angry letters Reed questioned Towers over what he saw as the over-evaluation of Walker's talent until Towers admitted he had read very little African American literature.<sup>137</sup> Reed apparently glosses over the fact that Towers actually did make negative criticisms of *The Color Purple* in the same review, by noting that the male characters were not presented in 'really positive terms'; that there were 'certain improbabilities', and that Walker 'had a lot to learn about plotting and structuring for what is clearly intended to be a realistic novel'.<sup>138</sup> But the worst aspect of this article for Reed has to be, again unmentioned, that Towers compared the two novels in question and that *The Terrible Twos* emerged, in Tower's words, as 'sufficiently entertaining' though not 'in the long run, clever enough, bitter enough, or [...] funny enough

<sup>135</sup> See Karla FC Holloway, 'Gender' in *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature* ed. by Andrews, Foster and Harris (Oxford and New York: Oxford University, 2001), pp. 163-166 (p. 165).

<sup>136</sup> Reed published *The Terrible Twos* in 1982.

<sup>137</sup> Reginald Martin, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed', July 1-7, 1983  
<<http://aalbc.com/authors/ishmael.htm>> [accessed 21 November 2008]

<sup>138</sup> Robert Towers, 'Good Men Are Hard to Find', *The New York Review*, August 12 (1982), 35-36 (p. 36).

to nourish the reader's imagination'.<sup>139</sup> By comparison Towers praised Walker as 'an exceptionally productive novelist'.<sup>140</sup> Reed's reaction to this review demonstrates, firstly, that he cannot accept a critic's praise of a black female novelist over and against the less than positive remarks about his work, and secondly, that black female writers being held in high esteem by the white critical establishment is anathema to Reed's cultural sensibilities.

Such assertions were symptomatic of the cultural developments from the nineteen seventies, which the black sociologist, Calvin Hernton, identified as a time when black men 'were less honourable than the women'.<sup>141</sup> He claimed that,

When black women write about the incest, rape, and sexual violence committed by black men against black females of all ages in the family and in the black community at large, and when black women write that black men are castrators and oppressors of black women, black men accuse the women of sowing weeds of "division" in the black community; the women are accused of promoting animosities not only between the sexes in general but between males and females in the black family itself. In other words, when the women tell the truth about men and refuse to accept the blame for what men have done to them, the men get mad as hell. They get "hurt". They try to discredit and invalidate the women.<sup>142</sup>

This allows one to speculate why Hernton should write with such intensity about the antipathy between black feminist and black male writers since he makes a very strong case for the feminists. Frances Foster claims this stems from 'his impulse to play the black knight' while Hernton claims his wish is to 'clear the air' about the sexual politics'.<sup>143</sup> However in his attempt to set the record straight on the extreme sexism generated against black women writers he can only court controversy since curiously his linguistic register coincides with Steinem's. Both deploy the lexis of 'truth telling' suggesting that finally the dreadful evidence of the racial and sexual character of black men is finally revealed. If his intention is to promote a greater understanding of the literary development of black feminist writers then from Reed's point of view Hernton is actually promoting major dissension amongst African American males.

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<sup>139</sup> Towers, p. 35.

<sup>140</sup> Towers, p. 36.

<sup>141</sup> Calvin Hernton, 'The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers', *Black American Literature Forum*, p. 141.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Frances Smith Foster, Review of 'The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers: Adventures in Sex, Literature and Real Life by Calvin C. Hernton and Afro-American Women Writers, 1746-1933', *Black Literature Forum*, 24 (1990), pp. 151-160 (p. 156). ; Calvin C. Hernton, *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers: Adventures in Sex, Literature and Real Life* (New York: Anchor Press, 1987), p. xvi.

Indeed after the publication of Walker's novel divisiveness was not only apparent between black males, but also in the black feminist movement. The black feminist, Trudier Harris, was severely critical of *The Color Purple* and she also launched an acerbic attack on Gloria Steinem for praising Walker just for being 'alive, black and able to write well.'<sup>144</sup> Harris protests among other things 'that the portrayal of Celie was unrealistic for the time in which the novel was set' leading Harris to re-classify it as a fable or fairy story. Moreover she critiques Walker's portrayal of black men, the dysfunctionality of the black American family and the immorality of many of the work's characters. Her concern is that many people, whom Harris classes as 'spectator readers', could be unaware of the novel's author, and thus the whole novel could be viewed by them as a decent attempt by a Southern white male to 'reinforce the traditional sexual and violent stereotypes'.<sup>145</sup> Harris's greatest criticism however is not levelled at the book itself, but how it 'silences by its dominance', for she finds fault with the way in which the novel silences its critics, especially black women who, in Harris' words, believe that 'to criticise a novel that had been so universally complimented was somehow a desertion of the race and the black woman writer.'<sup>146</sup> As recently as 2003 Reed commended Harris as the 'black scholar' who dared to cause controversy by publishing her view that 'white feminist scholars were responsible for creating a large market for books by a handful of black women, especially those who bashed black men'<sup>147</sup> His tone of admiration is unmistakable, for a black woman who, on the principled grounds of literary, gender and racial authenticity, was prepared to withstand a major career backlash at a time when she was establishing her own scholarly reputation.

Reed's position in the nineteen eighties was premised on the view that black males were now the most oppressed group on earth. He was identified as an 'unrepentant sexist' and in retaliation against this label he accused feminists of 'picking on black men' and indulging in 'namecalling'.<sup>148</sup> He argued that it was impossible to initiate a dialogue with them and his tone of bitterness is unmistakable: 'I think the feminist movement at this point in history is the biggest threat to male survival since the Civil War'.<sup>149</sup> He wrote of the double standards

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<sup>144</sup> Trudier Harris, 'On The Color Purple: Stereotypes and Silence', p.156.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., pp. 155, 157.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>147</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p, 23.

<sup>148</sup> Judith Moore, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed', 1983, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 219-234 (p. 226).

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

arising as a result of the women's movement where male writers dared not disparage women or write of vengeance because of the public condemnation that would regard them 'as hateful, bitter, misguided'.<sup>150</sup> The tensions of this period became so deeply ingrained in Reed's mind they began to fuel a series of obsessions that repeated themselves from book to book until as recently as 2008. Unsurprisingly they centre on Walker and Steinem, for Reed believed that the publication of *The Color Purple* and Steinem's validation of the same work initiated and inflicted irrevocable damage on the cultural perceptions of black men resulting in a 'holocaust' where, 'over 10,000 black men have been lynched'.<sup>151</sup> Reed argued that this statistic could culminate dangerously in 'genocide', given that currently 'most of the people on death rows are black men'.<sup>152</sup> He directly holds that 'untruths about these men, disseminated by people like Gloria Steinem and Alice Walker have set the stage for this new holocaust'.<sup>153</sup>

Such convictions intensified Reed's role as a black watchdog and the publication of the essay, 'Steven Spielberg Plays Howard Beach' in 1988, contains his most powerful expression of anger against black and white feminists.<sup>154</sup> This recorded Reed's reactions to the film adaptation of *The Color Purple* by Steven Spielberg in 1986 and primarily Reed draws a convincing correlation between the film launch and the attack of a gang of white teenagers on three black men in the bay area of Queens, New York, resulting in the death of one black man.<sup>155</sup> Reed's accusations are caustic since he places the culpability in two quarters: firstly Spielberg, as the entrepreneurial white male director, for saying 'that when he read the book *The Color Purple*, all he could think of was rescuing Celie'.<sup>156</sup> Reed exposes the double standard in such chivalry by writing that Spielberg's misogyny was well known to feminists. Secondly, Reed charges the feminists with gross hypocrisy and abnegation of responsibility, particularly Gloria Steinem, Walker 'and all the others who've libelled black men' and he gives them a stern admonition:

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<sup>150</sup> Reginald Martin, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed', 1983, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 235- 244 (p. 236).

<sup>151</sup> Moore, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed', 1983, p. 227

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., pp. 227-228.

<sup>154</sup> This essay was eventually re-published in the collection, *Writin' is Fightin'* (1990), pp. 145-157.

<sup>155</sup> Reed bases this on the trial evidence that indicted Jon Lester, the teenager who led a lynch mob and the one who received the harshest sentence. He 'had seen the film *The Color Purple* and was described by a black girlfriend as being "real emotional about it". See *Writin' is Fightin'* (1990), p.155.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

I hope that the Howard Beach tragedy will persuade black feminists and womanists to understand that the criticisms of such films as *The Color Purple* (which made over \$100 million) [...] are not always based on 'envy' or spite, but just maybe a justifiable paranoia. Film and television, besides being sources of entertainment, are the most powerful instruments of propaganda ever created by man, and the Nazi period has proved that, in sinister hands, they can be used to harm unpopular groups and scapegoats.<sup>157</sup>

Though Reed is sensitive to the usual charge of artistic envy he seizes the opportunity to claim what he sees as the moral advantage by overturning this and promoting the notion of 'justifiable paranoia'. Though it has long been notoriously difficult in cultural and scientific discourse to prove that watching certain types of media can directly inflame violence and other harmful effects on human behaviour Reed insists there is a connection, that could culminate in tragic consequences where people are likely 'to shoot first and ask questions later'.<sup>158</sup> The parallel he draws between the consequences of feminist propaganda and the identification of the scapegoats and victims in Nazi Germany is clearly meant to be a direct barb at Spielberg who, as a Jewish American, would be all too aware of how the Jews were scapegoated during the Holocaust. By implication Reed makes the point that black men are now suffering as the result of copycat behaviour by an unscrupulous film director for the sake of media celebrity.

This essay is significant because Reed recycles Walker's term 'womanist', as a sneer to remind the reader that Walker wanted to 'separate herself and her followers from white feminists like "feminist scholars" Deidre English and Gloria Steinem, who publish her articles'.<sup>159</sup> Certainly Walker felt that the discourse of the feminist movement was too limited and disregarded the issues of race and class, thus her coining of the term 'womanist', in its practical application, was to be directed towards empowering and maintaining the African American sisterhood. But, Walker also intended that 'womanism' would be an umbrella term that embraced the African American experience, and would show a commitment 'to the welfare of an entire people claiming the universality and diversity of the black race'.<sup>160</sup> She asserts that, 'I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people'.<sup>161</sup> This suggests that Walker would adjust her focus towards the racial group rather

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., pp. 156-7.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>160</sup> Carol P. Marsh-Lockett, 'Womanism' in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, pp. 784-785 (p. 785).

<sup>161</sup> Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, p. 250.



than just the feminist cause. When Reed, through his spokesperson Chappie Puttbutt, spoke of his longing to be a 'Masculinist' it is possible that he proposes an equivalent of 'womanism', which again, would show an interest in African American men *and* the progress of the African American community inclusive of male and female. However this seems unlikely given that Reed's bitter comments are directed towards feminists *and* womanists, because he clearly believes them to be still closely affiliated with each other. He does not accept that womanism as an ideology is at all altruistic to the African American community, and his argument is that *together* white and black feminists have promoted the black male rapist stereotype to the media. This reaches a climax for Reed with the novel and the movie versions of *The Color Purple* which he views as the perfect opportunity for the media to indict all black men.

To some degree Reed makes a number of valid points in the 'Howard Beach' essay, for the furore of public debate, immediately following the release of the film, centred on the much contested accuracy of Walker's depiction of black males as ruthless misogynists. Certainly in the novel, the nameless character Mr. \_\_\_ undergoes a transformation from the brutal male chauvinist to the repentant and compassionate Albert, thus named, because he has recovered his humanity. But Spielberg's depiction ignores this and locates Walker's character within a one-dimensional framework of villainy portraying black masculinity as inherently domineering and animalistic. While Spielberg's narrative might be defended, in filmic, aesthetic or even sensationalist terms, his representation inevitably has political and racial implications. The black feminist bell hooks, whose later work chiefly concerns itself with the question of black representation, noted how,

Black women testified that they had known black men like Mister, that we are victims of incest, rape, and brutal physical abuse. Black males responded with the challenge that the issue of representation was not accuracy but whether certain aspects of black life should be talked about (i.e., revealed) in a non-black context [...] black men are more concerned with how they are seen by white men than by black women.<sup>162</sup>

This contribution fired public discussion in the black community and while witness statements cannot be easily challenged and disproved, hooks tends to generalise in her idea that black men were mainly concerned with the perception of white men. Many black males

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<sup>162</sup> Bell Hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston and London: Turnaround Press, 1991), p.70.

worried about cohesion in the African American community. Tony Brown, in an article entitled *Blacks Need to Love One Another*, hinted at the need for harmony and conciliation between black men and women, but at the same time wished to explode the black male stereotypes depicted in the film. On the one hand, he praised Walker's endeavour, given that there were so few films 'produced with black themes'.<sup>163</sup> Yet Brown still held her in contempt on the other, by pointing to the fact that *The Color Purple* 'becomes the only statement on black men' detracting from the 'fact that Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X overcame the system's psychological warfare and produced healthy, non-incestuous, non-brutalizing relationships with women'.<sup>164</sup>

Reed had long been 'very upset with Gloria Steinem' and what he described as her 'black feminist auxiliary'<sup>165</sup>, and the 'Howard Beach' essay not only enabled Reed to re-air his major disagreements with feminists, but also to spiral the bitterness of those disputes to new levels,

Gloria Steinem, media-appointed high priest person of American feminism, set the tone for the current group libel campaign against black men when she said, in the June 2, 1982 edition of *Ms*, that the characterizations of black men in Walker's book represented 'Truth-telling'. Since then this 'truth-telling' line has been picked up by other feminists, womanists [...] Most recently, in an interview with a deferential San Francisco feminist, Alice Walker said that she was trying to tell the truth.<sup>166</sup>

As before, Reed's major adversary is identified as Steinem, who is represented as feminist royalty toting Walker and other feminists in her wake. As part of what has become a series of obsessions Reed has been intent on targeting both Steinem and Walker. In the case of the latter Reed believed that Walker was targeting the feminist liberal market by reproducing 'the kind of writing that Thomas Dixon wrote in "The Clansman"', suggesting that she was honouring the cultural myths of the black male as rapist.<sup>167</sup>

<sup>163</sup> Tony Brown, 'Blacks Need To Love One Another', 1986, in *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* by Alice Walker (London: The Women's Press, 1996), pp. 223-225 (pp. 224-225).

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Moore 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed', 1983, p. 226.

<sup>166</sup> Reed, *Writin' is Fightin'* (1990), p. 146.

<sup>167</sup> Martin, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed', July 1-7, 1983 <<http://aalbc.com/authors/ishmael.htm>> [accessed 21 November 2008]. Thomas Dixon's novel, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), promoted racist notions about the potency and danger of black male sexuality. Dixon believed that the Ku Klux Klan was an essential organisation that should maintain racial segregation in the south and north of America.

Fundamentally it is this myth of representation, the propaganda of the black man as a rapist, that becomes a second major theme in Reed's discourse on feminism. This depiction is primarily responsible for the singling out and criminalization of young black men. Indeed the contentious topic of gender and racial violence carries many cultural and social repercussions. In *White Hero Black Beast*, the social critic Paul Hoch traced the theme of the black man as a dangerous 'super-sensual dark villain or black beast', posing a constant threat to 'the eternal feminine white goddess'.<sup>168</sup> He highlighted a central motif where negro males, as 'super-masculine black beasts' were always prone to rape white women.<sup>169</sup> That the threat of such dark, primitive forces would have to be defended by 'the ruling powers of white Christian civilization', and that this notion should dominate the writings of 'ancient political conservatives' to the 'hysterical fears' expressed by world leaders such as 'Ronald Reagan', is also noted by Hoch and other social critics.<sup>170</sup> bell hooks wrote of her concern that from the time of colonialism the powerful myth of the black rapist has fuelled fear of white men's terrorism, and this has a continuing basis in the fact that white men control a legislative system in which African American men are not only massively overrepresented in prisons, but often suffer from poor health and low life expectancy as a result.<sup>171</sup>

The 'Howard Beach' essay and Reed's earlier writings are unequivocal in the blame they accord to the feminist movement for accelerating the negative perceptions of black manhood. Yet this is an assumption by Reed that neglects to consider aspects of contemporary discourse. Discussions of masculine identity during the woman's liberation movement of the nineteen sixties and seventies were also influenced by the contributions of Norman Mailer and Eldridge Cleaver. In the *White Negro*, Mailer might have complimented African Americans on the one hand for their "'Hipster"-ness' bringing a 'cultural dowry' of marijuana, jazz, and a black vernacular that culminated in an extraordinary street culture,

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<sup>168</sup> Paul Hoch, *White Hero, Black Beast: Racism, Sexism and the Mask of Masculinity* (London: Pluto Press, 1979), p. 43. When Hoch traced examples of racial imagery from a range of civilisations spanning from ancient Egypt and Greece to contemporary western media stereotypes he identified a 'Chain of Being', that stretched 'from the beasts below to the angels above'. Hoch also cites examples of the alignment of white and black gender characteristics from contemporary films such as *Star Wars*, *King Kong* etc. See pp. 44-49.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46. Bob Connell writes that 'the fantasy figure of the black rapist plays an important role in sexual politics among whites, a role much exploited by the right-wing politics in the United States'. See R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity, 1995), p. 80.

<sup>171</sup> See Bell Hooks, *Yearning, Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston and London: Turnaround Press, 1991), pp. 57-58. She also points out that in all this discourse there is no authoritative history which examines how white men continually raped black women as a means of subjugation during the time of slavery. See also Richard Majors, 'Cool Pose: Black Masculinity and Sports', in *The Masculinities Reader* ed. by Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett, (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), pp. 209-217 (p. 210).

together with a remarkable tenacity for surviving the ‘sublimation’ of history.<sup>172</sup> But on the other hand, he depicted this hipster as a Negro ‘psychopath’, whose ‘infantile’ obsessions could potentially orchestrate a transformation to the ‘orgiast, the drug-addict, the rapist, the robber’ who would murder in order to seek the ‘next orgasm’.<sup>173</sup> Though many white men wished to emulate this ‘hip’ style it is not difficult to imagine the impact of such a publication and, as Michelle Wallace points out, Mailer was not considering black women when he wrote this essay in 1957. For he ‘meant that black *men* were psychopaths’ and although he might have positively prophesied ‘that the major function of black men was to produce a better white America, to humanize white men’, it was not so much the veracity of this ‘that was so important, but that he had articulated so well the nature of the white man’s fantasy/nightmare about the black man’.<sup>174</sup> Wallace makes a convincing case for how Mailer’s essay was to provide further evidence for the white man’s case by confirming that, this nightmare ‘through an Americanization process of several hundred years, had become, to a great extent, the black man’s as well’.<sup>175</sup> Even though she notes that, ‘American blacks are no more psychopathic as a group, than are white Americans’, the violence of the black liberation movement was too fresh in people’s minds.<sup>176</sup> Then of course Cleaver, as a young black male, described himself as a student of Mailer’s and in his book, *Soul on Ice* in 1968, he seemed to advocate the serial rape of white women. Therefore, as I will discuss later in this section, he could be regarded as a living embodiment of Mailer’s prophecy.

Following his critiques of Walker and Steinem the third feminist to be targeted by Reed is the white writer Susan Brownmiller, and he deems her to be responsible for casting insidious aspersions at black men. He has repeatedly returned to the inflammatory nature of her book, *Against Our Will*, which he later described as ‘a feast of antipathy towards black men’ because she accused them of ‘encouraging rape’.<sup>177</sup> In this work, in a chapter entitled ‘A Question Of Race’, Brownmiller discussed the phenomenon of ‘interracial rape’ revealing that,

The recurrent nightmare in the eighteenth-century slaveholding South had been the white male dream of black men rising up to rape their women, and

<sup>172</sup> Norman Mailer, ‘The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster’, 1957, in *The Penguin Book of the Beats* ed. by Ann Charters (London and New York: Penguin, 1992), pp. 582-605 (586, 591).

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 592, 598.

<sup>174</sup> Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman*, pp. 43, 45-46.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>177</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. xx.

in the second half of the twentieth century the black man in his fiercest rhetoric seems intent on fulfilling that prophecy...today the incidence of actual rape combined with the looming spectre of the black man as rapist in the mind's eye, and in particular the mythified spectre of the black man as rapist to which the black man in the name of his manhood now contributes, must be understood as a control mechanism against the freedom, mobility and aspirations of all women, white and black [...]The crossroads of racism and sexism had to be a violent meeting place. There is no use pretending it doesn't exist.<sup>178</sup>

Reed firstly objects to the fact that Brownmiller 'doesn't say some black men; she says the black man meaning me [...] and a whole lot of other people'.<sup>179</sup> True, Brownmiller's monolithic approach to black men and women was highly insensitive, and the repercussions of her work 'shaped public commentary around sexually and racially charged issues'.<sup>180</sup> Reed knew how damaging the images of the black male as the rapist could be no matter how 'mythified' or 'spectral', and by this time he was convinced that Brownmiller's book was one of the major contributory factors in rejuvenating and sustaining this powerful but invidious notion.<sup>181</sup> Since Brownmiller suggested that there was a resurgence of black male rape against women in the twentieth century on the grounds of the black man's desire to reclaim his manhood, Reed has continually attempted to expose the bias of her assertions and to disprove her claims by reevaluating historic black lynching cases in the light of contemporary events.<sup>182</sup>

The first of these cases is Reed's objection to Brownmiller's discussion of the Emmett Till murder<sup>183</sup>, which she described as the 'landmark case of white male retaliation for black male transgression'.<sup>184</sup> She writes,

<sup>178</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will Men: Women and Rape* (London and New York: Penguin, 1975), pp. 210, 252, 255.

<sup>179</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p.56.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Brownmiller's point has also been ratified by Valerie Smith. See 'Split Affinities: The Case of Interracial Rape' in *Conflicts in Feminism* ed., by Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) pp. 271-287 (pp. 273-4).

<sup>183</sup> In 1955 Emmett Till, a fourteen year old black boy from Chicago visited relatives in Mississippi. Together with some local boys he bought sweets in a grocery store and although accounts vary he was said to have 'wolf-whistled' at the twenty one year old white woman Carolyn Bryant, the wife of the store owner (Roy Bryant who was on a fishing trip). Other versions suggest that Till was said to have placed the money in the hand (instead of the counter) of Bryant or that he asked her for a date adding 'Bye baby'. She alleged later that he had grabbed her at the waist and asked for a date. Two days later Rob Bryant and his brother-in-law came to the cabin of Till's uncle, Mose Wright, around 2.am and abducted Till. Till's body was found three days later in the Tallahatchie river with signs of such extreme violence that his corpse was virtually unidentifiable. This case swiftly attracted national attention and in spite of an intensive trial the two white perpetrators were found not guilty of Till's murder. Many blacks labelled this slaying as a lynching and many believed that it was this event

Till's action was more than a kid's brash prank and his murder was more than a husband's revenge [...] Emmett Till was going to show his black buddies that he, and by inference *they*, could get a white woman and Caroline Bryant was the nearest convenient object [...] And what of the wolf whistle [...] it was a deliberate insult just short of physical assault, a last reminder to Carolyn Bryant that this black boy, Till, had in mind to possess her.<sup>185</sup>

Brownmiller's prose suggests that the Till case centred on his boastful ability to attract white women. Her analysis proclaims outrage at Till's audacity in wolf whistling at a white woman, a feeling so profound that even fifteen years later Brownmiller was still troubled by the sexual implications of Till's action. She concluded that this had to be tantamount to an insult, evident in 'the depersonalized challenge of, "I can have you" with or without the racial aspect. Today a sexual remark on the street causes within me a fleeting but murderous rage'.<sup>186</sup>

Reed was so appalled by the discussion of Till's murder by a white feminist, and, together with his growing resentment of Steinem and Walker, that he felt compelled to treat this event fictionally in *Reckless Eyeballing*.<sup>187</sup> In fact the title of this novel refers to the practice of a black man daring to look at a white woman.<sup>188</sup> The main protagonist, Ball, pens a play of the same name in an attempt to assuage and placate the ire of feminists about the sexism of his first play and so he awards all the best roles to black female actors. The action unfolds when the body of a lynched black man (Ham Hill), is exhumed at the request of Cora Mae (the white woman), he was accused of 'raping [...] in a manner of speaking' with his lecherous stares (*RE*, 104). As the 'only male member of the cast [...] the skeleton', Hill, is taken 'to the courthouse' amidst 'thunder, lightning and great applause' (*RE*, 94). In spite of all the absurdity and melodrama, Reed reinforces the parallels to the Emmet Till case: Hill is a murdered child who was lynched by Cora's husband and friends even though 'he didn't struggle with her or molest her' (*RE*, 104). Hill's defence attorney exhibits pictures of Cora at

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that proved to be the final catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement. See 'The Murder of Emmet Till', 1997, <<http://www.watson.org/~lisa/blackhistory/early-civilrights/emmett.html>> [accessed 9 September 2010]

<sup>184</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will Men: Women and Rape*, p. 247.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>187</sup> In an interview Reed admits to reading books by feminists and that he 'actually borrowed some of their ideas and characterizations for that book'. See Zamir, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed', 1988, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, p. 302.

<sup>188</sup> Another inference from this title can be linked to the gruesome and tragic discovery of Till's corpse, which was said to have one eye dislodged from its socket, possibly as a punishment for looking at a white woman.

the time of the incident, 'with miniskirt, eye shadow, rouge, blond hair with black roots, a sleaze and a tease', but now that twenty years have passed she is a 'radical feminist lesbian [...] dressed in men's clothes' (*RE*, 94-95).<sup>189</sup>

Michelle Wallace critiques this portrayal commenting that the lesbian feminist figure is 'Reed's code for Totally Unreasonable Person', though in Reed's view this factor probably added to the dramatic tension.<sup>190</sup> The point is made that since 'white people can't own you anymore' they attempt to control black people with 'the rude stare' (*RE*, 102-103). Thus, there is the inference that Cora enticed Hill just as a 'vixen intrudes upon his space', and lustfully gazes upon the innocent boy (*RE*, 103). By contrast Cora's lawyer, in robust tones that resemble Brownmiller's understanding of the case, contended that when Cora felt Hill's 'hot and dirty eyes on her she felt as though, the scum of the world was taking an X-ray of her body' (*RE*, 103). Warming to this theme, she continues, 'the men in this country think that all women are available to them, so they use their eyes to scout in the same way that a predator stalks its prey' (*RE*, 103-104). In opposition to Hill's defence, which asserts that his only crime was to have 'his eyes in the wrong place at the wrong time', she concludes, 'he penetrated her with his eyes. He eye-raped her' (*RE*, 104). Reed's fictionalized account apparently parodies Brownmiller's statements thus, vehemently suggesting that there was a very fine line indeed between Till's crime of staring and an actual physical attack, and that moreover wolf-whistling is a virtual violation of the female body.

Even fourteen years later in *Another Day at the Front*, Reed argues that Brownmiller 'seemed to identify with the killers', while in the essay collection *Mixing It Up* in 2008, he declares that what she was really trying to say was, that 'Emmett Till got what was coming to him'.<sup>191</sup> He reveals that the white feminists 'who blamed Emmett Till for his death ignored the testimony from his mother [...who] told her son, a stutterer, that whenever he was seized by an episode of stuttering, he should whistle to get attention'.<sup>192</sup> In turn at an MLA conference Reed was attacked by Jeff Melnick for 'using the Brownmiller statement to indict all feminists', when by 1986 many feminists had condemned Brownmiller's statements.<sup>193</sup>

<sup>189</sup> The novel makes the point that it took twenty years for Cora to bring charges against Hill. It was the act of becoming a feminist that allowed her to attempt to clear her name from the suspicion that she was 'trying to lure Ham Hill, the supermarket packer' (*RE*, 96).

<sup>190</sup> Wallace, 'Female Troubles: Ishmael Reed's Tunnel Vision' 1986, p. 187.

<sup>191</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. 28. ; Reed, *Mixing It Up* (2008), p. 190.

<sup>192</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. xx.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-9.

Reed's rather sanguine view of this critique is that he was certainly aware of the criticisms of Brownmiller by Angela Davis and others, but true to his tendency of waging what seems at times to be a one man campaign against feminists, he continues to react strongly to any attacks against black men. Yet in his introductory comments in *Another Day at the Front*, as if mindful of Melnick's comments, Reed deploys a more recent review of a publication on rape by Maria Bevacqua. Here, she accuses Brownmiller of failing to address the issue of race in her book, *Against Our Will*.

Indeed in *Reckless Eyeballing*, during the enactment of Ball's play, Reed communicates to the reader that the black feminists in the audience 'had really enjoyed the performance of Ham Hill's defense attorney but wouldn't let on before their white sisters' (95). He has always been keen to draw attention to the disaffection between white and black feminists on the grounds of race, and Wallace is convinced that 'at the heart of *Reckless Eyeballing* [...] lies Reed's perception that American feminism propounds that white women are not responsible for bigotry and racism'.<sup>194</sup> Also bell hooks had already taken umbrage at the fact that Brownmiller reported rape as an institutional crime, thus omitting to discuss how it devalued black womanhood, but rather how the black male rape of white women was seen as much more significant.<sup>195</sup>

Reed's general bitterness towards these women has propelled his writing to such a degree that in his mind a number of national dramas, that doubled as high profile media cases, can be understood as having a direct paradigmatic affiliation with the death of the Emmet Till as a result of, firstly, Steinem's truth-telling exercise in *The Color Purple*, and, secondly, Brownmiller's discussions on rape. Reed believes the Steinem's words have perpetuated a *Color Purple* form of American reality for black men where they continue to be vilified, regardless of their innocence. Over the past sixteen years he has examined a number of crises in black male celebrity and this issue has continued to feature in every one of his non-fiction publications. He has commented on the rise and fall of such figures as Clarence Thomas, Mike Tyson, O.J. Simpson, Kobe Bryant and Michael Jackson to show how eagerly American culture awaits the exposure of black masculine excess where black men are all 'guilty before they had their day in court', and where black celebrities can be used by 'many

<sup>194</sup> Wallace, 'Female Troubles: Ishmael Reed's Tunnel Vision', 1986, p. 187.

<sup>195</sup> Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Winchester and London: Pluto, 1982), pp. 52-53.



in the white population to vent their anger against blacks in general'.<sup>196</sup> He cites these cases including, more recently the pre-elective President Obama, to demonstrate how Steinem, and implicitly Walker, and other feminists, operate double standards which are often taken up and celebrated by the media.

In two essays in the collection *Airing Dirty Laundry* Reed's anger is barely tempered as he discusses Clarence Thomas and Mike Tyson. Initially, he addresses the first anniversary of the 1992 harassment case involving Thomas, and his attorney Anita Hill. Far from the media attention dying down on the case Reed shows in the work, *Clarence Thomas Lynched Again*, how, in the full glare of the media 'Hill is portrayed as something of a saint', while Thomas is constantly 'pilloried'.<sup>197</sup> Reed contests that feminists are still trying to destroy Thomas by making his 'lynching [...] an annual event', for Hill appears to constantly take the lead in opinion polls about the credibility of her charges against Thomas.<sup>198</sup> In fact Reed felt compelled at this point to issue a personal statement on the matter almost as if he felt he was being subjected to a media trial himself,

In the background of the Hill-Thomas affair (and my own powerful reaction to it) is the ongoing hostility between feminists and the defenders of black men. I was described in the pages of *Ms.* magazine as a "ringleader" of black men allegedly opposed to black women writing about misogyny. I was also accused of calling such writers "traitors to the race," which, of course, I have never said. In fact, in my capacity as a magazine editor, I have published leading black critics of misogyny among blacks, and I'm supportive of feminist demands such as the right to choose, the Equal Rights Amendment and day care. I think that black men are no better or worse than other men when it comes to their attitudes about women. My problem with the gender-first faction on the feminist movement, compounded by the demonization of Clarence Thomas, is that it singles out black misogyny as if it were the only misogyny that exists.<sup>199</sup>

Reed appears to defend himself against the charges of misogyny here by reminding his readers that he constantly publishes black female writers. Also by formally declaring his support of female rights he attempts to clarify his animosity to feminists. It is their excessive demonisation of black men in particular, as opposed to men in general, which angers him

<sup>196</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up* (2008), pp. 14, 218.

<sup>197</sup> Reed, 'Clarence Thomas Lynched Again' in *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), pp. 53-58 (pp. 54-55). Reed also cites cases where if a black woman is raped or sexually harassed by white men feminists do not appear to take any action against the perpetrators. See the St. John's University and the Walter Shorenstein cases.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p.53.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

though he does suggest above that feminists are generally 'gender first' when they harbour rancour towards the entire male population.

Secondly, in an essay called the 'White Hope Cult', Reed profiles the media spectacle surrounding the Mike Tyson rape case and to heighten the tension he classifies this as a 'fairy tale' where 'the black Prince of Darkness is vanquished by a white Knight in the guise of the White Hope'.<sup>200</sup> He notes that 'the guilty verdict' was awarded in a 'courtroom presided over by a blatantly feminist judge', and, after labels of 'psycho puppy and 'subhuman' were awarded to Tyson, 'the media were in a position to usher in a series of surrogate White Hopes'.<sup>201</sup> Reed grimly observes that Tyson would inevitably be sacrificed for feminists who were 'cheated out of roasting [...] Clarence Thomas and the alleged vices of other athletes'.<sup>202</sup> Though Reed was not out to condone what would be a criminal act his argument centres on the view that Tyson's accuser, Desiree Washington, was aided and abetted by media feminists, thus she became the object of a vast number of white hopes who saw her as a woman who could bring Tyson down and destroy his career. Ultimately Reed regards the media 'effusions' from Steinem and Brownmiller as being responsible for the dangerous profiling of black men and writes that after Mike Tyson 'was convicted on rape charges [...] she [...Brownmiller] was interviewed on Pacifica Radio and sounded positively gleeful'.<sup>203</sup>

Throughout his essays Reed differentiates between his own clamour for justice and those who would argue that he tried to condone any black man on any charge. He reveals his conservatism by describing being shouted at 'on a hip-hop panel for criticizing Snoop Dogg as a bad role model', thus suggesting that if black men deserve criticism then he will not be afraid to mete this out.<sup>204</sup> But his major assertion is that 'the same stereotypes are endlessly recycled' by feminists to carelessly defame black men's reputations and where the offences of black celebrities, often created by media millionaires, are 'used to signify on other black men'.<sup>205</sup> In the essay 'MJ, Kobe and Ote Benga: Continuing the U.S. War against black men' Reed is at his most acerbic when he writes that the Kobe Bryant incident 'was just another example of feminists 'dumping all of women's hatred onto the shoulders of black men (193). He names specific media feminists such as Wendy Murphy, who not only 'slimes Kobe

<sup>200</sup> Reed, 'Mike Tyson and the White Hope Cult', in *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), pp. 68-74 (p. 68).

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-69.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>204</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up* (2008), p. 215.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., pp. 187-188.

Bryant' but drags 'in O.J. and Jim Brown, both black'.<sup>206</sup> This leads Reed to comment that 'when Murphy lumps the three men together, I am reminded of the old 1896 song, "All Coons Look Alike to Me"'.<sup>207</sup> More recently in 2010, Reed adds Barack Obama and Tiger Woods to the mixture of black males in the public gaze who are subjected to 'Negro mania, an American sickness', which he claims is a form of profitable 'hysteria' invoked by the American press.<sup>208</sup> Reed argues that Woods was targeted not merely, because of the scandal of his adultery, but because he was a 'black man exposed as a lover of Nordic-type white women', a predilection that has long carried many sinister implications.<sup>209</sup>

Reed's vilification of Steinem and Brownmiller resembles an eternal boxing match where old rivals battle for a resounding victory that is never achieved. His remarks profile him also as a national sentinel and defender of black manhood as he appears to scour the media constantly for any offensive articles or words spoken against this community that he aspires to protect. Reed explores the cumulative influence of these feminists in what he insists is their campaign to lynch black men. He examines how they both endorsed the suffragettes as 'feminist pioneers' in spite of their appalling racism.<sup>210</sup> He reveals the early clashes between the anti-lynching crusader and black feminist, Ida B. Wells, who set herself in opposition to Frances Willard, a white suffragette. The former expressed her contempt for the southerner Willard, because she 'accepted the rape myth and publicly condoned lynching and the color line in the South'.<sup>211</sup> Reed argues that there is a continuum between Willard, Brownmiller, and those later New York feminists who convicted some Hispanic and black young men for the rape of a stockbroker in Central Park. When the latter were proved innocent Reed writes that,

Feminist Susan Brownmiller who wrote a book proposing that Emmet Till got what was coming to him, still believes that the accused were guilty, despite the confessions of the real perpetrator and the DNA evidence that exonerated them. This is proof, I believe, that she and other well-known feminists have an irrational hatred of black men but defer to white men who are their employers.<sup>212</sup>

Later Reed recorded the response of Brownmiller to a *Village Voice* reporter at that time,

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., pp. 188-189.

<sup>208</sup> Reed, *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media* (2010), pp. 238-239.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>210</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up* (2008), p. 287.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

She said that regardless of the scientific evidence, she still believed that the children who spent their youth in jail, on the basis of the hysteria generated by Donald Trump, the press and leading New York feminists, were guilty.<sup>213</sup>

Reed cites these extreme views to show that the physical lynchings that took place earlier in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries might be outlawed by present law, but that as far as he is concerned, the media and its hounding of male celebrities has now taken the place of those crimes. Thus he repeatedly asks the question, 'Does the media freak show surrounding the Jackson and Bryant cases resemble the kind of atmosphere associated with lynchings?'<sup>214</sup> He argues that they have similar features in terms of the festive atmospheres where whole families were able to get involved, though Reed grimly notes, in his discussion of the Kobe Bryant case, how 'T-shirts depicting hangings have replaced ropes as the paraphernalia of lynching' in contemporary America.<sup>215</sup>

Brownmiller regarded the Emmet Till case as the prime example of the uncontrollable instincts of black male lust, and she identifies the second affiliated case through the profile of Eldridge Cleaver. She cites Cleaver's strong reaction to the wrongful murder of Till, as a 'small breakdown two days later during which he says he 'ranted and raved [...] against white women in particular'.<sup>216</sup> She spells out Cleaver's conclusion, 'that it was of paramount importance for me to have an antagonistic, ruthless attitude towards white women' and finally his words, 'I became a rapist'.<sup>217</sup> She claimed to understand Cleaver's 'thought pattern and ideological construct', and by quoting from the more threatening and provocative passages of Cleaver's work, *Soul on Ice*, Brownmiller effectively garners her proof for establishing the black man unequivocally as the archetypal rapist.<sup>218</sup> Cleaver's work was published in 1968 in the same year that Reed, engaged in his 'anarchist' period, gave an interview advocating complete artistic freedom.<sup>219</sup> At this time he remarked that Cleaver was 'a nice guy, a regular fellow' whom he would, 'like to play chequers with'.<sup>220</sup> But by 1983

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., p. 288.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, p. 248.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Walt Shepperd, 'When State Magicians Fail: An Interview with Ishmael Reed', 1968, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 3-13 (p. 6).

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

Reed's view had shifted because by then he was angry with feminist perspectives. Of Brownmiller he says,

She distorts facts on the basis of remarks of eccentric people who do not represent black male mainstream people—Eldridge Cleaver and Amiri Baraka. It's sloppy scholarship. These people [...] read *Soul on Ice* and jump to the conclusion that all black men are rapists. I would not go to Gary Gilmore to find out what white men think. Or, I would not interview Truman Capote to find out what's on the average white man's mind.<sup>221</sup>

Reed by this point acknowledged that extremist views were being expressed by a tiny minority of black men and Reed was not alone in despairing of Cleaver's general legacy that seemed to result in his portrayal only as a dangerous black menace to society. Much later in 2003 he uses the reviews of another scholar to show that 'white feminists like Susan Brownmiller took the late Eldridge Cleaver's confession that he prepared for his rape of white women by practicing on black women to represent the experience of all black men'.<sup>222</sup> The other point about Brownmiller is that while she was right to see Cleaver's rage against white women as stemming from Till's murder, she did not actually acknowledge Cleaver's later confession. While he was in prison, as he started to write his memoirs, he sensed strongly that he 'had gone astray [...] from being human [...] and] could not approve the act of rape'.<sup>223</sup> He asserted that the persona of the former Eldridge Cleaver no longer existed. In *Airing Dirty Laundry* Reed pays tribute to Cleaver's political and cultural contribution and acknowledges the significance of Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* as a work that highlighted the 'eternal struggle between the black supermasculine menial and the white omnipotent administrator—a struggle that continues in various forms, to this day'.<sup>224</sup>

Overall Reed draws a distinct association between Walker, Steinem and Brownmiller for the ways in which they appear to have endorsed the notion that all black men are abusive rapists. He makes a clear interconnection between the dissemination of this notion through the various media forms, and the direct targeting of black male celebrities for offences that white men commit but often go ignored. Reed claims that the social legacy is one of disproportionate injustice that leads to ruined careers, lives and even death for black men all

<sup>221</sup> Moore, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed', 1983, p. 227. Later Reed asked the same question, 'Why does Eldridge Cleaver represent the experience of all black men and not Ralph Ellison, Ralph Bunche...?' See Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. xix.

<sup>222</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. xviii.

<sup>223</sup> Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, p. 34.

<sup>224</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. 96.

because of the phenomenon of feminism. Reed has waded into the very heart of identity politics to champion the reputation of black men against the negative generalizations perpetuated by some feminist writers. Much of this discussion is underpinned by the negative effects of gender and racial profiling especially from white feminist writers, an issue that will now be debated at greater length.

## **Gender, Race and the Canon**

Underpinning the discussion of this whole chapter are the dynamics operating between race and gender. Reed's major objective is to address the political effectiveness of blackness in American culture, and in practice, the promotion of the underdog—the African American male. This section will now focus more intensively on the racial tensions stemming from the uneasy relationships within the genders. For example, Reed believes it is white men who, because of their 'macho' conduct, are predominantly responsible for the difficulties inflicted on black men. Moreover he argues it is white men who are the root cause of nearly all his adversarial relationships with feminists. To some degree this is a predictable supposition given that racial tensions are thought to involve the prejudice of white people against black people, but when gender enters into the fray it would appear that this is not as clear cut. Since Reed vows to legitimize blackness he vents his wrath against prominent black people, such as Henry Louis Gates Jr. and feminists, who appear in his view to have 'sold out' to white, capitalist conglomerates. Reed argues that this drive to please the white male establishment is the very reason behind the shaping of the African American canon. Much to Reed's dismay, this grants a higher profile to black feminist writers at the expense of black male authors, who in Reed's view, deserve much greater prominence. The fact that Reed holds Gates to be responsible for this development reveals the cultural animosity within the heart of male African American culture. Thus I will attempt to 'read' the masculine when it emerges in the writings of Reed and to consider this in the light of three border lines that he tends to draw between white men and black men, between black men and white women, and between black male writers and black male academia. For Reed, these lines are always intersected by the presence of black feminists.

Reed's representation of the interactions between white and black men evokes the constant

spectacle of masculine aggression. In a series of essays throughout the nineteen eighties and nineties Reed depicts the everyday paradigm of the ‘white male macho cop approaching a black driver and addressing him as “boy” or some other slur’.<sup>225</sup> Also he draws attention to the iconic image replayed ‘on television’ where, ‘black men are typically shown naked from the waist up, handcuffed, and leaning over a police car’.<sup>226</sup> Both scenarios are meant to draw attention to the most serious crisis for black men, namely, their ongoing conflicts with forms of subordination orchestrated by white men. This is a factor that Reed continually claims to be at the heart of all race riots and race wars. In the essay, ‘Black Macho, White Macho: The Stale Drama’, Reed commented that, ‘there still exist in this country, white males who believe that the proper place for black males is opening car doors for them, or pushing their luggage’.<sup>227</sup> Essentially the sub text of his essay is to spell out the differing racial/gender norms for white men and black men: for while the former are expected to conform to rugged North American standards of aggression and indomitability, the latter are discouraged from achieving such a profile. Yet suffice it to say that a number of theorists on masculinity comment that traditionally all ‘men are supposed to be aggressive, tough-minded, taciturn, rational, analytic, and promiscuous’, but since the time of slavery black men were regarded as civilized only if they adopted the Uncle Tom-esque qualities of meekness, submission and unwavering obedience.<sup>228</sup> Though Reed explores the implications of ‘Macho’ he does not define this concept precisely, but it becomes evident that he identifies four elements including: (i) political power, that Reed identifies with Ronald Reagan’s right wing ‘Macho Restoration Government’ as an ‘oligarchy’ of those who view themselves as ‘guardians of western values’ where ‘blacks [...] are to be seen and not heard’; (ii) economic power, related to the white hegemonic ownership of labour witnessed by the fact that ‘white males own the media’; (iii) thirdly violent behaviour, witnessed in the activities, according to Reed, of Klan members, explaining why some ‘black veterans’ urged younger black men to ‘participate in paramilitary training’,<sup>229</sup> and finally (iv) sexual prowess, an area of perceived opportunity for

<sup>225</sup> Reed, *God Made Alaska for the Indians* (1982), p. 69. ; Reed, *Writin’ is Fightin’* (1990), p. 157.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> This work is included in Reed’s essay collection, *God Made Alaska for the Indians*, pp. 69-74 (p. 69).

<sup>228</sup> See R. W. Connell, *Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 40.

<sup>229</sup> There is a long history in colonial and post-colonial situations of white fears of black men’s violence. In America this was related to the first major slave revolt led by the black preacher, Nat Turner in 1831. But conversely there is also the phenomenon of black fears of white man’s terrorism, that according to F. W. Connell, ‘have a continuing basis in white men’s control of police, courts and prisons’ and African American men being massively over-presented in the latter. See R. W. Connell, ‘The Social Organization of Masculinity’ in *The Masculinities Reader* ed. by Whitehead and Barrett, pp. 30-50 (p. 37).

black men on the grounds of their mythical sexual superiority, though this notion was perceived as an area of ultimate threat and opprobrium by white men.<sup>230</sup>

Reed's exposition of manhood indicates that he identifies a form of hegemonic versus subordinate masculinity. Reed's point is that hegemonic masculinity is strong, ruthless and tyrannical, and, oppresses the black men (and by implication the women) who are excluded by it. It would be useful to consider this in the light of Frantz Fanon's analysis of racial differentiation through power structures. He asserts that, 'At the risk of arousing the resentment of my coloured brothers, I will say that the black is not a man [...] not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man'.<sup>231</sup> Fanon's premise is that white men consider themselves to be superior to black men, and the racialized black 'other' operates as a central dynamic in white identity formation. He explores the ways in which white men ruthlessly dominate while black men are usually denigrated, brutalised and in some cases destroyed. More importantly Fanon believes that black men are perpetually caught within a process of catching up with white men, a dialectical process that directly informs the development of black as opposed to white masculinity. This spells out the potential for confrontation because Reed implies that the black desire to become 'macho' in order to gain access to white male privilege often results in violence and aggressive power struggles

Reed's essay 'Black Macho, White Macho: The Stale Drama', suggests that he disapproves of macho behaviour, and the various gendered and racialized metaphors associated with white domination. In Reed's fiction several of the white male protagonists are portrayed as omnipotent despots, who wield enormous financial clout and disseminate unscrupulous values to the diminished black man. In *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, the tyrant, Sam, resides over the city of 'HARRYSAM' (a parody of America) and his philosophy of governance, when his subjects, including 'spicks and gooks', disobey him, is to 'bomb the fuken daylight's out of um' (*TFLP*, 132); the villainous, capitalist, cattle rancher, Drag Gibson, commands deference in a 'world' that 'definitely' belongs to him where 'the white man is smarter than God' (*YBRBD*, 57); Arthur Swille, rules over a plantation which is 'said to be the very replica of King Arthur's in the Holy City of Camelot, the Wasp's Jerusalem, the great Fairy City of

<sup>230</sup> Reed, *God Made Alaska for the Indians* (1982), pp. 69-71.; Reed's four aspects are resonant of Connell's tripartite model of gender structure based upon the relations of Power (patriarchy); production (including divisions of labour) and cathexis (sexual desire). See Connell, *Masculinities* (1995), pp. 73-75.

<sup>231</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (London: Pluto, 1993), pp. 10, 110.



the old Feudal Order, of knights, ladies'. After establishing a feudal system, the slaves are treated like a 'human plow' (*FTC*, 15) and; in *The Terrible Twos*, the real power resides not with Dean Clift, the puppet president, but with a group of white capitalists who decide to destroy, 'the surplus people [...that] began to take over our cities' and the mongrelisation of our world' (*TTTW*, 55-58). In the latter the presidency of Clift is meant to resemble the Reagan years, a time of conspicuous consumption. It is not clear whether Reed intends the negative portrayal of this group of white autocrats to serve as a textual warning, for this form of white 'macho' conduct ends in their destruction. They cannot be tolerated by the 'others' who serve them, violence tends to beget violence, and, most often it is black men and other minorities who are instrumental in their downfall.

Reed's point is that even in the nineteen eighties black men continue to be emasculated and the one individual who is deemed as being partly culpable is, according to Reed, 'Ronald Reagan [...] the leading man for American macho'.<sup>232</sup> He perpetuates racist stereotyping by maintaining that 'black men are promiscuous, ne'er-do-well studs' or 'strapping bucks', thus over-representing black men's sexuality and the notion that they are brutal, virile and fierce.<sup>233</sup> Michelle Wallace informs the reader that this last image of the buck 'is the nightmare that whites could not handle' because of its 'threat to white womanhood'.<sup>234</sup> Reed, as underlined in the title of his essay, exclaims that this is a 'stale drama', and these images are faded and tasteless but nevertheless, in his view, 'the most lethal macho is white macho [...] If the nuclear button is pushed, it will, no doubt, be pushed by a finger belonging to a white male [...] black male macho might be annoying, white male macho could be the death of us'.<sup>235</sup> This is a very thorny issue for Reed and he argues that even though he has personal friendships with white males the relationship between white and black men will always be problematic, because the perpetual spectacle of macho rivalry can lead to insufferable consequences for women. In concluding the essay Reed admits that he was 'impressed with the energy and commitment' he witnessed previously in a women's conference in Houston, where 'the grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and daughters of America met to thrash out some serious issues of American life', thereby concluding that 'it's time for the grandfathers,

<sup>232</sup> Reed, *God Made Alaska for the Indians* (1982), p.73.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.* Reed also makes the point that Reagan's macho reputation was partly acquired because in his former career as a film actor, there was 'a never released segment where Reagan slaps Angie Dickinson to the ground because she didn't follow his orders after the third demand'. See pp. 72-73.

<sup>234</sup> Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman*, p. 25.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

fathers, brothers, and sons of America to do the same thing'.<sup>236</sup> Thus, in a conciliatory tone Reed expresses his empathy for American women, and although despairing of the behaviour of some black and white men, his language register gestures towards a future of prospective harmony.

Indeed Reed shows that he is aware of the dangers of macho posturing, and in a later interview in 1987, his self-explanation appears,

[...] in the nineteen sixties, we had a different attitude. Our workshop in New York always subjected women writers to ridicule. We told them to go make coffee. But look. I grew up with John Wayne. It was dumb, but that was the way it was. We were oppressing other people while we were talking about our own oppression.<sup>237</sup>

This is the closest that Reed comes to offering a distinct reason and part-apology for his attitude to women. Though he might disapprove of the notion of behaviour blueprints he admits that most black men, including himself, resorted to reproducing the toughness and independence of Wayne, implying that they were attempting to capture a dominant and domineering, white, model of masculinity. Such historically imitative behaviour, conditioned by a major cultural signifier of white machismo, means that Reed locates his own chauvinism outside African American culture. His tone might be one of regret, but attributing black men's behaviour to Wayne's tough posturing appears to be Reed's euphemistic means of legitimizing their 'catch-up' to white men. He presupposes that black men can be excused by indicating those earlier historical moments when the gendered construction of black male racial victimhood was through the African American male embrace of white manifestations of machismo.

This begs the question that if Reed is more sensitised to the mistakes of the past and is able to look to a future of gender and racial quality, why does he continue to exponentially fuel a gender war? In the examples discussed thus far, Reed actually presents a series of contradictions. He campaigns aggressively for black men to achieve parity with white men commensurate with the political, social and economic opportunities of the latter. He rebukes men for their macho posturing, but virtually all his fiction and non-fiction is situated within a

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>237</sup> Lee Bartlett, 'And That History Is Subject to the Will: Ishmael Reed', 1987, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, p. 265.

theatre of war. In *Japanese by Spring*, for example, Chappie described his ‘father’s vision of the world—as a battleground between the strong and the weak’ (JBS, 98). This image of perpetual conflict offers a very useful context for comprehending Reed’s lexis, because although the parity mentioned above might safeguard and include women, his standpoint does not appear to be extended to feminists because he generally adopts the language of ‘macho’ to combat them. When engaging with their polemics, Reed resorts to a militaristic code to seemingly evoke masculine space. This ranges from ‘battleground’, ‘front’, ‘bomb’, ‘meta-enemy’, ‘veteran’ and ‘warfare’, and Reed often invokes comparisons to the oppression of the Nazi period. By implication his subtext suggests that feminists must be displaced by using metaphors that celebrate men and masculinity since these convey strength, aggression, dominance and competitiveness. In this sense Reed shows little difference from those who might be classed as the ‘macho’ giants of white American literature, such as Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer and Philip Roth. Indeed the cultural commentator Kasia Boddy, drew attention to the association of these authors, including Reed, with the language and sport of Boxing which she notes is ‘primitive; controlled [...] not feminine and not sentimental and not refined’.<sup>238</sup> This demonstrates that in gender terms Reed has a lot in common with white mainstream writers yet, he has actually commented on what he considers to be, ‘the psychotic misogyny of Philip Roth’, who, ‘once said in *Esquire* “Fuck the feminists”’.<sup>239</sup> Reed undoubtedly resents the adoration of white Americans for these successful novelists, because in his view, they escape relatively unscathed from feminist criticisms, while he cannot. However it cannot have escaped Reed’s attention that Roth has been the subject of a number of feminist critiques in which he has been accused of deploying overt misogynistic stereotypes, and being completely unsympathetic to women.<sup>240</sup> This is yet another example of Reed’s pragmatic tendency to muster arguments that are often over-generalized in order to counter his opponents. It is also worth noting that Reed can hardly be considered peripheral to American mainstream culture given the anti-feminist diatribes that are so common in his writing.

<sup>238</sup> Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 240.

<sup>239</sup> Dick, ‘A Conversation with Ishmael Reed’ 1997, p. 238.

<sup>240</sup> Derek Parker Royal summarizes the accusations levelled against Roth culminating in reputation that classes him as a writer of ‘men’s’ novels. See Derek Parker Royal, ‘Editor’s Column’, *Philip Roth Studies*, 6, (2010), pp. 9-11 <[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/philip\\_roth\\_studies/v006/6.1.royal01.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/philip_roth_studies/v006/6.1.royal01.html)> [accessed 24 October 2012] The number of feminist attacks on Roth’s tendency to portray women in a derogatory light led the author to issue a defiant non-apology for his lack of political correctness. Roth defended himself by saying that there is ‘a morsel of truth’ in all his depictions. See Hermoine Lee, ‘The Art of Fiction LXXXIV: Philip Roth’, 1984, in *Conversation with Philip Roth* ed. by George J. Searles (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), pp. 162-187 (pp. 172-175).

Throughout Reed's discussion of the relations between white and black men he comes to the realization that both groups harbour attitudes that are harmful to themselves. This raises the question of whether this awareness might inform his dialogue of the second of his contentious, gendered relationships: white women. However, if we consider the introduction to the 1993 essay collection, *Airing Dirty Laundry*, Reed asserts that black men are the 'meta-enemy of women' and that feminists 'represent one of the most serious threats to black male well-being since the Klan'.<sup>241</sup> In the same year he approached Robin Morgan, a radical feminist and political theorist, for he hoped to resolve his arguments with *Ms Magazine*, where she was the editor-in-chief. When no response was forthcoming Reed pronounced that, 'sometimes I feel like a Palestinian where I don't get to negotiate, where I'm not recognized. I would like to see white feminists [...] talk to us. I would like to negotiate with them directly'.<sup>242</sup> Though the spirit of reconciliation is present in this exchange Reed's writing is underpinned by some extremely contentious, some might even say, menacing images. Also comparing himself to an adversary or a politically isolated figure from a part of the world which is notoriously fraught with conflict, is absurd in some respects. Yet such is Reed's frustration that he resorts to inciting feminists to take up his inimical challenges in print. Alternatively it is possible that Reed reveals a naivety here or he simply plays the provocateur, since feminists, far from feeling flattered by his approaches, are most likely to feel threatened by his hostility.

Previously we discussed Reed's trenchant criticisms of white feminists because of their persistently negative images of black men, but on more pointed racial grounds he also lambasts them for their apparent indifference to the phenomenon of inter-ethnic chauvinism. His objective is to draw attention to two facts: firstly, that violence against women is not an exclusively black phenomenon, as American society would suggest, but a cross cultural one. Secondly, Americans seem to accept the abuse of women by white men.<sup>243</sup> Reed exposes

<sup>241</sup> Reed, *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p.xiv.

<sup>242</sup> Dick, 'Ishmael Reed: An Interview' 1993, p. 345.

<sup>243</sup> Reed attempted to prove that he could be unearthing issues that had been deliberately hidden. After asserting that the treatment of women by black men is no worse than in other ethnic groups he cites the statistic that 'while the murder of white women by their boyfriends and husbands has remained the same, the murder of black women by their boyfriends and husbands has declined by 40 per cent since 1976'. See Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. xvi.; This is ratified again in 2008 when, in a bid to outwit the media, Reed provides a series of footnotes from newspapers and websites to point the reader to the facts of domestic violence in white families and the falling murder rate of black women by black men. Reed refers to an article in the *Reporter* in 1997 and an opinion page in Salon.Com in 2006. See *Mixing It Up* (2008), pp. 158-9.

these double standards by asking white feminists why they constantly fixate on the dangers of black men when they have more to fear from the men in their own ethnic group. He has repeatedly highlighted the phenomenon of wife beating in Jewish, Italian and Irish American communities enabling him to raise the question of why the media does not expose the scale of violence in these communities. Reed takes Spielberg to task again for ignoring the chauvinism and violence in Jewish communities:

I'm still waiting for Spielberg to do a movie about the mistreatment of women in American Jewish Households, an issue that, according to some Jewish feminists, is a cover-up by the community. He could do one about the battery of women in Israel, also treated with silence. According to a spokesperson for a battery center in Haifa, one out of six Israeli women has been battered. He said that when he read *The Color Purple*, all he could think of was rescuing Celie. But what about rescuing Naomi and Rachel? <sup>244</sup>

Reed's enmity can be explained on the grounds that he has not forgotten how Spielberg used the text of *The Color Purple* to create what Reed believed to be 'one of the most sinister black male characters' in film.<sup>245</sup> Thus, he continues to challenge Spielberg about the point that the latter does not empathize with the plight of young women by producing a film about Jewish domestic abuse

Reed cites the findings of a joint scholarly study of domestic violence in 1997, conducted by Lois Weis and Michelle Fine, to bolster his arguments.<sup>246</sup> This showed that ninety-two per cent of white females and in comparison sixty two per cent of black females reported levels of violence in their lives, but what particularly interests Reed is that many of the black women subjects were very willing to reveal details of the violence they had seen and experienced. Reed quotes directly from Weis that, 'the white women in the study, on the other hand [...] were very secretive [...] Weis speculated that such secretiveness serves to protect the popular image of family life in the white community'.<sup>247</sup> He concludes that such a

<sup>244</sup> Dick, 'A conversation with Ishmael Reed' 1997, p. 235.

<sup>245</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up* (2008), p.161. ; Even Toni Morrison, while not affirming Reed's views directly, has exclaimed, 'Think about violence in the white media. Everyone remembers Jimmy Cagney smashing that grapefruit in that woman's face. Did anybody have a debate on television about white males being violent to their women? No! [...] When a black man does it in a little book called *The Color Purple*, the whites say, "Ohh!" She must be saying that all black men [...] Look, they talk about Norman Mailer now, but all those years nobody said a word!'. See Cecil Brown, 'Interview with Toni Morrison', 1995, in *Toni Morrison: Conversations* ed. by Carolyn C. Denard, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), pp. 107-125 (p. 124).

<sup>246</sup> Weis is a professor of education at the University of Buffalo and Fine is a professor of social psychology in the Graduate Centre City University of New York

<sup>247</sup> Reed, *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. xxi..

study provides a concrete example of how the media, politicians and think tanks cover up the problems in the white community, ‘while projecting [...the dirt] onto blacks comes as no secret to the generations of blacks who’ve worked in the homes of whites and carried tales back to the black community about what went on in these homes’<sup>248</sup> He has Steinem in mind when he pointedly asks, ‘how many women and children are suffering in silence because of people like...[her]?’ and as a result of her ‘saying she’s always embarrassed when a male of her background is connected with scandal and it reaches the newspapers’.<sup>249</sup> Ultimately Reed registers his disbelief that, ‘the harshest criticism of black male misogyny has been made by Jewish American feminists: Gloria Steinem, Tammy Bruce, Susan Brownmiller, Amy Goodman, and others, yet they seem to look away from the domestic abuse that occurs in their ethnic group. These feminists have a lot of educating to do’.<sup>250</sup> He implies that their behaviour is unethical since their silence ignores the suffering of other Jewish women, in spite of ‘a complaint made in almost every issue of *Lilith*, a Jewish feminist magazine’.<sup>251</sup> Reed appears to target Jewish Americans in his criticism probably because of the ethnic background of Steinem and Brownmiller, but also possibly because this ethnic group is the one that has been the most successful in establishing its dominance in American media culture. To provoke further debate Reed turns his attention to the television talk-show host Don Imus, and cites Imus’s ‘constant on-air berating of his own wife Deidre as a “whore” and a “moron”’.<sup>252</sup> Reed jibes that it would not be surprising if ‘women in Celtic American households have a harder time than women in black households’.<sup>253</sup> What outrages Reed is that feminists on the news channel CNN, referred to as Imus’s ‘stable of Celtic American commentators’, issue no protest against the public humiliation of a white woman on air.<sup>254</sup> Yet if it were not for the fact that Reed did critique Irish Americans he would lay himself open to the charge that he was guilty of over-pathologizing Jews, which is the accusation he levels against white society in relation to black men.

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> See also, George Paul Csicsery, ‘The Many Battles of Ishmael Reed’, 1990, in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, pp. 314- 338 (p. 325).; Reed *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), p. xv.

<sup>250</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up* (2008), pp.160-161.

<sup>251</sup> *Another Day at the Front* (2003), p. xxii. Further evidence is supplied by Reed that tells of his visit to Israel, where he learned that ‘the incidence of crimes of homicide against women by their husbands is the highest in the West, so high that Prime Minister Barak commented about it’. He recommends visiting the website [www.TheJersusalemPost.com](http://www.TheJersusalemPost.com) for evidence.

<sup>252</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up* (2008), p. 159.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p. 159. Don Imus is an Irish American radio host, a satiric writer, and philanthropist. His nationally-syndicated talk show, *Imus in the Morning*, was aired throughout the United States on Citadel Media.

Since all the other ethnicities, other than African Americans, are comfortably grouped as white in American culture, Reed's suspicion is that the real reason for the unwillingness of white feminists to critique their own society is that they fear the consequences of exposing abusive men. For Reed, a 'white macho' culture uses 'white women to take down the brothers because the feminist movement has propagandized over the years that gender trumps race in oppression poker so they can make racist statements without criticism'.<sup>255</sup> He escalates this critique by making the point that white women, for all their feminist clamour for equality of opportunity, are ultimately controlled by and owe their livelihoods to white men. Through their ownership of large media conglomerations they 'control the means of expression' in all the mainstream newspapers and magazines and television channels 'where the majority of writers are white men'.<sup>256</sup> Reed is keen to show that gender and racial discourses overlap by revealing that feminists appear to tolerate the misogyny of white males. He does not empathise with the feminist position therefore, for he believes they regard black men in a more prejudicial light.

By citing examples of media institutions and their involvement in political events Reed unearths the fear that white women have about losing their jobs if they were to turn their attention to berating white men for chauvinistic practices.<sup>257</sup> Reed comments particularly on the events preceding the successful election of Arnold Schwarzenegger to the post of Governor in the state of California in 2003. Reed claims that the latter received the women's vote as a result of the strong support of feminists such as Susan Estrich and Tammy Bruce, who according to Reed, were both extremely racist towards black men.<sup>258</sup> Reed's point is that in spite of the charges of sexual harassment against the Governor, these women did not cease to support him for 'Hollywood women said they feared losing their jobs'.<sup>259</sup> Reed reveals that although Schwarzenegger had promised to hold an investigation into harassment after the election, this issue was quietly dropped and Reed in declamatory style wails,

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>256</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up* (2008), p. 164.

<sup>257</sup> Reed mentions the publication, *Tales from the Boom-Boom Room: Women vs. Wall Street*, 2002 by Susan Antilla in which she reveals the extent of sexual harassment on Wall Street. She states that many of her female informants were scared to talk about white male misogyny.

<sup>258</sup> See Reed's essay collection, *Mixing It Up* (2008), p. 191. He claims that Susan Estrich once wrote in *USA Today* that it was the behaviour of black men, rather than racist attitudes, that were responsible for their longer prison sentencing and incarceration in the criminal justice system. He describes how Tammy Bruce was so racist that she was expelled from the National Organization for Women.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

Where are the feminist picket lines that materialized before the Capitol demanding that the Senate hear Anita Hill's testimony? The kind of women who gave Mike Tyson, Clarence Thomas, Jim Brown, and now Kobe and MJ such a hard time. Maybe this is why the feminist movement has singled out black men to take the brunt of criticism for misogyny. Black men have no economic power over these women. Black men can't do nothin' for them or against them. Can't give them jobs at CNN, NPR, and Pacifica.<sup>260</sup>

Reed presents the likelihood that some white women despise black men because of their economic disempowerment while white men appear to be able to successfully dominate and subdue a number of females who are chasing lucrative careers. He believes that the apparent veneration of white male misogynists by feminists is nothing less than another aspect of the conspiracy against black men. He also turns the tables here by querying why white women do not support their black sisters when they allegedly suffered from black male harassment, thus pointing to the racism within the women's movement. Reed's views have been ratified on this point by Hooks, for she noted that fundamentally Reed is 'critically on the mark when he calls attention to a differentiation in reactions to black and white male sexism within the feminist movement', and she noticed how contemporary feminists tended to 'act as though black male sexism is more heinous than white male sexism'.<sup>261</sup>

Reed goes even further to claim that some black feminists approve of white misogyny, citing Margo Jefferson's praise of John Wayne. Reed's irony is at its best as he muses, that Wayne was,

a man who said that he was all for women's lib as long as they had his dinner ready when he got home. She gets on my case but writes a sappy, goofy valentine for John Wayne, the very symbol of American macho. She talks about his "beauty," and she says that she can't watch his films without feeling that "John Wayne is a dangerous and savage Other whom I must destroy or be destroyed by. But I can no longer dismiss the lure and force of his screen presence." Remarkable! I guess that Ann Rice was right. You got to treat them rough. But John Wayne wasn't all that rough. I knew his black mistress. She ran a restaurant in Berkeley. She used to wear a blond wig. She said that on the night that he received an Oscar, he wept in her arms like a baby.<sup>262</sup>

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., pp.191-2.

<sup>261</sup> See Bell Hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston and London: Turnaround, 1991), p. 68.

<sup>262</sup> Dick, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed' 1997, p. 240.



Though Reed, as a black male, has often been viewed as paranoid by many critics, here he genuinely seems baffled by a black woman's adoration of a well-known media figure who is figured as the epitome of machismo. He deliberates over the use of violence against women suggesting that this is a key aspect of Wayne's appeal. On a humorous note Reed even attempts to destabilise the common perceptions of Wayne's masculinity by revealing that far from being an icon of strength and indomitability the actor could be highly emotional.

Reed has consistently presented white men as hegemonic champions of racial chauvinism and white women as their racial enforcers while maintaining that black men continue to suffer under this regime. Yet he does not allow the male black community to remain unscathed in his criticism of gendered relationships. The third target of his critique is the black community itself, and this has remained a volatile issue for Reed because he feels he is one of the very few black voices to respond and fight back. He chastises 'some black men who are opportunistic, who go over to the feminist thing, based on greed', who support the negative idea that 'patriarchy is the main thing in the African American community' and, even worse in Reed's mind, who believe 'that African American men are less talented'.<sup>263</sup> Angrily Reed lashes out, 'you can't depend on the designated "head Negroes" from academia to do it. They're too busy trying to determine whether badly written nineteenth-century novels were authored by white or black women, or scrutinising Richard Wright's manuscripts for evidence of misogyny, or engaged in a trace-your-genealogy-back-to-Africa scam.'<sup>264</sup> Reed has really only one individual in mind here, Henry Louis Gates Jr., who he claims 'got upset because I said that he had never read a book by a black woman that he didn't like'.<sup>265</sup> In a 1997 interview with Bruce Dick, Reed launches into an extraordinarily bitter invective against Gates because he believes that the latter turned his back on African American male writers and sold out to the feminists. According to Reed, before this,

Gates was giving the establishment hell [...] he was accusing them of treating black intellectuals and writers the way they would the people who served them drinks. But then he compromised. Said that if they'd admit a couple of black divas to the canon, he'd call off the dogs. He then began picking on welfare mothers and even told one audience that multi-generational welfare dependency was a problem, when such situations are rare and the majority of welfare recipients are only on welfare for a short time [...] If the Talented Tenth continues to mimic the insidious trend

<sup>263</sup> Dick, 'Ishmael Reed: An Interview', 1993, p.347.

<sup>264</sup> Reed, *Mixing It Up* (2008), pp. 37-38.

<sup>265</sup> Dick, 'Ishmael Reed: An Interview', 1993, p. 347.

rightward, soon it'll be because of their genes [...] We prefer the pre-1987, early Gates, the intellectual warrior and ass-kicker to the one we have now.<sup>266</sup>

There are three points to note in this quotation. Firstly, there is Reed's palpable ire at what he believes to be Gates's betrayal, not only of African American male writers, but of the whole black community for becoming a member of a conservative academic and arts establishment that Reed saw paradoxically as reinforcing black inferiority under white Western modes. Secondly, Gates very much separated himself from the working class blacks, particularly those women who he regarded as social problems, but aligned himself with black middle class black female writers. Thirdly, and rather ironically, Reed clearly shows his approval of the 'early' Gates, but apparently only because Gates conformed to what Reed believes to be the only acceptable blueprint for black men, that is, they should fulfil the role of what has actually become a black stereotype: the aggressive, macho warrior. Reed describes Gates at this point as a composite of the intellectual Black Panther who politically was a skilful cultural agitator. By leaving this behind Reed claims that Gates's affiliation with middle class black feminists has had a disastrous effect on his critical outlook.

Reed's anger reveals the very real hostility at the heart of male African American culture. In the same interview, Reed condemned the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, first published in 1997 when Gates led the editorial team. Reed complains that the latter 'called about ten black women writer's great' leading Reed to assume that this publication was 'a feminist propaganda volume'.<sup>267</sup> Reed and Gates are desperately at odds here because of the omissions of a number of black male writers. Reed is convinced that the '1960's black writers were the most influential writers since the Imagists of the turn of the century', while Gates said that the 'black writing revolution of the 1960's was short lived'.<sup>268</sup> This was a key decade for Reed of course, because his own artistic beginning can be firmly located at that point. Thus he exclaims,

How can you put out an anthology and leave out William Melvin Kelley, Lorenzo Thomas, Askia Muhammed Toure, Calvin Hernton, Cecil Brown, David Henderson, and John O'Killens, whose *And Then We Heard the Thunder* is as good as or even superior to Ellison's book, *Invisible Man*? When you decipher the propaganda line in Gates's *Norton*, it proposes that

<sup>266</sup> Dick, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed', 1997, p. 245.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., pp. 229-230.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

black men were “valued” and then, all of a sudden, a renaissance of black women writers occurred. Valued? If the establishment valued Richard Wright, Langston Hughes and Chester Himes, who were desperately seeking funds toward the end of their lives, it had a funny way of showing it.<sup>269</sup>

Reed holds Gates entirely responsible for excluding from the *Norton* seven black male authors.<sup>270</sup> Gates, in Reed’s estimation, appears to over inflate the ‘greatness’ and ‘value’ of black women writers in a bid to overtake the full range of deserving male writers. It is notoriously difficult to measure excellence in terms of literary quality and Reed’s views are highly subjective, based on gender differentiation and should be debated at more length.

Therefore it is useful to give some weight to Robert Elliot Fox’s consideration of the difficulties prevalent in canon formation in African American literature. He empathises with Reed’s annoyance at this male group of seven’s ‘perfunctory treatment’ and he discloses his own opposition to the issue of ‘commercial considerations’, and the climate of ‘political correct-ness’, where “old” judgments are dismissed as sclerotic and [...] oppressive, while “new” verdicts, self-adjudged as morally superior, are substituted’.<sup>271</sup> Fox even applauds Reed’s view, adjudging ‘we are not lacking multiple instances of greatness; the problem is a rush to canonize the new, the “other,” in response to sociopolitical exigencies of the moment—to insist on the importance of particular works before the “weight” of that importance has made itself fully apparent’.<sup>272</sup> Without castigating Gates specifically, Fox implies that this historical moment accommodated feminist writers as a matter of political urgency, and the issue of financial potential was another overriding factor driving editorial decisions. However Fox does not concur with Reed’s assessment that O’Killen’s’ work is superior to Ellison’s magnum opus, adding that this ‘will strike most readers of both texts as preposterous, the result of judgment overruled by passion on behalf of forgotten or neglected writers’.<sup>273</sup> Fox appears to have the measure of Reed’s over-zealous assessments for this could be at the heart of Reed’s second criticism where he suggests that the black canonical establishment did not appear to value Hughes, Wright and Himes. This again is not strictly true for the three writers are represented in the *Norton* together with critical biographies and

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Reed believed that the editorial board was diminishing the contribution of key twentieth century black male writers who were responsible for shaping the development of African American literature before and after the Civil Rights movement.

<sup>271</sup> Robert Elliot Fox, ‘Ted Joans and the (B)reach of the African American Literary Canon’, *MELUS* 29 (2004), 41-58 (pp. 42, 44).

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., pp. 43-44.

significant extracts from their work. Hughes and Wright are represented in numerous critical works and anthologies though admittedly Himes possibly had more success in Europe. One wonders whether Reed is really focusing on the critical appraisal or the pecuniary circumstances of these writers, but Reed had made up his mind: he concluded that the Norton is fundamentally an expression of Gates's view that 'African American male writers are inferior in a number of ways to African American women writers'.<sup>274</sup>

Reed cites 1989 as being the pivotal year when Gates 'had already made up his mind to go after the very lucrative women's studies market', which corresponds with the year that Reed wrote an introduction to an edition of Zora Neale Hurston's, *Tell My Horse*. Reed chose this text because he thoroughly applauded Hurston's interest in Vodun and the black folklore tradition, and this corresponded with his own research into black traditions and Neo-HooDoo. Yet by this time many feminists were focusing on Hurston's better known work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and were claiming that she was one of the earliest black feminists.<sup>275</sup> Reed countered this view by making the point in his introduction that she did not belong to a tradition of feminism and that the women's movement was ignoring Hurston's other works. Reed explains how, as the editor of his edition, Gates deleted this point at the request of a white 'woman at Harper Row who was having a panic attack about black misogyny'.<sup>276</sup> Grimly he notes that 'Gates said that my remarks would wave a red flag in front of the feminists'.<sup>277</sup> Reed also observed that the cover of this publication had 'a black man riding a black woman's book' which he understood to signal a 'black male-hating cover'.<sup>278</sup> When he confronted Gates the latter referred him to the publisher implying that 'he had no opinion' about this.<sup>279</sup> Reed's animosity towards Gates is palpable for apparently selling out to black feminism in its quest to spearhead the feminist movement regardless of how black men were continuing to be denigrated in national publications.

To prove his point Reed cites the review written by Gates of an anthology, edited by Mary Helen Washington. According to Reed this contained an announcement that he had

<sup>274</sup> Dick, 'Ishmael Reed: An Interview', 1993, p. 347.

<sup>275</sup> In Alice Walker's publication, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden's*, 1983, she describes her search to locate and mark the presence of Hurston's grave in detail and she also considers Hurston to be her foremost literary ancestor and mentor.

<sup>276</sup> Dick, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed', 1997, p. 228.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

‘capitulated to the feminist movement and from that time on, he’d be a little more than their literary cheerleader’.<sup>280</sup> Furthermore Reed’s glee is tangible when he records how he personally challenged Gates about this matter on an air flight to Washington, though the latter declined to make any comment. Certainly in 1990, Gates published a critical anthology of women’s writing, entitled *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, and in the introduction he argues that,

Much has been made—too much—of the supposed social animosities between black men and women and the relation between the commercial success of the black women’s literary movement and the depiction of black male sexism. Perhaps some media commentators have been titillated by the notion of a primal black fratricide-sororicide. But the popularity of black women’s literature has nothing to do with anti-black male conspiracies—as is occasionally charged [...] The black women’s literary movement, it seems safe to say, already has taken its place as a distinct period in Afro-American literary history, and could very well prove to be one of the most productive and sustained.<sup>281</sup>

This can be understood as Gates’s formal announcement that black women’s literature has broken its authorial silence, come of age and is now, ‘independent of, the black male tradition and its triangle of influence, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison’.<sup>282</sup> He proposes that black women’s writing has achieved this position by merit and by its very quality, ‘that is at once black and female, replete with its own shadings and timbres, topoi and tropes’.<sup>283</sup> He accepts that it is time to move on from the gender wars between black men and women though he also implies that the media has exacerbated and exaggerated the strength of bitterness of this feuding.

In the past Reed’s argument about the initiation of black gender feuding has been formulated in the first place on the strength of Alice Walker’s negative portrayal of black men in her novel *The Color Purple*. Reed would probably agree that the media influence surrounding the film release of this novel whipped up a colossal storm of protests, but he has also insisted that there has been a conspiratorial element in the elevation of what he has called ‘the new crowd’, those black feminists who have aligned themselves with white feminists. Reed is still resentful about Gates’s claim that that he was ‘given to “bizarre overstatements”’, and for his

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid., pp. 236-7.

<sup>281</sup> Gates Jr., ed., *Reading Black: Reading Feminist*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

‘crazy’ criticisms of the movie *The Color Purple*.<sup>284</sup> Above all Reed is suspicious of Gates’s motives and suggests that Gates overvalues black women’s literature purely ‘for the purpose of impressing the feminist market’.<sup>285</sup> Reed has not forgiven Gates for implying that black men should ‘just keep quiet and not engage in [...] “divisive polemics” against a feminist movement’.<sup>286</sup> Neither would Reed agree with the following words from Gates, that ‘despite the very public and bitter rows about the political implications of black women writing about black male sexism, this movement has not promoted itself bombastically or as self-consciously as, say, did the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Arts Movement’.<sup>287</sup>

However Gates is not alone in espousing these ideas, for Toni Morrison, asserts that,

Black men have decided that black women writers are the enemy, and therefore we are doing something deceptive by writing less confrontational literature and getting more play out of it. Whereas they are the serious warriors, vis-a-vis literature and they can’t get published. And that is just not true.<sup>288</sup>

Morrison suggests, like Gates and formerly Hernton, that the gender wars are overstated and largely perpetuated by men who complain about the lack of publishing opportunities. She also points out the lack of support within the black male writer’s community, commenting, ‘any number of black books by black men have come out and I haven’t seen black men in the bookstore buying that book’.<sup>289</sup> Gates also differentiates precisely between the experience of black male and female writers because he claims that the former, especially ‘older black male writers deny any black influence at all’, while the latter, ‘often claim a descent from Hurston’; they are more than ready to bond with other women, ‘free from the anxiety that only one writer can emerge from the group [...] as “the” black writer of the decade’.<sup>290</sup> This suggests that Gates believes the men are more divisive and competitive.

Above all Reed regards Gates as a hypocrite who,

<sup>284</sup> Dick, ‘A Conversation with Ishmael Reed’, 1997, p. 234.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Gates Jr., *Reading Black: Reading Feminist*, p.3.

<sup>288</sup> Brown, ‘Interview with Toni Morrison’, 1995, in *Toni Morrison: Conversations*, p. 109.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., p. 110..

<sup>290</sup> Gates, *Reading Black: Reading Feminist*, p. 3-4.

[...] talks about my misogyny, yet I didn't see him resigning from the *New Yorker* when Jamaica Kincaid was fired. He hangs out with Marty Peretz, who said that black women were 'culturally' deficient. Why hasn't he jumped on Peretz the way he did on Farrakhan? Why doesn't he insist that progressive Jews be given space in these neo-conservative publications where he has power? Why doesn't he ask his friends at the *New Republic* to hire progressive Jewish women writers?<sup>291</sup>

Reed maintains that Gates is unprincipled in his pursuit of prestige and wealth which is why he suspects that the latter prefers to maintain a media silence so as not to upset the establishment. In the past Reed furiously rejected Gates's allegations that the black community was anti-Semitic and in this quotation Reed turns the tables on him by foregrounding the question of why Gates did not expend his considerable influence in the publishing world to defend Kincaid or to promote Jewish writers.<sup>292</sup> These are tangled insinuations because Kincaid is a black woman and also a Jewish convert, while the Jewish American Peretz, whom Gates presumably befriended at Harvard, is guilty of bigotry against black women. Reed perceives this situation as a terrible irony because he thinks that Gates could have intervened in this situation to champion his own black community. Also it is possible that Reed feels betrayed by Gates because the latter does not appear to share his own interest in multiculturalism and publishing minority writers. Previously in this interview Reed observed that in a *Washington Times* review of Jewish American literature in 1987, 'very few women were mentioned, even though Jewish American women have been producing superior literature from the turn of the century Yiddish writers to the present day'.<sup>293</sup> From these assertions Reed implies that Gates is not only beholden to the Ivy League academia and conservative publishing houses, but more sinisterly to North Eastern media conglomerates that he does not wish to offend by supporting black men or other minority groups. This leaves one to conclude that Reed's earlier assertions about the 'macho' power of the white male might have some merit, for they appear to control American culture and gendered associations. Thus it is not only white women who are held in thrall to white men's economic

<sup>291</sup> Dick, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed', 1997, p. 243. Jamaica Kincaid is a Caribbean novelist who has won a number of American literary awards. She is a convert to Judaism, possibly when she married Allen Shawn, the son of the established editor of the *New Yorker* magazine, William Shawn. According to one report Kincaid left the *New Yorker* in 1995 because of her disgust at the lack of intellectual qualities promoted at the magazine and the 'vulgarity' of Tina Brown the new editor. See 'Jamaica Kincaid' in *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2004, [http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Jamaica\\_Kincaid.aspx](http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Jamaica_Kincaid.aspx) [accessed 5 June 2012]

<sup>292</sup> Marty Peretz is a Jewish American and a former assistant professor in Harvard. Currently he is the editor emeritus of the journal, *New Republic* and is a staunch supporter of the State of Israel.

<sup>293</sup> Dick, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed', 1997, p. 237. According to Reed this review (October 5, 1987) took place around the same time that Gates put forward a review in the same media publication because 'of black feminist pressure to share some of the women's studies loot' which presumably means Gates was co-erced into airing some of the most recent writings from black women.

autocracy and patriarchy, but as we have seen there are far reaching influences for black males and females.

Since Reed has perennially castigated black feminist writers it might be helpful to conclude by considering his current relationship with them. He seemed to be almost petulantly gratified to announce that he 'was the first to write about fascist and racist elements in the modern feminist movement'.<sup>294</sup> He argues that as 'well as being a white supremacist movement, it also contains elements of gender supremacy, which for black men, being both black and male has meant double trouble'.<sup>295</sup> This critique suggests no altruism or empathy towards black feminists, for instead he seems merely gratified to publicly air the issue of white supremacy in a liberation movement, that in his view, ought to concentrate on achieving racial and social equality. He even accuses the black feminist movement of pandering to white males, claiming that it 'seems to be mired in breezy intellectual clichés, dishonesty, pettiness, a response to dissent characterized by performance-art emotionalism [...] and a tendency to embrace some of the racist obsessions of ultra-right-wing white male movements'.<sup>296</sup> Regrettably Reed tends to condemn all black feminists with this statement even though one suspects that he only has in mind the few 'black mid-wives' used by white feminists 'to hit black men over the head about affirmative action'.<sup>297</sup>

When Bruce Dick asked Reed, in 1997, to reflect on the critical response to his work over the previous thirty years the latter's response quickly manifested itself as a rant against all the feminists who criticised his work. Thus, Dick had to remind Reed firstly, of the black women who have commended his writing, and, secondly, that he does have cordial relations with a number of black feminists who have not only supported him but also been favourable to his fiction. It is noticeable that Reed only seems to approve of those who have praised him. Therefore he cites the artists, Nikki Giovanni, Thulani Davis, Joyce Carol Thomas, Lucille Clifton, and Baraka Sele. Then there are those who have broken ranks to support him, namely, Ntozake Shange, for refusing to take sides with the other white feminists who prevented him from 'appearing on a panel sponsored by the Writers Union'.<sup>298</sup> Reed adds approvingly of how 'Gwen Carmen, editor of a black lesbian magazine, cussed them out,

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>295</sup> Reed, 'Foreword' in *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p. xvi.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., p. xviii.

<sup>297</sup> Martin, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed', 1983, p. 240.

<sup>298</sup> Dick, 'A Conversation with Ishmael Reed', 1997, pp. 239-240.



publicly'.<sup>299</sup> He has drawn on the words of Bell Hooks to ratify his arguments and of course she has publicly come to his defence against white feminists in her writings. But it is very difficult for Reed to shake off his suspicions, and when issuing a critique he dismissed Hooks as a 'Ms. Magazine diva', who capitulated to white feminists because she was told she had to.<sup>300</sup>

Reed then, enters the 'gender wars' as a self-proclaimed 'masculinist'. As part of his masculine self-expression he writes extensively to counter the negative cultural perceptions about black men. To a considerable degree Reed articulates a language of confrontation, and perpetual warfare because a number of women and white men continue to be troublesome to him. While he deems a militant, vitriolic tone to be necessary to confront the challenges that American society presents, this is not welcomed by feminists who find great difficulties in engaging with his discourse.

## Conclusion

Given Reed's claim that the 'Afro-American male' is the 'most exploited and feared class' in America, it is hardly surprising that the hostility between the genders emerges as one of his major and perennial concerns.<sup>301</sup> Reed adopts a politics of masculinity that foregrounds the black man's position and his black male protagonists are spokesmen for the African American experience of being treated as scapegoats or pariahs. In spite of his contempt for the limitations proffered by gender-racial profiling, Reed's black female protagonists are not allowed to exhibit the masculine traits of being strong, intelligent or independent without being labelled domineering fascists, who emasculate the men in their lives. In fiction Reed's women have to be controlled and their male counterparts, Loop Garou, La Bas and Ian Ball all find the means to subdue or stamp out the troublesome evil of feminists on behalf of their gender. The undercurrent of Reed's writing rails that black women should not have the last word, rather, black men should be the ones to decide what is legitimate in African American culture, and they should be the key players in countering white hegemony. The disputes with black and white feminists incurred by this chauvinistic presence means that the label of

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p. 144.

misogynist has shadowed his career in the past thirty years. Even though he might attempt to vigorously repudiate this categorization by expressing his admiration of some black women writers Reed is still currently battling with this association of sexism.

Nevertheless two main contradictions manifest themselves. Firstly an interplay of hierarchies complicate Reed's stance on race and gender. He does not contribute to the spirit of plurality and equality for all groups because on times he presents patriarchal perspectives, as cultural truths. Admittedly this position could be balanced against Reed's generosity in publishing a number of aspiring female writers through the auspices of his multicultural organisation, The Before Columbus Foundation. This led him to comment in 1994 that the women are 'onto something', followed by an appreciation that, 'a lot of good eloquent work is coming from women's writing'.<sup>302</sup> Such statements correlate with the time Reed reassessed his position on black women in the nineteen eighties claiming that he, amongst other black men, had been blinkered by the process of reclaiming manhood on a comparative basis with white men. Yet his stance as the black 'masculinist' on the issue of African American canon formation contradicts such positive assertions and locates Reed in troubled waters. After Gates compiled the anthology of Black Women's writing in 1990, and later headed the Norton editorial team for the volume on African American literature, Reed campaigned to reject the worthiness of such endeavours. He issued a series of diatribes against Gates for consorting with black feminists in opposition to the black male writers. Reed regarded this as a betrayal and made it clear that he was not going to keep quiet in order to pacify feminists. Indeed, Reed shows little sign of accommodating women in his discourse and his forthright representation of masculinism has engendered a tangled web of relations with the result that a number of Reed's critics have commented on his paranoia with regard to female self-assertiveness. Alternatively one could understand Reed's gesture at masculinism or 'manism' as a loose equivalent of Walker's concept of womanism. Since the latter implied that the term is a holistic one that gestures towards integrating the entire African American community, then Reed may be intimating that he writes to champion all African Americans as an act of his sense of social responsibility and humanity. However, ever the pragmatist, his conciliatory voice is often overshadowed by his tendency to deliberately provoke black and white feminists because of his anger over the presentation of *The Color Purple* as a truth

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<sup>302</sup> Valencia, 'Prof Plays "Gotcha" with Ethnic Myths', 1994, p. 360.

telling exercise. He has not forgiven Walker and Steinem for appearing to conspire against black men and therefore he continues to issue hostile statements against them.

Secondly, although Reed presents himself as the remote outsider on the margins of black artistic culture he is actually one of a series of black and white American males who could be regarded as both misogynist and anti-feminist. When Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, was published in 1982 there was an outcry from large numbers of African American male writers and great bitterness ensued between black men and women. Correspondingly Reed wrote an essay critiquing the phenomenon of white macho, because he realized that attempting to merely copy white men's chauvinism was not the answer for black men. Reed's works nevertheless seem to reveal an obsession with actually proving manliness by deploying a language register that is dominated by black assertion in aggressive situations. Though stylistically different, Reed may be considered similar to a number of famous white authors such as Hemingway, Mailer and Roth who have been bitterly condemned by feminist critics on the grounds of their personal behaviour and their depiction of brutally aggressive male protagonists. Ironically therefore Reed comes very close to the American mainstream on the question of gender.

Racial profiling is anathema to Reed. It is therefore curious to see him, at times, revel in gender profiling. Even though black men and women would be in a position of immense political strength if they combined their expertise and resources, Reed's work foregrounds the psychological and racial barriers limiting this kind of co-operation.

## Afterword

Ishmael Reed has, throughout his career, offered lacerating attacks on American society. However, unlike other black novelists such as James Baldwin or Chester Himes, he has never opted to reside in Europe in self-imposed exile, for he is fascinated with, and obsessed by, the global microcosm, the 'cultural bouillabaisse', that defines the society of the United States.<sup>1</sup> In a tradition that can be traced back to the authors of Puritan Jeremiads, Reed is quintessentially the patriot who acknowledges his debt to the United States, yet who continues to launch stinging attacks against a country which tolerates his subversive creativity. Reed's adversarial vision keeps pace with contemporary America and just as Papa La Bas in *Mumbo Jumbo* seeks the text of the Black Aesthetic to discover that it is always changing, Reed, the pragmatic pugilist varies his punches according to his adversaries' strengths and weaknesses. Endlessly evolving, Reed responds to conditions that are generally not of his own making while, nevertheless, always seeming to be one or two steps ahead of his adversaries.

Reed generally promotes a sense of his own 'outsiderism' on racial and political grounds through a principle of doubling: as an African American he is peripheral to the dominant values of the white majority, and as the promoter of multiculturalist activities he has outlawed himself from the assimilationism of the northern black and urban middle class. When reviewing Reed's essay anthology *God Made Alaska for the Indians*, Jerome Klinkowitz observed that the work is a 'commentary about being a necessary outsider to the monocultural elite'.<sup>2</sup> Yet Klinkowitz counters this insight with the question, "Ishmael Reed?" some people will ask; "If he's not on the inside of our academic and publishing establishments who is?"<sup>3</sup> The point is made that 'outsidership' is not a trait that we can ascribe to Reed in spite of his self-representation as the battle scarred pugilist on the margins fighting on behalf of the disenfranchised and oppressed. I have attempted to show that Reed is neither peripheral nor detached and that his sense of outsidership can be considered to be a strategic example of self-romanticisation. Thus he actually draws on the most traditional of

<sup>1</sup> Reed, *Writin' is Fightin'* (1990), p. 53. Reed attributes this term to the Yale professor Robert Thompson. Bouillabaisse is a French name denoting a fish stew with multiple ingredients that may change from day to day depending on what foods are available.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz, 'Ishmael Reed's Multicultural Aesthetic' 1985, in *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed* ed. by Bruce Allen Dick (Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 155-164 (p. 158).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

American discourses, by punching out a stylistic range of metaphors and invoking a rugged male heroism that transcends the boundaries of 'race', and seen for example, in a whole range of works from white writers including Hemingway, Mailer, and Philip Roth. Like Reed who admits that 'I've published writers I've had fistfights with', these white authors have not only engaged with boxing rhetoric they have taken their sparring into real life.<sup>4</sup>

In this thesis I hope to have demonstrated that on intellectual, racial and gender grounds Reed is highly engaged with fighting for the cause of the African American community and black men in particular. He insists on asserting his identity through a decentred perspective which corresponds with rejecting the notion of individuals as fixed subjects and he contextualises them instead through the fluctuating identities of class, race, ethnicity and gender. This very issue presents many future research opportunities, particularly in relation to the question as to whether Ishmael Reed can comfortably be classed as a postmodernist author. There is a volume of critical writing that regards his fiction to be characteristic of postmodernist thought and Reed's eclectic writing style can be seen to draw striking parallels with the postmodernist concerns of self-reflexivity, historiography, metanarrative, and pluralism. Linda Hutcheon believes Reed's work 'to be at the heart of the postmodernist enterprise in general because of his 'postmodern ironic contesting of myth as master narrative' and the 'political satire and parody' in his fiction.<sup>5</sup> ; Brian McHale regards Reed as a postmodernist revisionist of history and writes of how Reed displaces history by introducing anachronisms to show a tension between the past and present.<sup>6</sup> African American critics, including Henry Louis Gates Jr., praise Reed's 'parodic use of intertextuality', while Bernard Bell believes him to be 'the leading promoter of black postmodernist writing' because of Reed's bold experimentation and revitalization of traditional forms as the Western, the detective novel and the slave narrative.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1989), p. 5. ; Kasia Boddy notes that Hemingway enjoyed nothing more than a physical or literary punchup while Mailer 'believed that regular spats with other male writers was an essential part of "keeping in shape"'. Roth specialized in the metaphor of the counterpunch as a way of 'describing the contradictions of his childhood' and Jewish background. See Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History*, pp. 235-236, 358, 377.

<sup>5</sup> See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 50, 130.

<sup>6</sup> See Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1987), p.96.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Loius Gates Jr., 'Ishmael Reed' in *Afro-American Fiction Writers After 1955*, Vol. 33, ed. by Thadious M. Davis and Trudier Harris (Michigan: Gale Research, 1984), ), pp. 219-232 (p. 225); Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), pp. , xv, 329.

Yet other critics have specific understandings of the African American context and would be likely to reject a postmodernist reading of Reed's work. Wahneema Lubiano argues that African American literature is a precursor of postmodernism on the grounds that slaves and their descendants were exceptionally poised to offer resistance to dominant cultures in the form of critiquing the grand narratives of western discourse because their 'repression' and their 'histories show that [...they have] maintained a fairly consistent level of incredulity'.<sup>8</sup> Barbara Christian critiques postmodernist theory for expunging the experiences of black and ethnic minorities in favour of 'a new Western concept which proclaimed that reality does not exist, that everything is relative'.<sup>9</sup> My attempt in this thesis has been to understand Reed's writing from within. I have not attempted to enforce a single model or ideology on his work because of Reed's intense engagement with various issues. His body of writing is not one that can easily be deconstructed and pinned into a series of fixtures. Rather, I have aimed to develop close readings of his fiction and non-fiction to allow for the multiple paradoxes and contradictions to speak for themselves. Reed strenuously argues that his 'work can't be categorized simply', due to his distinct forging of a diverse African American aesthetic.<sup>10</sup> He emphatically denies being influenced by other postmodernists and his suggestion is that 'critics look at *Mumbo Jumbo*, Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings* and William Burroughs's *The Western Lands*, and see perhaps that they were influenced by me'.<sup>11</sup> Reed thus has his own ideas about his literary identity and location within the American literary canon.

Ultimately Reed is a contradictory mixture of both the radical and traditionalist, who blends the writing of fiction and literary criticism with serious political and social commentary. His larger aesthetic project of 'Neo-HooDoo' draws on a multiplicity of styles and moods which means that the reader encounters myriads of characters, who transcend time and history and move within vast landscapes across the continents of Europe, Africa and North and South America. As the consummate pugilist, Reed's writings are constructed to challenge any forms of racism, monoculturalism, intellectual precociousness and feminist chauvinism that surface in America so that he might make his gesture towards a more democratic and hybrid vision of

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<sup>8</sup> Wahneema Lubiano, 'Shuckin' off the African American Native Other: What's "Po Mo" Got to Do with it?', *Cultural Critique*, 18 (1991), 149-186 (p. 160).

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Christian, 'The Race for Theory', *Feminist Studies*, 14:1 (1988), 67-79 (p. 73).

<sup>10</sup> Zamir, 'An Interview with Ishmael Reed, 1988', pp. 1146.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1137.

American democracy. For Reed, 'Writing' ultimately is 'fighting' and after fifty-nine years of punching on paper he remains poised to fight another round.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Reed, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*, p. 129.

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