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“RUPTURING THE PLANE”: SIGNIFYIN(G)

AT THE JUNCTURES IN ISHMAEL

REED’S *MUMBO JUMBO*

being

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty

of the Fort Hays State University in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of Master of Arts

by

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ABSTRACT

Most readings of Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* come from a perspective that Reed establishes a series of binaries to be dissected. Many of these critics use Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction because they assert that Reed is simply reversing the roles of the marginalized African and the centralized white man. These implications cover most of the major points in Reed's work: the West vs. the East, Christianity vs. Hoodoo, white vs. black, etc. However, this type of reading is inadequate because it is too limiting. Reed goes beyond the binaries and beyond the Western assumption of one or the other. He creates a kind of hybrid notion, suggesting the text contains more of a crossroads motif than a simple inversion of dominance and oppression. Using Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* as a theoretical framework, I examine the protagonist, PaPa LaBas, as well as the text *Mumbo Jumbo* itself because they represent the points at which Reed's notions of hybridity are most prominent. Cynthia Hamilton writes that which most closely summarizes my concept: "The 'X' of the crossing roadbeds signals the multidirectionality of the juncture and is simply a single instance in a boundless network that redoubles and circles . . . and branches over the vastness of hundreds of thousands of American miles" (237). The sense of redoubling and circling aligns with Gates's theory of "Signifyin(g)," and the process enables readers to go beyond the binaries to discover the complex nature of Reed's work.

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Chapter 1: An Overview: *Mumbo Jumbo* and Gates's Signifyin(g)

The Plot Untangled

Ishmael Reed, in his book *Mumbo Jumbo*, creates a work that readers initially find distracting and difficult to comprehend. Chapters jump from setting to setting, and the span of time stretches from 1971 all the way back to the times of Ancient Egypt. Reed's writing style does not follow standard conventions, and he challenges readers to find the line between history and myth, between fact and fiction. Some readers become frustrated as they struggle to trace a linear plot, but they fail to recognize the complexity and richness of Reed's writing process—and of the greater points he is trying to make through his unconventional methods. Reed plays on the words *mumbo jumbo*, calling attention to his unusual writing style in the title itself. Reed intentionally creates a text that requires the readers to participate actively in revealing the sub-textual meaning. They cannot passively read the text and expect to understand Reed's message.

Readers misinterpret the title for meaninglessness, often assuming that the message they expect to find is buried in a heap of mumbo jumbo and that it cannot be found. Perhaps the readers carry this thought because they are accustomed to a linear, logical, easily understood plot. They come to the book with Western assumptions of how a book should be read and even how it should be written. These assumptions play precisely into Reed's intentions. He seeks to challenge readers to acknowledge and even accept that a story can have multiple sources and multiple means of being communicated. As Michael Boccia writes:

For Reed there is an additional level of irony in the metaphor of mumbo jumbo because the Black culture's contribution to American culture has been called mumbo jumbo in the word's most pejorative sense: meaningless, jibberish. But, Reed forces the reader to learn that the mumbo jumbo is not chaotic, meaningless, and silly, [sic] rather it is a different explanation (or metaphor) of the world. He forces us to the conclusion partly through the form of the book which, through its uniqueness, appears disorganized, but is quite unified and organized. (105)

The play on the words *mumbo jumbo* is precisely Reed's point. Between the two interpretations of what those words mean—of what the text itself means—lies a crossroads of understanding, the point at which the two meanings intersect. It is this crossroads that conveys the most significant implications in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Reed certainly wants his readers to contemplate opposing views—between black and white, Hoodoo and Christianity, myth and history, non-Western and Western views— but, more importantly, he wants them to understand that the two views have a common ground; conceivably, it is within the mumbo jumbo of meaning, within the crossroads, where Reed conceals yet another complexity to be unfolded.

Since the plot, by nature, is quite convoluted, perhaps a summary of the highlights of *Mumbo Jumbo*'s plot, as well as a mention of the characters within that plot that are discussed in this paper, will prove helpful before delving into the implications of crossroads figures. Before readers can understand the plot, they first must have an understanding of Jes Grew. As John Parks explains, it is “the American version of

polytheism of Osiris” (168). Parks defines the concept quite succinctly, clear to the Western reader. It is not in Jes Grew’s nature, however, to be defined so linearly and simplistically. Reed offers an additional explanation that comments on Jes Grew’s elusiveness:

Jes Grew has no end and no beginning. It even precedes that little ball that exploded 1000000000s of years ago and led to what we are now. Jes Grew may even have caused the ball to explode. We will miss it for a while but it will come back, and when it returns we will see that it never left. . . . Jes Grew is life. (204)

Jes Grew, then, is more of a spirit, and it comes from Ancient Egypt, tracing back to the Egyptian god Osiris.

A thorough understanding of Jes Grew cannot be complete without examining Reed’s account of Set and Osiris, which comes late in the plot. Jes Grew is the spirit under which Osiris rules and under which he and his people thrive; with Jes Grew, the people are “[h]appy all the time. . . . Egypt was prospering under Osiris and there was peace” (Reed 163). Osiris makes it his mission to travel the world, teaching others “to permit nature to speak and dance through them, . . . to mimic him and add their variation to fit their country and their clime” (165). Osiris realizes that his people are, at times, overtaken by the spirit so much that it interrupts their work, which could lead to the fall of Egypt’s prosperity. To counter this potential problem, Osiris has the Book of Thoth created as a way to document the dances for his people to “determine what god or spirit possessed them as well as learn how to make these gods and spirits depart. . . . [T]he

Book of Thoth [became] the 1st anthology written by the first choreographer” (Reed 164), and it helps Osiris’s people gain a deeper understanding of and control over the spirits that inhabit them.

Osiris’s brother Set does not approve of his brother or of Jes Grew. In fact, he is bothered by the lack of productivity in the nation: In Set’s perspective, everyone was “enjoying themselves when there was hard work to be done, countries to invade, populations to subjugate” (Reed 163). Set mopes about as his brother rules a nation in peace and prosperity, but he constantly plots to bring about Osiris’s downfall. Set eventually is pushed to his limit in tolerating his brother’s empire, and all his conspiring finally proves useful. As Osiris travels the world, teaching his dances and traditions, Set instigates rumors that his brother is a “drunk . . . fornicating fraud” (Reed 165). He challenges Osiris to prove his worth by sprouting forth from the water, a trick Osiris can do in his sleep. While Osiris is resting peacefully underwater in the coffer, Set orders some of his men to mutilate Osiris’s body, sending a message to the ruler’s followers that Set is right—that Osiris is, indeed, a fraud. With his brother successfully murdered, Set steps up as the new ruler. Under his reign, he outlaws dancing, music, and sex. Reed writes that Set goes so far as to “even [outlaw] Life itself” (173). Desperate to gain popularity, which is rapidly dwindling, Set creates a new religion based on Aton (the sun god). Despite his efforts to replace his deceased brother’s practices, Set fails to popularize his new religion. He does, however, set the stage for Atonism, which will be revived a few generations later by the acclaimed child in a basket, Moses.

The two branches of religion that stem from the rivaling brothers (and which, consequently, become religions steeped in that same rivalry) are as vastly different as the brothers themselves; while “Set went down as the 1st man to shut nature out of himself” (Reed 162), “Osiris . . . developed such a fondness and attachment for Nature that people couldn’t tell them apart” (166). Atonism, the religion that eventually turns into Judeo-Christianity, directly descends from Set, and Jes Grew springs from Osiris, growing into the Hoodoo religion. Since Set, and by extension the Atonists, detests Jes Grew, he makes it his personal mission to snuff out his brother’s legacy—a mission that sets the stage for centuries to come.

The two religions survive together *and* apart. Despite Atonism’s dominance and efforts to destroy “the despised enemy of the Atonist Path” (Reed 211), Jes Grew, through its ever-morphing, ever-elusive nature, finds a way to survive. Jes Grew waxes and wanes, weaves in and out of Atonism’s vigilant watch, constantly searching for its sacred text, for, if the two reunite—if, as Reed writes, “the lost liturgy [can] seek its litany” (211)—Jes Grew can be restored to its former Osirian glory.

The Book of Thoth, like its spirit, Jes Grew, survives, a fact that allows us to fast forward to the 1920s, where the plot of *Mumbo Jumbo* begins. Atonism and Jes Grew remain mortal enemies; Atonists continue their efforts to end the despicable entity, which is on the rise in New York. The Book is in the possession of Abdul Hamid, one of the fourteen people designated to hide the Book from the Wallflower Order, a society that descends from Atonism. Hamid is murdered, and it is up to PaPa LaBas, a houngan (male priest in the Hoodoo religion), to solve the crime.

In order to do that, LaBas goes back in time, pulling from his knowledge of the prophet Moses, who (after Osiris) is the next known person to be in possession of the Book of Thoth. In LaBas's account, Moses travels to Koptos and takes the Book from Isis, Osiris's wife. Striking a deal with Set's ghost before retrieving the Book, Moses agrees to spread Aton's influence after the Book is in his possession. He remains true to his word, passing on the secret of ending Jes Grew until Set's mission is accomplished. Then Moses, out of fear of the Book's teachings, hides the Book of Thoth in the tabernacle, where it will remain untouched until a Knights Templar librarian, Hinckle Von Vampton, stumbles across it centuries later.

LaBas continues the story, which now takes place in 1118 A.D. The Knights Templar, initially in a position of power, attempt some of the Book's rituals, but, since they practice in a way inconsistent to the Book's intentions, their fortune changes. Some Knights are burned at the stake for practicing the ritual, but Von Vampton escapes with the Book. The Knights Templar retreat underground until Von Vampton can escape to America in the late 1800s. No, that date is not erroneous. Von Vampton remains alive (by learning a bit of magic from the Book) throughout this span of time. In America, he encounters a problem; wherever he and the Book reside, Jes Grew's influence in that area swells as it seeks its sacred text. The Wallflower Order is hot on Von Vampton's trail. To evade the Order's detection, he devises a plan to have the text rotate among fourteen Jes Grew carriers. As was mentioned before, Abdul Hamid is one of them, and he holds the sacred text. The Wallflower Order tracks down Von Vampton and threatens to kill him unless he surrenders the Book. He strikes a deal with them: If he destroys the Book of

Thoth, accomplishing the mission of the Atonist's millennia-long struggle, the Knights Templar will take over the remaining crusade of officially ending Jes Grew.

A person who reads the above summary with a proclivity for collecting facts can come to the same conclusion that PaPa LaBas does, that Hinckle Von Vampton murdered Abdul Hamid. LaBas solves the crime, but a twist in the plot remains: Hamid burns the Book of Thoth before he is murdered, so Jes Grew will never be able to reunite with its lost and sacred book.

This summary lays a solid groundwork from which readers can delve more deeply into the meaning Reed tries to communicate. Within the narrative, ideas and themes are always in opposition: white and black, Atonism and Jes Grew, Set and Osiris. Richard Swope provides a succinct explanation for the conflicting nature of the plot:

[T]he space he [Reed] wishes to interrogate is that of the cultural crossroads. As we will see, however, while Reed places the two cultures in opposition, his work is not so much interested in overturning binary hierarchies as it is in interrogating and making use, artistic or otherwise, of the ways in which these cultures and their forms—including the spaces they produce—communicate, mix, clash, or disrupt one another. (613)

With this in mind, readers might be more equipped to look beyond the binary opposition and into the crossroads. Doing this allows readers to see beyond the scope of a simple conflict, to unveil a new meaning that is buried between clashing perspectives.

An understanding of Reed's plot certainly reveals the complex ideas with which he is playing. Clearly, Reed did not title *Mumbo Jumbo* accidentally, for those seeking to

untangle Reed's messages do not find the task simple. One way to understand some of the methods Reed uses is to become familiar with the theoretical framework bolstering my interpretation of Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, which comes from *The Signifying Monkey* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a prominent critic of African-American literature. His book plays a particular role in my research because it centers on the dualities present in African-American literature, and Gates argues that a common trope unifies many of the underlying messages present in writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Ishmael Reed. To Gates, these authors' texts "talk" to each other as well as to the readers, but the means by which readers interpret the texts is unconventional within a Western mindset. Gates's theory relies on the term "Signifyin(g)," which is the underlying structure for his theoretical interpretations. I will explain Signifyin(g) in a later section; however, a brief understanding of the Signifying Monkey himself, the figure behind Gates's title, is in order.

The Signifying Monkey, The Signifying Monkey, and Signifyin(g)

Gates builds his work on the trickster figure of the Signifying Monkey, which plays a prominent role in African-American folklore. The story of the Signifying Monkey has its roots in Africa, and the tale traveled over with the slaves, managing to survive even into the 20th century. The Signifying Monkey survives in poetry as well as music. Willie Dixon, a musician who shaped the sound of Chicago Blues, picked up on the trickster and wrote him into a song in 1947. Dixon's Signifying Monkey highlights the key points of the tale, but excludes the vulgar language that typically accompanies the trickster's story:

. . . Said the Monkey to the Lion on the bright summer day,
“There’s a big, bad cat livin’ down the way
He talked about your folks in a heck of a way
A lot of other things I’m afraid to say”
The Lion jumps up all full of rage
Like a Harlem cat that’s blown his gauge
He meets the Elephant in the front of the tree
He says, “Now big boy it’s you or me”
The Elephant looks him from the corner of his eyes
“You better find someone to fight your size”
The Lion jumps up and makes a fancy pass
But the Elephant knocks him over in the grass
They fought all night and they fought all day
I don’t know how the Lion, well he got away
He come back through the jungle more dead than alive
And that’s when the Monkey really started his jive . . .
Well he waked up his temper when he jumpin’ up and down
And his foot missed the limb and his head hit the ground
Like a bolt of light’ning and a streak of heat
The Lion was on him with all four feet
But the Monkey looks up from the corner of his eye
Says, “Now Mr. Lion, I apologize”

The Monkey on his back studies up a scheme

He's tryin' to trick that jungle king

"Be bad with me, I wish you would

I'd tear you up all over the wood"

The Lion jumps up, squares off for a fight

But the Monkey jumped completely out of sight

"So if you bother me again

I'll turn you over to my Elephant friend"

The story of the Signifying Monkey solidifies key features of Gates's work, particularly his explanations of Signifyin(g) and the trickster figure Esu.

Gates's main focus in *The Signifying Monkey* centers on the term Signifyin(g) and how it plays into the black vernacular's connection to literature. Signifyin(g), to Gates, is a figure of the double-voiced, a concept borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin. To better understand what exactly Signifyin(g) means, it is best to read a metaphor from Gates himself: "Thinking about the black concept of Signifyin(g) is a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon ever closer examination" (44). With this in mind, we can see that Signifyin(g), then, becomes a form of interpreting texts. As we read, we want the text to have a single, unified meaning; however, Gates suggests that what we read has a hidden, underlying message that can evade a reader's initial interpretation. This method of Signifyin(g) has existed from the times of slavery, when slaves concealed messages beneath the lyrics of their songs. Signifyin(g) within slavery served two purposes: to hide

true meaning through a double voice and to serve as a way to indirectly criticize (Kaplan and Williams 778). By Signifyin(g), slaves could convey vital messages and express their frustration without detection.

Signifyin(g) can also be explained through “The Dozens,” a game played between two people who take turns insulting each other until someone gives up or displays violence. Gates describes the Dozens as a form of Signifyin(g) that is often misunderstood as vulgar trash talk. Gates dispels this conception, saying that the Dozens is an exercise of Signifyin(g) at its finest. We see the Signifying Monkey play a mild version of the Dozens with the lion in Dixon’s song: “He talked about your folks in a heck of a way.” Other variations of the poem include more obscene insults from the Signifying Monkey, and his comments to the lion are certainly part of the Dozens, a game played, as H. Rap Brown says, “like white folks play Scrabble” (qtd. in Gates 72). To Brown, the Dozens can include rapping, which provides a way “to use the vernacular with great dexterity” (Gates 72). Those who play the Dozens often tell stories and use language with indirection and wit. A person essentially wins not only by “one-upping” the opponent but also by displaying clever use of black vernacular. As Gates explains, “Signifyin(g) . . . is the figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning. . . . [It] presupposes an ‘encoded’ intention to say one thing but to mean quite another” (82). In essence, Signifyin(g) relies on the use of the double-voiced and provides a significant framework for understanding and (re)interpreting language.

Trickster Figures: Esu and the Signifying Monkey

The final prominent figure that Gates emphasizes—and which plays into Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*—is the role of the trickster. Gates, in detail, describes Esu. In the Yoruba culture (mainly in Nigeria, Cuba, Haiti, Benin, and Brazil), Esu is both a trickster as well as a messenger of the gods (Gates xxi). His role is to serve as the mediator between humans and the gods. Literally representing the double-voiced, Esu is depicted in sculptures as having two mouths (xxv). Esu is a trickster that appears in several cultures; as such, he has many names. Esu is short for Esu-Elegbara, and another commonly used name, given by the Fon in Benin, is Legba. The Haitians call him Papa Legba (which is pronounced læbas), a name that Reed uses for his central figure. To be concise and to avoid confusion, I will refer to this trickster as Esu and to Reed’s character as PaPa LaBas (as Reed named him).

Esu is central in my interpretation of Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* because he, as Gates explains, “is the guardian of the crossroads, . . . master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane” (5). Since Esu dwells in both worlds, he is solely responsible for interpretation, for connecting truth to understanding. Although he possesses the ability to interpret and understand truth, he is also known as the god of indeterminacy because neither humans nor gods have the knowledge it takes to fully comprehend a delivered message. Gates explains Esu’s significance in terms of Signifyin(g), for he embodies metaphor, which is one concept that stands for something else. To Gates, Esu is “our metaphor for the uncertainties of explication, for the open-endedness of every literary text” (22). Esu, Gates says, wears a hat that “is neither black nor white; it is both black and white” (35); the implication behind this claim is that to

interpret something with a single, determinant meaning is to commit literary folly, for Esu's indeterminacy reminds us that texts can be read again and again, each time with a different meaning.

Esu's cousin is the Signifying Monkey, whom we met in Dixon's song. Esu dwells in Africa while his cousin sprang into existence as Esu traveled to America; essentially, Esu transformed into the Signifying Monkey. The cousins are fundamentally one and the same; however, they do possess slight distinctions. Esu serves as a function for double-voiced interpretation, whereas the Signifying Monkey serves as a trope that embodies even more tropes. As Gates describes, "the Signifying Monkey is often called the Signifier, he who wreaks havoc upon the Signified" (52). The Signifying Monkey, then, takes up the art of Signifyin(g) in its most literal sense, baffling those who wish to interpret—an art that only he can master.

Esu and the Signifying Monkey do tread common ground regarding how we interpret texts. The two mediate in the crossroads, serving as those who can truly understand. The problem, however, lies in what they convey to others. They may interpret the truth, but when they relay that truth, it becomes lost among the tropes of Signifyin(g). As tricksters, their job is certainly to signify, but, even if they do not intentionally smear meaning, it happens, nevertheless, in the process of turning primary knowledge into secondary knowledge. Gates expands on this idea, describing the ever-present indeterminacy of interpreting language:

The text, in other words, is not fixed in any determinate sense; in one sense, it consists of the dynamic and indeterminate relationship between

truth on one hand and understanding on the other. . . . The relationship between truth and understanding yields our sense of meaning. . . . [W]e can say that Legba [Esu] is the indeterminacy of the interpretation of writing, and his traditional dwelling place at the crossroads, for the critic, is the crossroads of understanding and truth. (25)

With this knowledge of Esu and the Signifying Monkey, we can begin to unravel the layers of complexity Reed employs in *Mumbo Jumbo*, for he continually stacks meaning atop layers of more meaning. It is through his use of these trickster figures, through the idea of a crossroads, that perhaps we can find the essence of truth, which he has masterfully concealed.

The Thesis: An Overview

Gates's term Signifyin(g) and his explanation of the trickster figures Esu and the Signifying Monkey play crucial roles in my interpretation of Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, for the theories play precisely into the concepts of crossroads. Understanding the African-American tradition of Signifyin(g) helps readers identify the chief challenge of Reed's text: we cannot pull from the text a single, unified truth, for when we identify one meaning, it becomes doubled and even redoubled into a never-ending play of elusiveness. In my thesis, I discuss two key figures that serve to guard or represent the crossroads: PaPa LaBas and the book *Mumbo Jumbo* itself.

Fortunately, the tricksters Esu and the Signifying Monkey are charged with the ability to interpret the truth, so the meaning readers desperately try to find is (somewhat) within their grasp. PaPa LaBas, presumably named because of his connection to Esu and

his access to the truth, sits on the border between Reed's intentions and the readers' knowledge. It is PaPa LaBas who solves the case, who mediates as a detective by collecting both empirical Western and spiritual non-Western evidence. LaBas, then, bridges a significant gap between differing modes of thought, and the area in between, the place where he dwells, begs further examination.

The other concept I want to explore is the text *Mumbo Jumbo* itself and how it, too, reflects the themes of crossroads within the framework of Signifyin(g). The unconventional methods Reed employs within his novel reveal a text that serves as an amalgamation of crossroads; *Mumbo Jumbo* comments on ideas of textuality, the African-American author, religion, convention, and essentially ideas that, in accordance with Gates's theory, double and re-double down a road of endless interpretations.

Within the crossroads, my aim is to explore both sides of the boundaries not to favor one at the expense of the other or even to reverse their roles but rather to identify the possibilities of new meaning that lie in the crossroads. Essentially, I want to explain Reed's statement of embracing the concept of both/and rather than the limiting view of either/or and discover the places of intersection at which hybridity abounds. Reading a plot that contains significant elements of Signifyin(g) and indeterminacy, readers become confused and even frustrated within the mumbo jumbo; perhaps Reed wants them to struggle and even become lost so that when they regain their bearings, their assumptions can shift and be reconstructed to include elements belonging to both sets of binaries rather than being limited simply to one or the other.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, while not necessarily considered a classical text, certainly has stirred much discussion, perhaps because the complexity is so intriguing that critics cannot help but attempt to decipher Reed's messages. The criticism collected for this thesis ranges from 1974-2009 and includes a multitude of responses, ranging from postmodernism to cultural studies to deconstruction—and more.

The first discussion about *Mumbo Jumbo* is by Neil Schmitz, who describes Reed's work as postmodernist, as a kind of “experimental fiction” that defies standard notions of textuality. Schmitz analyzes Reed's new, self-professed mode of fiction called Neo-HooDoo, which is a way to step away from Anglo-American literature and is used as a way for the black artist to “be estranged from the dominant culture” (127). Reed emphasizes Neo-HooDoo as something original and unique to the Afro-American writer and as a way of writing that serves a political agenda. Schmitz certainly acknowledges Reed's unconventional techniques in using photographs and news clippings and including a “maze of plots” (137); however, his greatest criticism of Reed's novel is thus: “The problem with *Mumbo Jumbo* is that it is not mumbo jumbo at all” (138). Schmitz contends that although Reed attempts to establish himself as an author distinct from his white contemporaries, he is not quite comfortable with his role in American literature and thus falls short of accomplishing a truly unique work. Schmitz sees Reed's parodies as relying too heavily upon the modes of discourse from which he is trying to distinguish himself.

Gates, in his article “The ‘Blackness of Blackness,’” explains some of the ideas in Reed’s work with which Schmitz disagrees, and the article is one of the most significant criticisms of *Mumbo Jumbo*, for it lays the framework for later critics to build upon or break down the theories outlined by Gates. Gates uses his theory of Signifyin(g), which is largely based on the work of Derrida. He also discusses *Mumbo Jumbo* within the context of “The Talking Book,” which comes from *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates gives a thorough explanation of Signifyin(g) as well as a background of the tricksters Esu and the Signifying Monkey. Gates explains the significance of repetition within the African-American tradition and how it can be used to reverse a previously conceived notion. Gates uses Bakhtin’s definition of the “double-voiced” to illustrate how “the narrative of the past bears an ironic relation to the narrative of the present” and how it “comments . . . upon the nature of *its writing itself*” (700, emphasis in original). Gates outlines what he believes are Reed’s main concerns in *Mumbo Jumbo*:

- (1) [T]he relation his own art bears to his black literary precursors . . . and
 - (2) the process of willing-into-being a rhetorical structure, a literary language, replete with its own figures and tropes, but one that allows the black writer to posit a structure of feeling that simultaneously critiques both the metaphysical presuppositions inherent in Western ideas and forms of writing and the metaphorical system in which the “blackness” of the writer and his experience have been valorized as “natural” absence.
- (701)

With Gates's explanation, it becomes clear that Schmitz partially understands Reed's intentions, but he is simply writing off Reed as unoriginal rather than understanding that his technique cannot succeed to critique Western ideas without parodying them. Furthermore, Gates sees beyond some of the binaries inherent in Schmitz's interpretation: "[W]e are in the realm of doubles, but not the binary realm; rather, we are in the realm of doubled doubles" (704). Within this framework, Reed is able, then, to critique dualism and binary opposition by offering a multitude of possibilities. As with Schmitz, Gates acknowledges *Mumbo Jumbo* as a postmodern text, but for different reasons. Mainly, he focuses on Reed's use of intertextuality as he refers to texts within the texts as well as to texts that are outside and surrounding *Mumbo Jumbo*. Gates's concluding argument is that Reed's work stands outside the Afro-American canon because it is a "novel that figures and glorifies indeterminacy," (709) a claim with which subsequent critics have a problem. Gates finds this claim on Reed's message about Atonists: They seek a single, determinant meaning. It makes sense, then, that the opposing critique would value indeterminacy and plurality, beliefs that are inherent in Hoodoo and the idea of Signifyin(g).

Theodore Mason does not criticize Reed as much as he does Gates's interpretation of *Mumbo Jumbo*, claiming that "[t]he fundamental weakness of Gates's position is the 'elevation' of indeterminacy" (105). He does not assert that the idea of indeterminacy is an inaccurate reading of Reed's central messages; rather, he disagrees with the assumption that it is "*the* value in the pantheon of literary values" (105, emphasis in

original). Mason also writes that Reed is not nearly as successful in his use of indeterminacy as Gates asserts, for, according to Mason:

Reed's novel actually breaks down because of the conflict between his interest in history and his emphasis on indeterminacy. . . . [N]o concept of history that makes any claims on authenticity and determinateness can be anything other than oppressive. And the more complete and overarching the advocacy of indeterminacy as value, the more it subverts the claims of history and the more it resembles ideas of closure and determinacy.

(106-7)

Mason concludes his article by saying Reed's use of historical verisimilitude essentially causes the novel to fall apart: "Reed takes up more than he is able to handle and invites a degree of scrutiny that the novel simply cannot withstand. It breaks apart under the vastness of its own intentions" (108). Mason, in this analysis, serves as one of the first critics to unveil some of the huge complexities in Reed's work. He does not necessarily assert that Reed is successful in the aims of his novel; however, Mason discusses the work as something that cannot be easily dissected or explained. His work, therefore, opens the door to the discussion of Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* as a vastly complicated piece of fiction.

Michael Boccia, as with Gates, picks up on the indeterminacy in Reed's text but instead discusses how it plays out in the form of mystery, highlighting three types in Reed's work: It is a "Who dunnit," a "religious mystery," and a "mystery of the book's form" (99). Boccia discusses the difficulty readers have as they "discover order and

meaning under the apparent mumbo jumbo of the form” (99) and how they are able to eventually untangle the messages through Reed’s use of a detective novel. He then explains the significance of the novel’s chief detective, PaPa LaBas, the mediator between humans and gods, and how LaBas’s position in the middle allows him to solve the mystery. Finally, Boccia reveals the solution of the mystery, claiming that “[t]he mumbo jumbo is no longer confusing, [sic] it is now a metaphor for the elements of a culture which appeared inexplicable, but in fact was quite comprehensible. . . . Reed forces the reader to learn that the mumbo jumbo is not chaotic, meaningless and silly, [sic] rather it is a different explanation (or metaphor) of the world” (105). Boccia’s conclusion is rather simplistic and does exactly what Reed warns his readers not to do: He attempts to explain the complexity of *Mumbo Jumbo* using a Western assumption—that Reed’s message can somehow be contained in a single, determined fashion. As Gates explains, “Reed’s fiction argues that the so-called black experience cannot be thought of as a fluid content to be poured into received and static containers” (“Blackness” 701). Boccia attempts to uncover only one layer of the meaning in *Mumbo Jumbo*, and his conclusions, accordingly, fall short.

Helen Lock’s interpretation of *Mumbo Jumbo* differs from the postmodern criticisms inherent in the 1970s and 1980s. She writes that, superficially, Reed’s “metafictional and satirical novelistic techniques seem to ally him more closely with the postmodern mainstream than with African-American literature. . . . His aesthetic could be called ‘art as subversion,’ in that it takes the superficial forms of a dominant culture and transforms their meaning while leaving the forms themselves intact” (67). Lock’s article

delves into the concept of Reed's use of the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic and how it influences the African-American literary tradition by tracing its roots to Voodoo in Haiti. She explains that Voodoo art focuses primarily on visual arts because "Voodoo is the religion of the poor and the uneducated; most devotees are illiterate" (68). Therefore, the art of Voodoo is constantly in flux, a concept Reed tries to incorporate into the idea of Neo-HooDoo within *Mumbo Jumbo*. Because Voodoo is highly improvisational, flexible, and adaptable, an idea "cannot be assigned a symbolic function which would rigidly circumscribe interpretation"; additionally, "nothing stands for anything else" (69). Lock continues that Voodoo represents a culture of the oppressed since those who practice it are highly uneducated. She makes the connection to Haiti, explaining that the ruling class forced Catholicism onto those practicing Voodoo. Since they were accustomed to flexibility, they simply made their beliefs fit into the molds of Catholicism, particularly with the saints. When Voodoo came to the United States, it became Hoodoo, which Lock calls "Voodoo in a diluted form, still operating under a Catholic 'front'" (69). Neo-HooDoo, then, becomes a way for the visual art of Voodoo and Hoodoo to be transformed into a literary art that retains the EuroAmerican forms while redefining their function. Through Neo-HooDoo, Reed can use words as a way to gain power, for he can use language as a challenge to the dominant culture and as a way to present his political agendas. After establishing the history of Neo-HooDoo and its influence on Reed's writing, Lock then delves into Derrida's theory of the sign and the signified as it relates to improvisation and the Book of Thoth in *Mumbo Jumbo*. According to Lock, "Since atonement of sign and signified petrifies both the word and its referent, Reed needs to

stress their separateness. The simple act of telling, of signifying, is only half of the equation. . . . [T]he reception or interpretation of the act of signification is turned over to the reader” (71). Lock concludes her argument by explaining how Reed is successful in setting forth his political agenda of racial issues because, in the process of signifying (which is largely connected to Gates’s theory of Signifyin(g)), he uses language to “transform, reshape, and reinterpret” (75) ideas and modes of oppression.

R.M.V. Raghavendra Rao also examines *Mumbo Jumbo* from a cultural perspective but instead focuses on the Black Aesthetic Movement and interprets it as an Afrocentric text that is comparable to Amiri Baraka’s *The System of Dante’s Hell*. Rao reads *Mumbo Jumbo* as fiction that works within the Afrocentric frame to help African Americans fight against white oppression. In essence, he sees Afrocentricity and the Black Aesthetic Movement as a “desire to create a literature about blacks and for blacks. . . . [T]he black writer is called upon to embrace . . . black people and experiment with black styles” (19). Rao also asserts that these black authors reject their American heritage because it is wrapped up and defined by a history of which they are not a part. To bring the black person back to the center, these authors, according to Rao, turn to the past to create a “new equation between the Afrocentric and Eurocentric worlds” (20). Rao captures the ideas of Afrocentricity and the Black Aesthetic Movement within Reed’s work; however, he limits what Reed is doing by claiming that Reed’s work is strictly for blacks. Within this framework, whites would be unaffected by *Mumbo Jumbo*, and they, as oppressors, are an integral part of the problem Reed is trying to illuminate. Rao focuses on a “blacks only” idea, a concept Reed defies because he delves much more

deeply than simply redefining black consciousness; he redefines white consciousness, Eurocentric consciousness, black consciousness, and many other types of consciousness that fuel the issues tied into racial tension.

Going back to more of a postmodern interpretation, Sami Ludwig relates Bakhtin's theories of language with Reed's use of Voodoo in *Mumbo Jumbo*. He finds analogies "between the imagery and processes in Bakhtin's critical idiom and manifestations of Ishmael Reed's polytheistic 'Neo-HooDoo' aesthetic, especially the concepts of possession and the houngan (voodoo priest)" (325). According to Ludwig, Bakhtin finds that language has a dialogic quality; it is a tool that, through style, can highlight certain concepts and themes while simultaneously hiding others (327). In this sense, language has a "double-voiced" nature—that which is intended and the meaning that can be extracted from a language, whether intentional or not. According to Ludwig, these theories can also be found in Voodoo rituals in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Much like a writer's "intentions" that manifest through concrete language, the loa of Voodoo are able to "live" when they possess those who practice Voodoo. Ludwig also explains that the "multiple possessions" that are possible in Voodoo provide a concrete way to explain the abstraction of Bakhtin's "double-voiced," which can be understood as the intention of others in language, or forces that influence meaning. Of course, one side of this theory is that the forces come from without, but the other half of the theory is that "the speaker [or writer] populates it [language] with his own intention" (331). In this case, the author does control some of the meaning that can be interpreted. Ludwig finds a connection between this concept and Reed's use of vehicles, for the characters with vehicles in *Mumbo Jumbo*

have their own means of transportation. On the hardback cover of *Mumbo Jumbo*, a small emblem carries even more meaning about transportation: Two knights are riding on one horse. In Voodoo, according to Ludwig, “[r]iding a horse . . . necessarily refers to possession by a loa” (333). The knights and, by extension, the Atonists, are represented as sharing a single horse and being possessed by a single loa. Atonists, of course, do not believe in possession or loas, so the “possession” represented by their horse goes only one way. On the other hand, those who practice Voodoo (those with individual vehicles) are using the vehicles (loas) for individual purposes while simultaneously being possessed. Therefore, the possession by a loa is a two-way process, much like the theory of Bakhtin’s “double-voiced.”

Along the same lines of postmodern interpretation, W. Lawrence Hogue reads *Mumbo Jumbo* as a text that contains several elements of deconstructionist assumptions: “Reed critiques Atonism’s logocentric values in Western society . . . by overturning binaries and undermining hierarchies, suggesting a postmodern or dispersed way of defining history and reality” (93). Hogue argues that *Mumbo Jumbo*, by containing traces of deconstruction, fits the mold of Linda Hutcheon’s “historiographic metafiction” as a postmodern text rather than Frederic Jameson’s totalized version of postmodernism (93). Hogue outlines the methods Reed employs to deconstruct the traditional novel: many tropes and genres, metafiction elements, exaggeration to undermine truth, and interrupted linearity. Reed works within a historiographic metafiction framework because he relies on traditional conventions in order to undermine them. For example, as Hogue writes, “Reed offers a social critique of oppressive . . . structures in the West, such as

the . . . Atonist Path and its totalized, unified, and coherent narrative of history” (103).

In doing this, Reed defies Jameson’s totalized postmodernism theory because Reed would deem such a reading of history oppressive when history is more of a “play of differences, as a subduing of history’s plurality and heterogeneity. . . . [H]istory . . . is being rethought—as a human construct” (103). Hogue, then, makes a critical and convincing distinction between Hutcheon’s and Jameson’s opposing views of postmodernism as they apply to *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Another postmodern interpretation comes from John Parks, who calls *Mumbo Jumbo* Reed’s “most ambitious and perhaps most important of all his work” (165). He even claims that the book could be considered a contemporary American comic epic because, as with writers like Pynchon and Barth, it includes “parodies of grand themes, satires of established institutions and systems, encyclopedia listings, mixing historical and fictional characters, [and] comic tone” (164). However, it departs from these writings because, Parks claims, it does not reflect an absurdist view of life. Rather, it “is concerned with a plague which is really an ‘anti-plague’ . . . and because it depicts the world not so much enfeebled by absurdity or irrationality, but rather a world suffering from too much rationality” (164). To understand Reed’s intentions, Parks reveals the dichotomous relationships inherent in *Mumbo Jumbo*: rational/irrational, history/myth, white/black. Essentially, Parks claims that Reed uses unconventional methods of writing to “challenge and dismantle . . . our assumptions and conceptions about knowledge and truth. The book seeks to . . . remind us that there are other ways of knowing and other things to know” (170). Finally, Parks explains that the only way new forms can come

forth—forms that diverge from Western thought—is through the spontaneity and the indeterminacy presented through Reed’s portrayal of Jes Grew and *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Sharon Jessee presents a unique approach to *Mumbo Jumbo*, for she discusses the various methods of ethnic laughter that Reed uses in the novel. She incorporates the theories of signifying and the sign into her argument, claiming, “By signifying on the sign of seriousness, Reed chips away the conventions of unity and coherence, . . . thus making possible the conditions of instability and flexibility which can nurture a more fluid and expressive sense” (127). She uses Gates’s Signifyin(g) and Bakhtin’s “double-voiced” to explain how Reed mocks the notion of seriousness (like unity and logic) because it is used as a way to repress and oppress. She also discusses the way “the Dozens” are used against Set to mock the serious nature of the Atonists. In short, Jessee asserts that, though Reed uses a mode of humor to convey his messages, the novel is still able to convey serious objectives because it serves to put a new spin on a story practically memorized by the Western world. The text serves as a way to amuse its readers with African-American tropes while simultaneously reeducating them.

Further readings that stray from the general pattern of cultural or postmodern criticism explore the implications of reading *Mumbo Jumbo* as a jazz text. Mark Shadle and Alfonso Hawkins use an immense knowledge of jazz to explain Jes Grew and the themes of Reed’s novel. They identify how jazz plays a significant role not only in the themes of the text but also in Reed’s style. They discuss how jazz figures into the idea of Signifyin(g)—how jazz, too, relies on something original and known and then reinvents it in a new way. Hawkins differs slightly in his interpretation because he bases his

knowledge on the character Madam Zajj (from the musical *A Drum Is a Woman*), who is a personification of African rhythm. Each article spends time in the 1920s, where jazz originated and also when the majority of *Mumbo Jumbo*'s plot takes place. Since the '20s play a significant role in both the development of jazz and Reed's novel, the authors find the themes in *Mumbo Jumbo* reflecting the feel of jazz—the repetition, spontaneity, “dirtiness,” etc. The themes of improvisation are especially relevant to Reed's message about Western (and Atonist) thought—that such a concept, while to the Atonists seems detrimental to society, is the next step toward reinventing a new America, one that comes not from the isolation of either Eastern or Western influence, but rather from the combination and strengths of the two.

While Beth McCoy does not discuss jazz in *Mumbo Jumbo*, she does make another distinct argument about the book, examining Reed's message regarding legitimate, academic research as she focuses on the way Reed cites certain passages and then includes a partial bibliography, etc., at the end of *Mumbo Jumbo*. She points out the way Reed mocks Western assumptions about academic culture. He includes graphs, footnotes, charts, a bibliography, yet readers often do not see that Reed's novel can actually be considered a textbook, as McCoy argues: “Quick glances at random pages . . . reveal that, thanks to the irregular interruptions provided by such visual blocks, the book not only looks exciting and interesting, . . . but also oscillates between looking like a ‘novel’ and looking like a contemporary manifestation of a . . . ‘textbook’” (613). McCoy also examines Reed's message regarding Western authority through the “untrustworthy” citations. On one hand, Reed uses the conventions of a textbook, using

authoritative citations to prove the accuracy of his claims. On the other, Reed portrays that accuracy as quite suspicious because the citations are so intermittently used and incomplete. Interestingly, McCoy has made the lengthy and even tedious efforts to track down Reed's citations, finding that they are, indeed, accurate. She points out that the citations do not really serve a purpose in *Mumbo Jumbo* because the story is so unbelievable: "As [it] makes no more or less sense when outside sources are consulted, it, too, becomes 'good enough,' its citationality and epistemological claims no more authoritative, perhaps, but certainly no less authoritative than those of other texts" (618). McCoy's argument is a rather unique interpretation of yet another way Reed challenges assumptions of Western authority, this time by criticizing certain concepts we unquestioningly accept as "true."

As with McCoy, Anthony Zias has a unique argument: He gives Reed credit for serving as a precursor to the historical thriller genre that would make its debut nearly twenty years later in novels like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. Zias outlines the major components in Reed's novel that classify it as a historical thriller: "protagonists with arcane knowledge, . . . antagonistic conspiratorial secret societies, . . . quests for a hidden text, . . . and vast historical cover-ups" (146). Additionally, as a conspiracy novel, *Mumbo Jumbo* (and later historical thrillers) provides a conclusion that should bring all the evidence together to provide an alternative history; however, though the reader and the protagonist understand the altered version of history, the key evidence remains hidden to the characters in the book who could influence a change in society's version of history. Zias ends his article with an explanation of how Reed's historical thriller situates itself as

a postmodern text because the ending, surrounded by a conspiracy theory, forces the reader into a sort of limbo between fact and fiction. The readers, then, remain in suspense and must sift through the evidence for themselves to uncover the secret.

The final two articles, by Cynthia Hamilton and Richard Swope, largely shaped the focus of this thesis. Both articles emphasize the boundaries in *Mumbo Jumbo* and interpret the text as something that goes beyond the binaries and dualisms critics often find in Bakhtin's double-voiced or Gates's Signifyin(g). The fiction, its characters, and the elements that comprise *Mumbo Jumbo* all certainly deal with systems of dichotomies, most of which have been analyzed through a basic deconstruction, through reversing the roles of the oppressor and the oppressed. Hamilton and Swope both emphasize that the two sides are not the ideas in question; rather, it is the intersection of the concepts that readers should examine carefully, for it is within these boundaries where Reed's messages lie. The authors move away from the concept of either/or (a highly Western concept) and toward something akin to the concept of both/and. They do not attempt to reverse the roles of right and wrong, nor do they favor one mode of thinking over the other. Instead, they emphasize the strengths of both sides and explain that new life can spring forth within the boundaries of the two opposing sides. Swope illuminates this concept quite succinctly:

[H]is [Reed's] work is not so much interested in overturning binary hierarchies as it is in interrogating and making use, artistic or otherwise, of the ways in which these cultures and their forms—including the spaces they produce—communicate, mix, clash, or disrupt one another. . . . [T]he

meeting points between what are traditionally seen as opposing versions of space deserve special attention because out of such amalgamations comes the potential birth of new spatial forms, new combinations that in their very production upset the special order of the West. (613)

Hamilton adds to this concept, identifying *Mumbo Jumbo* as a hybrid detective fiction that belongs to both categories of the detective genre (Poe's "Who dunnit" and Hammett's hardboiled detective). Many try to categorize African-American detective fiction in a separate detective category, but Hamilton argues that it does not belong in its own category because it contains elements of both types of detective fiction. Hamilton traces this idea of hybridity throughout *Mumbo Jumbo*, explaining what she thinks is Reed's central message: The crossroads carry significant meaning because they provide the space from which "a boundless network [can] redouble and circle, making . . . branches over the vastness of hundreds of thousands" of possibilities (237). For Hamilton and Swope, the reader should focus on the boundaries, the hybridity, and the crossroads in *Mumbo Jumbo*, not in the contradictory, opposing areas of the novel.

The aforementioned articles represent a range of opinions and interpretations of *Mumbo Jumbo*, each contributing to the argument I propose. Schmitz examines Reed's novel as a Neo-HooDoo story that relies too much on traditional tropes to distinguish himself from the very oppressors he tries to evade. However, he fails to see the point made in Gates's article that Reed's art relies on Signifyin(g), on repeating the tropes in order to defy them. Mason disagrees with Gates, claiming that he glorifies indeterminacy

at the expense of understanding Reed's intentions. He says that Gates essentially writes off Reed's ability as a writer by claiming all his messages are impossible to locate.

While Mason finds more of a problem with Gates's argument than with Reed's novel, he certainly serves an important role in criticism, for it is he who realizes the complicated nature of Reed's novel and argues that *Mumbo Jumbo* deserves further examination as a deeply complicated text. Boccia outlines the basic mystery inherent in *Mumbo Jumbo*, though his attempt to interpret the novel is a bit simplistic.

Lock and Rao both explore the racial implications of the text but approach *Mumbo Jumbo* quite differently. Lock looks at Reed's Neo-HooDoo, distinguishing Reed's work from the Black Aesthetic Movement. She claims Reed invents Neo-HooDoo as a way to celebrate differences and to transform ideas of oppression. Rao, on the other hand, compares Reed to Baraka, claiming that Reed fits into the Black Aesthetic Movement, yet that is too isolating for Reed. It serves as yet another way to create an "us against them" mentality. Reed's NeoHooDoo serves to reconcile this distance, essentially reversing and empowering black writers to be unique and have their own genre separate from whites while also serving the white community. To place authors such as Reed within the Black Aesthetic Movement forces a certain type of reading. Readers then interpret in one way, trying to pull out only that which is about race, but they often fail to see the other possible readings.

Ludwig looks at Bakhtin's theory of the double-voiced and Reed's Neo-HooDoo, explaining how Reed's novel serves to make the abstraction of Bakhtin's theory more tangible by examining the Voodoo in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Parks also examines *Mumbo Jumbo*

from a postmodern perspective, claiming that the spontaneity and indeterminacy of the text is what makes it most fascinating. Jesse, too, acknowledges the value of double messages, asserting that Reed's humor coats the messages that serve to reeducate readers.

Shadle and Hawkins take a different approach, focusing on jazz within Reed's work, but their message is similar regarding the crossroads and Signifyin(g) concepts: As with Reed's writing, jazz is an amalgamation of the traditional music that comes before it. Reed's novel can be read as a kind of improvisation of the novels that preceded it. Reed simply adds to the tradition, reinventing and altering it to create something new.

Penultimately, McCoy looks at Reed's novel as a textbook and as an argument against authority. She essentially examines Reed's commentary about authority in academia as it serves to undermine academic authority by using academic conventions sparingly. Finally, Hamilton and Swope both regard Reed's text as a kind of hybrid fiction, as a masterpiece that glorifies the crossroads motif.

Each article contains certain elements of the overall argument I make about crossroads. They explore Gates's indeterminacy, Bakhtin's double-voiced, Derrida's signifying, etc.; however, they do not make the connection between Gates's theory of Signifyin(g) as an African-American tradition and Reed's message regarding crossroads. Therefore, I argue that, within the framework of Gates's concept of Signifyin(g), the character PaPa LaBas and the text *Mumbo Jumbo* itself serve as sources for the numerous (and perhaps infinite) messages Reed suggests within his novel.

Chapter 3: PaPa LaBas: The Signifyin(g) Trickster

As a crossroads figure in the novel, PaPa LaBas is a trickster who stands as a merging point between man and spirit and between two branches of thought as he solves the plot's crime. His name itself, LaBas, is an alternate pronunciation for Legba (or Esu), which, in Haitian Voodoo, stands as a mediating figure between humans and loas. As Park writes, "LaBas stands for and points to the meeting of the real world and the spiritual world" (169). By loading the main character with symbolism, Reed intentionally portrays PaPa LaBas as the gatekeeper between worlds. LaBas serves as a crossroads figure on many levels. First, as a figure containing elements of two separate tricksters (Esu and The Signifying Monkey), he bridges the ideas between mystery and science as he signifies and essentially recreates a commonly understood version of history. Next, he represents an unconventional detective with the methods he employs to "solve" the crime. Finally, PaPa LaBas stands as a crossroads figure in *Mumbo Jumbo* because he blurs our understanding of time as a definitive, straightforward entity.

LaBas as Conflation of Esu and the Signifying Monkey

First, to understand how Reed personifies Esu through PaPa LaBas, it is helpful to become familiar with a section of the plot that highlights the trickster's characteristics and illuminates the various ways readers can identify exactly how LaBas represents Esu by being primarily in charge of serving as the chief mediator between loas and the characters in the book. He is highly concerned with feeding the loas, repeating several times to both Earline and Charlotte, the women who work with LaBas at the Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral, the importance of keeping the loas content. Both characters dismiss

LaBas's advice, and both of them suffer greatly as a result. The consequences vary in degrees, depending on how much the two women disregard LaBas's advice regarding Hoodoo. Earline simply forgets to feed the loas. After she sees LaBas's reminder as she is in the bathroom, she remembers: "O, that reminds her. She hasn't replenished the loa's tray #21. . . . She would attend to it tomorrow or the next day" (28). She faces quite severe consequences for failing to heed LaBas's advice and for failing to, as he has suggested, satisfy the loa. Earline's boyfriend, Berbelang, is murdered, and she becomes possessed by Erzulie. LaBas, through a Hoodoo ritual, oversees the revival of Earline, and she quickly realizes her mistakes: "Pop, you know I neglected to replenish the altar's 21st tray for many days" (206). She understands that LaBas's advice should be taken more seriously because he truly is the intermediary that communicates between loas and those they inhabit.

Charlotte, on the other hand, suffers a much more devastating consequence. Biff Muscwhite, the man who murders Berbelang, strangles Charlotte, killing her as well. Perhaps her fate is much bleaker than Earline's because the degree of her offense against LaBas—against the loas—is more severe. She decides to quit working for LaBas: "[A]t 1st your approach was O.K. but, pop, you know you developed a cultish thing about this New Hoodoo therapy" (Reed 51). A conversation between the two indicates that her leaving is bad, indeed, but what she plans to do is unforgivable: "The manager wants me to entertain some of the selective clientele. . . . You know, teach them diluted versions of the dances I have observed here. . . . [LaBas:] Charlotte, you shouldn't attempt to use any

aspect of the Work for profit” (52). LaBas immediately recognizes the gravity of Charlotte’s offense, but he lets her go, for she must be in charge of her own fate.

Reed writes serious consequences into the plot to reflect the importance, seriousness, and truth to PaPa LaBas’s insistence on maintaining peace with the loas. LaBas is not simply an old kook; he is a powerful, insightful character whose advice on “mumbo jumbo” should be taken quite seriously because he is the only person who truly understands the intricate boundaries between loas and humans.

From the above section, it becomes clear that PaPa LaBas houses all the knowledge to maintain the balance between loas and humans, and he is accurate in his warnings to the young women in the novel. Readers are to take him seriously and to realize that he really can be interpreted as a personification of Esu; he is a true houngan, not simply a bokor who is practicing with the wrong intentions. Indubitably, LaBas can be interpreted as having ties to Esu; however, he represents an amalgamation of two rather distinct trickster figures: both Esu *and* The Signifying Monkey. Gates distinguishes the two, saying that Esu can be personified and enter into the story itself, whereas The Signifying Monkey is more in charge of narrating the story and isn’t necessarily inserted as a character into the plot:

The Esu figures are divine: they are gods who function in sacred myths as do characters in a narrative. Esu’s functional equivalent in Afro-American profane discourse is the Signifying Monkey, a figure who seems to be distinctly Afro-American. Unlike his Pan-African Esu cousins, the Signifying Monkey exists in the discourse of mythology not primarily as a

character in a narrative but rather as a vehicle for narration itself.

(Gates, "Blackness" 688)

LaBas has both qualities; he is clearly the personification of Esu, as his name translates to the American version of his Pan-African title. Reed writes Esu (LaBas) into an American tale, conflating the distinct categories between Esu and The Signifying Monkey. Esu has migrated to America in Reed's text, breaking the boundaries that usually separate him from his cousin. Aside from the geographic barrier that Reed dissolves, he also combines qualities of the two tricksters into PaPa LaBas. Near the end of the novel, his role changes from Esu as a character in the plot to The Signifying Monkey as the storyteller. He is pressed to explain Hinckle Von Vampton's involvement in the murder of Hamid, and, to evince this accusation, he has to become the storyteller. LaBas's basic characteristics reveal that he is a conflation of two similar ideas, ideas that, though similar as trickster figures, are usually placed in separate categories. Reed blurs the line of the "cousin" tricksters, conflating them into one character of PaPa LaBas; the very essence of the character carries Reed's message about crossroads.

Solving the Crime with State and Nomadic Science

LaBas also plays out this intermediary symbol in how he solves the crime. To put all the clues together and to think with logic at the forefront of his mind is a Western notion, placing emphasis on logical, straightforward deduction. As Swope explains, "[W]hile LaBas clearly wishes to introduce the world of mystery into the sterile order of the Atonist West, this does not mean that he gives up on reason altogether. In fact, LaBas depends heavily upon his ability to deduce and reason, to sort detective-style through a

string of clues as well as to interpret Abdul's cryptic notes" (620). LaBas certainly uses this mode of thinking as he contemplates who killed Hamid and where the Book is located. After all, he has to read closely between the lines of the note Hamid leaves and rely on the facts to locate the Book of Thoth.

That mode of thinking, however, is not enough, for LaBas still has to discover who killed Hamid. And doing this requires a disregard for logical, Western conceptions of time. LaBas's method for unveiling Hamid's murderer is foreshadowed when Earline accuses LaBas of being a conspiracy theorist: "There you go jabbering again. . . . Your conspirational hypothesis about some secret society molding the consciousness of the West. You know you don't have any empirical evidence for it that [sic]; you can't prove. . . . [LaBas:] Evidence? Woman, I dream about it, I feel it, I use my 2 heads. My Knockings" (Reed 25). As LaBas uses his "2 heads," he examines the facts over several centuries and concludes that Von Vampton is the murderer, that he is really a Knights Templar who has learned to cheat death. This deduction is ridiculed at the end of the novel because it does not align with one American police officer's "logical" thinking: "[Y]our premise is not based on sound empirical fact. . . . In times of social turbulence men like you always abandon reason and fall back upon Mumbo Jumbo" (195). Despite the officer's mocking, LaBas knows he is correct, and so does Von Vampton.

Presumably, the Haitian embassy will take up the case and charge him, for the embassy—thinking outside Western thought—will certainly be more inclined to consider a story that Americans deem laughable. LaBas has unveiled the culprit, a feat he could not have accomplished by using only one mode of thinking. The crux of the solution,

then, lies between the modes of Western and non-Western thought, so LaBas—once again—represents the crossroads figure that links two disparate ideologies to construct an explanation without which the mystery would have remained unsolved.

Swope identifies these differing methods of deduction in terms of what Deleuze and Guattari call “State science” vs. “nomad science.” The two can be understood further with Swope’s explanation: State science relies on “a set of strictly limited formulas, as does the science of detection. [N]omad science . . . is difficult to classify; as with Jes Grew, its history is even difficult to follow. Unlike State science, nomad science resists rigidly in confined parameters, including textual parameters” (619). State scientists rely on reason to make deductions, whereas Nomad scientists do not necessarily use empirical evidence; rather, their interest lies within the ideas of “deformations, transmutations, passages to the limit” (619). Swope finds the work of Deleuze and Guattari particularly fascinating because they, like Reed (and LaBas), are not interested in deciding which mode of science is better. Instead, they find particular interest in the places where the two intersect because the two “appropriate and transform the elements” of the other (Swope 619).

This mode of thinking, once again, points to the methods Reed employs to focus on the crossroads, the borders in between. He does not emphasize Western logic as more influential than non-Western practices. Neither does he invert the two, claiming that the way to solve the crime is to rely more on mystery tactics. He does, however, comment on the single-mindedness inherent in Atonism, for, as has been evidenced, a single mode of thinking will not yield an accurate portrayal. Swope reminds us of Reed’s aim in

emphasizing “borderline phenomena”: he “focuses our attention on . . . the points of interaction between Western science or Western cultural logic and Afrocentric culture and tradition, and also suggests that the place [that] is most alive is the cultural crossroads” (619). Reed, then, wants readers to understand the significance of the area that borders the two spheres of deduction to solve crime. Simply relying on one or the other would not have led to Von Vampton’s incrimination.

An Account of Mythical History

Next, PaPa LaBas serves as a mediator of the crossroads because the tale he reveals smudges the line between myth and history. When LaBas has located Von Vampton and Gould and accuses them of a crime, they reply, “[Y]ou will have to explain what charges you have against us before we will go anywhere” (Reed 160). Since the novel is framed as a detective, the reader is expecting hard evidence, yet LaBas does not exactly act according to expectations, beginning his account, “Well if you must know, it all began 1000s of years ago in Egypt, according to a high up member in the Haitian aristocracy” (160). Immediately, the reader is taken back to Ancient Egypt, to a place that is associated with myth, certainly not with fact. Without the thirty-page digression into the blend of Egyptian mythology with Judeo-Christian “history,” which eventually traces its way back to the current setting, LaBas would never be able to frame Von Vampton and Gould for their crimes. He relies on what Westerners deem “myth” to reach his conclusion about the two men in question.

He relays the story of the brothers Set and Osiris, Isis, Moses, Jethro, and the Knights Templar as part of his evidence to incriminate Von Vampton. He also weaves the

myth into the Western account of history, making the story, though incredibly unbelievable to his audience, a little more convincing. Passages such as the following provide samples of Reed's conflation:

Moses thought that he could calm the multitude by going out to the balcony and "reasoning" with the people, . . . warning them that he would not truck any rowdiness and that horrible punishments were in store for those who persisted in this unruliness. Ladies and gentlemen of Egypt. [sic] I will unleash the Holocaust upon you this time if you persist in this action. . . . A rock busted the cat's lip. In anger Moses flung his rod to the ground where it immediately transformed into a snake. (185-6)

LaBas's account of the story of Moses takes a different spin on the accounts found in the Christian bible. The great plagues of Egypt and the well-known story of Moses's staff turning into a serpent are documented in LaBas's version; however, they have been inverted and taken from the center of the tale they occupy in the Bible. In LaBas's account, the events indeed happen, but they have been removed to the margins of the story LaBas hints has been forgotten. LaBas does not alter the "history" to which Westerners are accustomed; he simply adds to that history and fills in the gaps that have been left out with the "myth" of his story. The message here is that the truth LaBas tries to locate lies somewhere between myth and history. It cannot exactly be extracted because the two have become blurred in Reed's novel. Readers simply cannot distinguish between that which is history and that which is not. To separate the fact from the fiction is an impossible feat because the layers are too numerous to be properly sorted.

LaBas, as a trickster and a master of Signifyin(g), repeats the story common to Western knowledge but puts a spin on it in order to create a new version, one that emerges between the myth and the history. As Hogue explains, “Reed uses this myth along with historical figures and facts not only to undermine the notion of a singular, centered history but also to show history as a dispersed, human construct” (103). Because history has been tainted by human involvement, the truth may never be found. Though the truth is impossible to locate, it nonetheless exists somewhere in the crossroads of myth and history. A noteworthy point is that the truth of the case certainly cannot be found in the Western version of history; what is more, it cannot be found within non-Western myth, either. As Swope elucidates, “LaBas the Neo Hoodoo detective is learning to live . . . on the borderline, for it is only in this space that Reed’s vision of multiculturalism can be realized and difference embraced. . . . Atonism is not, then, defeated by the instantiation of a different ‘right way,’ but rather by the obliteration of the either/or” (626). Reed’s message is not that Western history should be replaced by non-western myth; rather, the two need to be refigured, recreated, and conflated until an ever-evasive truth can begin to emerge. While the task, solving the crime and revealing the truth, proves impossible, Reed still emphasizes that the ideal “side” is not a side at all.

Circular Linearity: Time Reconstructed

Finally, PaPa LaBas plays a role as mediator between concepts about time. Reed encourages readers to think about LaBas within a time framework because he defies time and seems to supernaturally defy it. In the 1920s, LaBas is described as being middle aged, and he does not seem to have changed much when the plot moves to the 1970s.

Additionally, LaBas has an all-knowing concept of time, perhaps revealing that he (or some part of him) has, in fact, been alive through all the events he has described. Furthermore, Von Vampton's survival throughout millennia makes readers doubt LaBas's conclusions because Western concepts of time cannot accommodate people living beyond what is deemed normal. They especially cannot believe that a man can live as long as LaBas claims Von Vampton does. Moreover, Reed leaves Western readers pondering their concepts of time: "Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around" (Reed 218). Reed, then, introduces a contradictory understanding of time: time as linear vs. time as a loop.

Those coming into *Mumbo Jumbo* with Western assumptions typically view time as an unquestionable entity with a definitive beginning, middle, and end. However, Reed counters this assumption in several ways. First, he leaves the grand mystery, discovering the Book of Thoth, unsolved. Though LaBas does, indeed, unveil the criminals behind Hamid's murder, he fails to reunite *Jes Grew* with its text. Readers accustomed to the Western detective narrative do not find such an ending satisfying because they expect the detective to wrap up all the loose ends and leave them with a sense of closure. Reed does not provide such closure because it does not align with the concept of time he is exploring.

Furthermore, the time periods Reed decides to incorporate into the plot dismantle the Western understanding of time as linear because the historical events Reed highlights are essentially repeated. In this regard, Reed is Signifyin(g) by giving accounts of history and then recreating it in different time periods. When Moses destroys the Osirian order,

he begins the first stage of oppression against the precursors of Hoodoo. Each subsequent account of history that LaBas describes is essentially the same story set in a different time. This concept is especially noticeable in the two main time periods LaBas inhabits: the 1920s and the 1970s. Reed suggests that the times are remarkably similar: “[T]he 20s were back again. Better” (218). Both periods are dealing with heavy issues of racism, and black art is thriving (Harlem Renaissance and the Black Aesthetic Movement). Reed seems to find both times perfect incubators in which Jes Grew can swell up once again.

The periods are so similar, in fact, that Reed reminds the readers of the pendulum analogy, saying simply that the 1920s were resurging. The idea seems to contradict a Western assumption of linear time, replacing it with a theory of time as a loop; however, once again, the crossroads of the border phenomena rises to prominence. Certainly, the 1920s seem to be back, but the time is not replicated exactly. New people thrive in the 1970s, people who are certainly not present in the 1920s. The ideas and themes are similar, almost identical—almost. Perhaps Reed is suggesting that the two constructs of time can be conflated, that history certainly repeats itself, moving progress forward at a slothful rate. However, the course of history does, indeed, move forward. In essence, LaBas reminds readers that “[t]ime is a pendulum” (Reed 218), but the account he gives of time—from the ’30s to the ’40s to the ’50s—does, indeed, advance forward. Therefore, through LaBas, Reed establishes another crossroads theme, this time involving time: It seems to move forward and backward simultaneously. It moves forward in the sense that time continues. The number represented by each year continues to increase.

But the events that unfold as the years progress are alarmingly cyclical. Similarly, Reed addresses this seemingly contradictory concept of time when LaBas uses the past to illuminate the present. Swope further expands on this point:

[A]t the moment when LaBas ought to petrify the past by narrating or textualizing it, he actually makes the past come alive through narration by revising history to include both the present and future. In LaBas's history the past is not re-constructed so as to stabilize it in the hope of locating its one Truth, [sic] rather, it is re-constructed in the sense that it is made part of the present. (Swope)

These concepts are certainly puzzling because they contain contradictory elements—time moving forward and backward as well as the past becoming conflated with the present and even with the future. Perhaps Reed's point regarding hybridity is particularly clear within the concept of time because it presents a crossroads idea on several accounts. The ideas to Western readers become confusing because they often categorize such concepts as mutually exclusive. Reed's message, however, is for the two ideas that are typically separated to come together in order to create something new and seemingly impossible, for it is within this space where that which has never been conceived can spring into existence. As Swope asserts, "[O]pposites are desirable in that they produce a 'rupture of plane' . . . out of which new life arises, meaning opposites are crucial to the ongoing regeneration of the 'new thang'" (620).

As the key figure who personifies Esu and even takes on the role of narrator (as does the Signifying Monkey) PaPa LaBas has the ability to Signify—to repeat and

recreate. He plays on conventional Western ideologies, using common tropes and concepts to tell his own account of history. To solve the crime, he does not simply embrace his “knockings” solely and move forward with the case. He must also incorporate empirical, Western methods of investigation to reach his conclusions. By combining the two methods—not employing one in isolation or favoring one over the other—LaBas is able to make conclusions that would have been impossible to reach with only one mode of investigation.

As he retells the story that leads to Von Vampton’s incrimination, he weaves in traditional Western history. He also presents the opposite side of Western history: the non-Western myth. In recounting the “evidence” that leads to Von Vampton’s conviction, LaBas blurs the line between myth and history, encouraging readers to examine their own understandings of the “truths” that have been presented to them. As Swope suggests, “History need not be locked away within the rigid determination, but rather, like Osiris, can be resurrected through infinite, communal versions” (616). Swope’s statement highlights the idea that history is not necessarily a solid, hermetically sealed truth. Instead, it is something that can be signified upon as it is resurrected and retold. When myth and history blend together, forming a crossroads, another version of history is, in essence, created, opening up new possibilities of interpretation.

Finally, PaPa LaBas represents and highlights Reed’s alternative notion of time, one that combines “temporal circularity” (Swope 617) with a linear trajectory. Reed does not expect his readers to understand their world as relying more on one concept of time over the other; rather, he wants them to see the conflation of the two as a way to

understand their world from a different perspective. Therefore, “Reed suspends his reader, not on a side—as does Atonism—or at an end point—as does the science of detection—but at a multi-directional, multi-cultural crossroads where the lines that define history and reality are ruptured, regenerated, and revised” (Swope 617). It is within these areas, then, the areas that shatter between binary oppositions, that Reed’s audience can truly learn, for they must consider the potential of both sides and combine elements to unveil fresh and powerful concepts that reflect their world.

Chapter 4: *Mumbo Jumbo*: Textual and Cultural Undermining

The text *Mumbo Jumbo* itself points to many crossroads ideas in the way it defies standard conventions of writing and in how it is framed as detective fiction. In his article, Hogue points out three main conventions traditional novels typically possess, and Reed simply uses those characteristics as a base for his writing style, Signifyin(g) upon them to turn *Mumbo Jumbo* into what many classify as a postmodern text. It is important to understand the techniques Reed uses to create his unconventional novel because they unsettle readers, allowing them to question not only the novel's form but also any preconceived notions they might initially bring into the novel.

Additionally, Reed frames *Mumbo Jumbo* as a detective novel, though readers are often unaware of the genre they are reading until quite late in the book. Hamilton argues that African-American detective fiction is not a separate genre but rather a conflation of the two typical American mysteries, classic and hardboiled. This concept of hybrid fiction plays into the theme of crossroads, and the argument of African-American detective fiction as its own genre vs. its being a product of the American detective reflects the ideas prominent in Reed's thinking.

The aims of the first part of this chapter are to identify the three main ways *Mumbo Jumbo* defies conventions of the traditional novel followed by a discussion of how the methods Reed uses allow readers to uncover the deeper meaning in the novel. The second part will explore *Mumbo Jumbo* as detective fiction within Hamilton's argument and also examine the concept of the text as a hybrid fiction in reaction to some of the main themes of the Black Aesthetic Movement.

Mumbo Jumbo VS the Traditional Novel

Readers of *Mumbo Jumbo* certainly come away from the book with new ideas and perceptions about the ways Reed defies conventions to pose questions to his audience. He blends ideas and themes in a unique way; however, readers often do not see the brilliance of his work because they struggle to follow the plot, let alone to decode Reed's meaning. Much of the problem arises because Western readers come to the novel with clear assumptions about a text: It should have an easily identifiable plot, it should be linear, and it should follow the conventions that authors typically follow. *Mumbo Jumbo* does not fulfill readers' expectations, however, particularly because it defies the very conventions of the traditional novel. With a more solid understanding of the traditional conventions Reed is defying, readers can begin to unravel the greater issues framing the plot and make connections among the themes Reed presents.

Hogue says that Reed critiques the center by using unconventional structure and content, therefore commenting on the idea of the expected genre, particularly "the traditional novel [that] emerged in eighteenth-century England with the rise of Enlightenment rationalism and the belief in progress" (94). Hogue outlines the main features of traditional novels: "[T]he world is linear[;] the world has a beginning, . . . middle, and ending[;] and it wills a truth through the mastery of knowledge" (94). Clearly, Reed defies these concepts in the traditional novel because *Mumbo Jumbo* "challenges . . . novelistic convention, notions of absolute truth, and linearity" (94).

First, regarding conventions of novels, Reed violates nearly every expectation readers hold when they pick up a book. They are challenged to identify exactly what the

book they are holding *is*, a detective novel, a textbook, a play, fiction, history, myth.

The first page of the book opens like a play in media res with a description of a New Orleans mayor followed by a dialogue similar to that found in a play. However, even the script defies conventions because neither character is identified. The dialogue is separated simply by paragraph breaks. The chapter ends with a passage in italics, serving as a sort of introduction to the book and giving readers a bit of context. At this point, the readers are trying to understand the frame surrounding the book. However, they are not successful, for following the first chapter, Reed includes a quotation by Louis Armstrong and then a definition of *Mumbo Jumbo* according to the *American Heritage Dictionary*. After this comes the title page, the copyright page, and then the dedication. The title *Mumbo Jumbo* appears on page 13, on the page where chapter two begins. The action begins before the credits, much like a movie, and then it continues in chapter two. At this point, the reader is expecting a play, but Reed switches to narrative, further complicating the conventions. Immediately, Reed bombards his readers with contradictions to the conventions to which they are accustomed, causing discomfort and confusion as they try to understand exactly what Reed is doing.

Additionally, Reed uses Arabic numerals instead of following the conventions of spelling out certain numbers (for example, the number 1, which often gets misread as the word *I*, causing the reader to revisit many sentences). Also, he does not include quotations marks to indicate dialogue. Moreover, Reed incorporates various unconventional graphics into the novel, as Hogue accurately summarizes:

Reed appropriates a variety of media such as . . . pictures, photographs, drawings, posters, anagrams, newspaper clippings, dictionary definitions, symbols, and signs—many of them improvisationally placed in the text and, at times, lacking direct correspondence to the narrative of the text—that function not to illustrate scenes from the plot, as in a traditional novel, but to reinforce visually messages, feelings, and images. (96)

The undermining of traditional conventions indicates yet another way Reed is Signifyin(g) by relying on existing expectations of a book and then undermining them with his own version of textuality.

Next, Reed defies traditional concepts of time, a method Hogue thinks can be seen as part of his continual assault on novelistic convention:

The problem of linearity is that it is part of the metaphysics that contributes to the idea of an absolute, total history. All times are measured in relation to the present; this linearist concept of time is therefore one of the deepest adherences of the modern concept of the sign to its own history. (96)

Because time is such an engrained concept, Reed works to undermine it by implying that linearity is only one of many ways to measure time. He interrupts the main narrative with another narrative, a story within a story. He presents the concept of simultaneity as a way to measure time, a method that becomes increasingly confusing for readers. Furthermore, Reed does not allow his plot to proceed in a beginning-to-ending fashion. He begins the story in the 1920s, when Jes Grew has returned and is on its way to New York. The story

gets interrupted with a jump back to Ancient Egypt, transporting readers back in time and even allowing them to forget the plot they left behind. The story returns to the 1920s, when LaBas arrests Von Vampton, and then jumps forward to 1971, when the novel comes to a close. The linearity is interrupted multiple times, suggesting to readers that they might question their concepts of time and linearity.

Finally, regarding the notion of an absolute truth, we have already seen (through LaBas's failure to locate the Book) that it is an elusive entity. *Mumbo Jumbo* contains numerous elements to classify it as a postmodern text: temporal distortion, historiographic metafiction, pastiche, intertextuality, playfulness, etc. However, the message about truth common in postmodernism, that there is not an absolute truth, is slightly altered.

Most postmodern texts make truth impossible to find, whereas Reed leads his readers to believe that they can, in fact, locate it. As Hogue writes, "He gives enough facts and materials to make *Mumbo Jumbo* sufficiently plausible that the reader cannot reject it. But he also makes the telling of the story so outrageous and fantastic—usually through parody, mimicry, and exaggeration—that the reader cannot accept the text completely" (95). He combines historical facts (like the sixty-one lynchings that occurred in 1920), or at least ideas that can be verified by the very historical documents Reed questions. He uses these facts and combines them with myth, as we saw in the previous chapter, when LaBas gives his version of history—a purely fictional one. With the new history so entangled by facts and fictitious elements, readers have a difficult time drawing a clear line between reality and falsity and therefore cannot extract truth, though it

certainly exists within their grasp. Hogue contemplates this subject, arguing, “In this nonhierarchical juxtaposition of fact and fiction, *Mumbo Jumbo* allows the reader only to accept a provisional, or a ‘suspect,’ truth” (95). Therefore, Reed finds a medium between modes of thought regarding truth. It is not impossible to locate, as postmodernists believe. Yet truth is not something that can simply be acquired through knowledge, as the traditional novel would suggest. Parks accurately expresses Reed’s position regarding truth: “*Mumbo Jumbo* . . . seek[s] to challenge and dismantle . . . our assumptions and conceptions about knowledge and truth. The book seeks to undermine the artifice of convention . . . and to remind us that there are other ways of knowing and other things to know” (170). Reed approaches another crossroads area within the concept of truth, for it dwells precisely in the boundary between postmodernism and its predecessors.

Reed challenges traditional conventions of writing perhaps because he wants to present readers with unexpected elements to shake them from the solid ground on which they stand when they come into the novel. All readers approach novels with certain assumptions and truths, and those very assumptions shape the way they interpret text. Reed does not, even for a moment, let readers settle in and get comfortable with his text because he wants to continually challenge their beliefs. If they have constantly to question the very plot they are trying to comprehend, they might also begin to question other assumptions they hold—assumptions about race, about prejudice, about religion, about truth.

Reed’s act of defying the conventions does not necessarily reflect the same elements of the crossroads; rather, it destabilizes readers so that they are not able to

leisurely read the novel. They struggle to extract meaning, and they constantly question Reed's methods. In doing so, the readers break from their traditional roles and can find, amid the pile of mumbo jumbo, conclusions that they otherwise might not have drawn. When they set their beliefs aside, they can, then, look at the binaries objectively and identify the message Reed presents within the crossroads.

The "New" Detective Genre as a Symbol of Crossroads

One way Reed destabilizes the reader is by framing the story within a difficult-to-follow detective novel. Readers do not identify this genre until late in the novel when it becomes particularly clear as PaPa LaBas submits evidence to convict Von Vampton of murdering Hamid. Until that point, the book is certainly mysterious (readers wonder what, exactly, Jes Grew is or if it will reunite with the Book of Thoth), but Reed does not make it easily identifiable as detective fiction until the last quarter of the novel. He uses several literary conventions to present his story, and it becomes difficult to identify exactly how the story is framed.

When readers finally understand they are reading a detective novel, it is not typical of the kind they are accustomed to reading. As Reed is wont to do, he Signifies on detective novels (both the classical detective as well as the hardboiled detective) to create one that is particularly unique. Before explaining the significance of Reed's novel as a kind of hybrid detective, it is important to clearly understand the characteristics of the two main detective genres and explore precisely how Reed's detective contains elements of both. With an understanding of the novel as a kind of crossroads detective, it is

possible, then, to grasp how that concept ties into Reed's greater message about the Black Aesthetic Movement.

First, the classic detective fiction, akin to that written by Edgar Allen Poe or Arthur Conan Doyle, has some underlying characteristics that place it in its own genre. The plot is somewhat predictable, revealing the crime early in the story and puzzling the readers as they follow the detective in discovering the identity of the criminal. As we see in the character of Sherlock Holmes, the detective is usually brilliant and has almost a super intelligence, allowing him to solve the crime, which itself baffles the authorities who should be in charge of investigation. Additionally, the classic detective usually has a colleague or sidekick (like Watson) that aids (somewhat) in uncovering the mystery. Finally, the police or authorities remain doubtful of the detective's motives and methods, yet they are humbled when the truth is finally revealed at the end and the crime has been solved.

Mumbo Jumbo contains a few of the elements of classic detective fiction. For one, PaPa LaBas is assisted by Black Herman, a sidekick who brings LaBas to his senses at a critical moment in the novel. When Earline becomes possessed by the loa Erzulie, LaBas is unable to help her, and it is actually Black Herman who coaxes the loa to come out.

LaBas's efforts are useless when he attempts to save Earline:

She gives him [LaBas] a smile so wicked in its content that it makes his flesh crawl. He touches the back of her left hand softly; she digs her nails into his right hand. . . . Girl, LaBas begins to speak. Why don't you leave Earline alone? The child has enough troubles. Her man is dead and she

loved him. You understand that, don't you? You got 1 man to flirt with you and make love to you, now why don't you return to where you came from. There's no need to worry her like this. Pick somebody else. . . . Man, Earline says, . . . there ain't nothing no American HooDoo man or whatever you call yourselves can do for me. I wouldn't be too sure about that, Black Herman says entering the room carrying 2 huge glasses containing his recipe on a tray. (Reed 127-8)

In this scene, LaBas is trying to use reason to persuade Erzulie from leaving Earline. At this point, he has played the role of detective too long and has begun to rely too much on Western thinking. He uses logic and reasoning to convince Erzulie to abandon her host rather than use the methods of Hoodoo that would certainly prove more effective. Black Herman stays true to the mission, reminding LaBas that simple reason will not work. Herman sticks to the ritual, and LaBas later realizes his blunder:

How did you succeed where I failed, Herman? Well, it's like this, PaPa. You always go around speaking as if you were a charlatan and putting yourself down when you are 1 of the most technical dudes with The Work. You ought to relax. That's our genius here in America. We were dumped here on our own without the Book to tell us who the loas are. . . . We made up our own. . . . I think we've done all right. (130)

When Herman calls LaBas a charlatan, essentially saying he has abandoned his role as a houngan, he is also calling him a bokor, which James Lindroth explains: “[H]oungan is a priest whose power derives from his connections with the spirit world; a bokor, on the

other hand, is a man who through deceit may appear to possess the power of a houngan but is really a charlatan” (193). Herman is blaming LaBas for interpreting the Work too literally, therefore inhibiting his ability to act as a houngan. When Herman revives Earline, he does so just in time, for his reminder to LaBas brings him back to his senses so that he is able to solve the ultimate crime of Hamid’s murder at the end of the novel.

Aside from the colleague to assist the detective, the solution of the crime in *Mumbo Jumbo* parallels those found in classic detectives, coming at the end of the novel and pulling all the pieces together. LaBas, much like Holmes, gathers clues that no one else could accumulate. Though the crime is solved in a different fashion (Holmes relies on sound deduction and empirical knowledge, whereas LaBas blends myth with history to reach his conclusion), the idea of super intelligence is inherent in LaBas. He uses thirty pages to explain an ancient story about two brothers who are the source of the current crime. The story he tells is quite convincing, despite its being nearly impossible to believe with a Western understanding of the world. LaBas weaves his version of history together masterfully, making the reader and even the authorities think twice. He ends his account thus:

Hinckle . . . learned . . . that Abdul was in possession of a Book whose description matched the one he had sent out. He approached Abdul for the Book and when Abdul resisted he murdered him. . . . When we dug up the box containing the Book we found the Templar’s seal on the top and we traced it to Hinckle Von Vampton. . . . It was the seal on the box of the

Book that connected us with [him] and if you will just look he is wearing it right now. (190)

LaBas has given an unbelievable account preceding this evidence, weaving in Moses, Set, and Osiris into his proof and claiming that Von Vampton has survived for centuries. Though that evidence seems implausible, he ends his account with convincing, empirical evidence that leaves Von Vampton and Gould “sweating profusely” (191). Clearly, Reed has revealed the truth about their crime, using knowledge and experience that no other person is able to piece together.

The hardboiled detective, such as the writing by Dashiell Hammett, looks quite different from the classic detective novel. The hardboiled detective is characterized as having an unsentimental view of violence and sex. Gangsters are often responsible for the crime in the novel, and the crime itself is not necessarily a mystery. The detective (and protagonist) usually narrates the story in first-person perspective, and the detective stirs up the situation rather than think about it. The hardboiled detective typically takes place in a large city, and the distinguishing characteristic about the detective is that he is able to survive against apparent odds. Additionally, in noir crime fiction, unlike the Continental Op in Hammett’s books, the protagonist is not an outsider or a detective but rather a victim who is somehow tied to the crime.

It is clear that *Mumbo Jumbo* fits certain molds of the hardboiled detective as well. While violence and sex do not play a big part in the story and LaBas is not the narrator, *Mumbo Jumbo* fits the other descriptions. Reed incorporates a kind of gangster

violence in the novel through the Wallflower Order, who are chiefly responsible for the “crime” of suppressing Jes Grew:

The foolish Wallflower order hadn't learned a damn thing. They thought that by fumigating the Place Congo in the 1890s when people were doing the Bamboula . . . and the VooDoo that this would put an end to it. That it was merely a fad. . . . In the 1890s the text was not available and Jes Grew was out there all alone. Perhaps the 1920s will also be a false alarm and Jes Grew will evaporate as quickly as it appeared again broken-hearted and double-crossed. (Reed 6)

The Wallflower Order have been trying to snuff out Jes Grew since Moses first got the Book from Isis, and they can be equated with gangster crime of hardboiled fiction because they present a challenge that goes beyond the scope of “Who dunnit” as their crime is complex, complicated, and uneasy to “solve.”

Moreover, *Mumbo Jumbo* contains elements of hardboiled detective fiction through the detective, PaPa LaBas, who really fits better with the protagonist of noir crime fiction since he is an insider. He walks the streets of New York City and runs the Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral. He knows the loas and Jes Grew. He is a victim of racism and understands the problem deeply as an insider. As Reed writes, “Whoever his progenitor, whatever his lineage, his grandfather it is known was brought to America on a slave ship mixed in with other workers who were responsible for bringing African religion to the Americas where it survives to this day” (23). Clearly, LaBas has been on the scene for a while and has solid insight as to the multifarious manifestations of racism in the country.

Most detectives in hardboiled fiction survive the odds of the violence that surrounds them. While LaBas does not necessarily evade violence that could end his physical life, he is trying to keep alive the very essence of Jes Grew, without which could bring an end to his spiritual life.

The detective story that Reed writes undoubtedly contains a mixture of the two main detective genres, which Hamilton points out in her article. Her main concern is “how detective fiction produced by African American writers relates to these generic categorizations: Is African American detective fiction a separate, hybrid genre that demands the isolation of new conventions for its definition, new terms for its analysis, and new standards for evaluation?” (222). Some critics, such as Stephen Soitos, claim that black detective writers should, indeed, be categorized with a distinct type of detective novel, though Hamilton strongly disagrees because she sees this categorization as a way of “creating a racially defined type, category, or genre” (222). Hamilton understands Soitos’s desire to separate African-American detective fiction, “given the extent to which African American [sic] achievements have been neglected or denigrated by those shaping both scholarly and public opinion” (223). However, she believes the shift comes too early to justify.

As she writes, the hardboiled detective became separated from the classical detective because so many novels emerged that shared certain conventions that deviated from the classical novel, conventions like the hero, the setting, the plot, and the style. She does not find such shifts in African-American detective fiction. Hamilton certainly does not deny the richness of the form of novel, yet she asserts that it should not be its own genre

because it “is not an indigenous African American [sic] form” (223), though it has clear reasons for becoming so popular among African-American writers, particularly because it provides a platform on which they can portray their political agendas regarding social criticism. In African-American detective fiction, especially in *Mumbo Jumbo*, racism can be personified as a villain (The Wallflower Order), and the criticism can be understood in a unique way.

Furthermore, double consciousness plays a role in classic and detective fiction because it “gives rise to the hero’s toughness, for it makes the detective vulnerable. To survive, the hero must respond to situations in a way that recognizes the powers and expectations of those he confronts. . . . The hero is constantly in danger on the one hand of losing his integrity and on the other hand of losing his life” (228). The double consciousness in these detective genres lends itself to be used by African-American detective fiction writers, for they can “expose problematic social attitudes and practices . . . and temporary concerns about institutional failures” (228) such as the ones Reed exposes about deeply engrained religion contributing to the oppression of blacks.

Hamilton acknowledges that African-American authors have taken the typical detective genres in new directions; however, she does not think it warrants a new formula for the detective novel, calling the classification “a false category . . . that signals a shift in thematic emphasis rather than a transformation of the basic underlying formula” (228). Placing the detective fiction in its own genre could be detrimental to criticism because it could “coalesce to the point where it blinds critics to the generic dynamics that cannot be

accessed through such an approach” (229), thus categorizing the fiction like *Mumbo Jumbo* and restricting the ways critics approach it.

If novels such as *Mumbo Jumbo* are viewed as belonging to the underlying detective novels, they will be interpreted in a multitude of ways, which will, of course, include delving into the implications of racial oppression. But Hamilton does not want racial reading to be the only way the texts are approached, for she finds this highly limiting: “[T]he ring-fencing of African American [sic] detective fiction poses a . . . danger: that certain types of readings will be prioritized while the significance of others is downgraded, not at the level of individual criticism, but at the level of generic prescription” (229). The final question Hamilton poses is “whether . . . African American [sic] detective fiction is unique enough to warrant being seen as a new genre”; if so, “the literary dynamics of generic layering and intertextuality” will be obscured (232). In short, the answer to her question is no.

Reed certainly would not want his novel to be categorized as its own fiction, for his chief work is to blend the line between two concepts, not to replace them with something “better.” Hamilton summarizes the issue accurately:

It is only when we acknowledge the . . . shared traditions of the classical mystery and hardboiled detective story that we can explain the openness of the texts themselves to a wide variety of readings within different socio-cultural contexts and the current wide popularity of and interest in these formulas as they have been employed by African American [sic]

authors. . . . This richness does not exist despite formula, but because of it. (233-6)

In an interview by Shamoon Zamir, Reed expresses his opinions about his writing: “[M]y work can't be categorized. White critics can't place me, and black critics say I don't belong to the black tradition.” Even Reed himself denies a spot in a specific category, particularly one that could be so closely aligned with the Black Aesthetic Movement.

Initially, Amiri Baraka began the movement about blacks, for blacks, by blacks. In this regard, placing the African-American detective into its own category would fit the aim of the movement; however, Reed does not identify with the movement, saying, “This Black Aesthetic is an urban thing, an urban professors’ movement. It was anti-white, it’s closer to Nazism or super-race philosophies like that than to the black aesthetic as it is perceived and experienced in this hemisphere (Brazil, Haiti, places like that)” (Zamir). Reed values the notion of hybridity, of something being produced as a result of merging binaries.

His detective fiction follows this trend as he Signifies on already-established tropes within the detective genre and plays on the conventions to comment on social issues. Yes, his work has a social agenda, as does the work of Amiri Baraka or others associated with the Black Aesthetic Movement, but his social agenda is not limited strictly to the black community. Robert Fox makes a critical observation regarding Reed’s work:

Unlike those who argue for a black essentialism [like Baraka], Reed sees this hybridity as a virtue, rather than a defect or betrayal. A deep

immersion in blackness is simultaneously an immersion in Americanness, given the extent to which, as a result of slavery and its aftermath, Africa helped to make America; and, considering the give-and-take of many other cultural influences, an immersion in Americanness is also an experience of the unfolding of multiculturalism.

Therefore, since Reed himself does not fit (nor does he desire to fit) into a specific category of fiction, his work *Mumbo Jumbo* serves to undermine all notions of categorization.

When Reed defies the conventions of readers by Signifyin(g) on the traditional novel, he encourages them to let go of preconceived assumptions about a novel, allowing them to simultaneously question assumptions they hold about race, religion, the West/East, and even what is “right.” They work through the novel with difficulty, therefore enabling them to embrace the messages Reed presents. The very frame of the novel as a detective is one of those messages regarding hybridity and crossroads, and *Mumbo Jumbo* serves as one of many “X’s” of crossroads Reed offers; it “redoubles and circles” (Hamilton 237), Signifyin(g) and pulling in elements of other detective fiction while simultaneously creating new notions that could not exist without a framework from which it can build.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Mumbo Jumbo as a text carries significant elements of crossroads themes because, as Gates's theory supports, the message is a process of Signifyin(g), of doubling and redoubling. As the chapter about PaPa LaBas highlights, the fine line between history and myth becomes unclear as LaBas presents the evidence that leads to Von Vampton's arrest. The story that unfolds within *Mumbo Jumbo* is a blend between history and mythology. Reed blurs the line between the two, suggesting that they comprise two parts of the unified whole. History, to Reed, can be no more trusted to convey facts than mythology can. As Parks asserts, "*Mumbo Jumbo*'s . . . forays, its revisions of history, seek to challenge and dismantle . . . our assumptions and conceptions about knowledge and truth. The book seeks to undermine the artifice of conventional history and to remind us that there are other ways of knowing and other things to know" (169). To emphasize this point, Reed even goes so far as to propose that mythology carries factual evidence. The story unfolds in such a manner that the reader has a difficult time deciphering where history ends and mythology begins. The two are conflated so seamlessly that all the "facts" of history in Reed's novel seem just as plausible as the myth of Set and Osiris. Reed ties the story together so masterfully that the reader often gets lost between the fact and fiction.

Another message Reed delivers that differs slightly from that which LaBas uncovers as a detective is the idea that history is not necessarily a factual authority, for Reed firmly believes in the notion that history is but another story that is always recast by someone in a position of power. For example, PaPa LaBas explains that the U.S. war

against Haiti—against Jes Grew—“will be completely deleted from the American ‘History Books’” (133). To Reed, the history in books is but a fraction of the truth it supposedly reflects, so his blending history with myth reveals another story—one that certainly is not possible, but one that illuminates the febleness of the history we so hastily take for fact.

The text also blends expectations of readers, for they cannot simply play a passive role in understanding the text; they are forced to take part in the novel and work alongside PaPa LaBas as a kind of detective to decipher meaning. Reed reveals his intentions for writing the book in an unconventional manner, as Franklin Sirmans gathers in an interview with Reed: “I . . . create[d] a different form of storytelling. I always try to vary how I tell stories. . . . You have to be interested in every possible way to tell a story. . . . If you don’t, you won’t get through. So, if they—not just whites but blacks as well—are going to block you in one medium, you have to find another way to work” (78). Reed’s use of graphics, pictures, footnotes, and non-linear writing serves to puzzle the readers, beckoning them to construct meaning—to challenge the text as well as challenge thoughts and assumptions they might carry into the story. Boccia agrees, saying:

First, there is mystery on the level of ‘Who dunnit?’ On this level *Mumbo Jumbo* is a traditional mystery revolving around the possession of *The Book of Thoth*. . . . [T]here is the mystery of the book’s form which offers the reader a very nontraditional puzzle to solve. . . . We are compelled to

become detectives while we read, not only to solve the detective's mystery, but to solve the form's mystery as well. (99)

Reed encourages his audience to abandon their roles as passive readers. He also abandons his role as author so that the line between author and reader is blurred. Reed writes with a clear intent, but he invites readers to bring their knowledge to his in order to create meaning off the page—and outside Reed's control.

Again, within the crossroads, readers can gain a new understanding and create a new story by struggling through Reed's unconventional form. It is easy to think the Western version of an account is simply false and that a non-Western version from those who are not in power would yield an accurate portrayal. However, as Swope reminds us, either version—history or myth—will be flawed and, thus, cannot be relied too heavily upon: “Reed's novel does not simply replace the Western detective story with an Afrocentric version; rather, *Mumbo Jumbo* concentrates on the space in-between, or the cultural boundary between African—or other non-Western cultures—and Euro-American ‘civilization’” (613). It is at this meeting place where readers can find a meaning that is not influenced by either side. Perhaps Reed works within this crossroads because he wants his readers to examine both sides—the facts and the stories—to produce a truth that springs forth when the two sides collide. Furthermore, it is in a reader's nature to desire a singular form that Reed simply does not provide. Mark Shadle thinks Reed's tactics are intentional: “This push toward oneness and doubleness in Reed's work is an indication of the frustration with this, our basic imperfection, part of which is an insatiable need for ‘form.’ But a plurality of forms celebrates and transforms this

imperfection into possibilities” (60). These possibilities are the product of clashing viewpoints and could not be possible without the binary opposition inherent in *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Throughout the book, readers encounter example after example of crossroads figures that serve to bridge the boundary between two opposing entities. As a character who represents the crossroads of crossroads as a blend between Esu and the Signifying Monkey, PaPa LaBas serves as a figure that bridges the spiritual and the physical world. Through him, the characters in the book can rely on his wisdom that transcends that of any mortal being. If characters do not heed his warnings, they can expect misfortune, for LaBas, and by extension Esu, can step in to mediate and interpret when loas are satisfied—and when they are not. LaBas also bridges the two realms of thought, Western and non-Western, to solve a mystery that would have remained unsolvable. He merges the two philosophies, combining reason with knockings, empirical evidence with spiritual hunches. Additionally, PaPa LaBas, through his storytelling, represents a new idea regarding the concept of time. As Reed portrays it, time is neither linear, nor is it circular, but rather a conflation of the two. Again, a crossroads creation abounds within Reed’s concept of time as he works to blend two thoughts seemingly at odds.

Finally, the text *Mumbo Jumbo* itself serves to bridge binary oppositions. Its form (or non-form) forces readers to think more critically about that which they read and to construct new meaning from the words that are chaotically thrown together. Reed forces readers to immerse themselves into the text, becoming detectives not in solving the murder of Hamid but in pondering the questions that lie between two opposing

perspectives. By the end of the novel, Boccia hopes that “[t]he mumbo jumbo is no longer confusing; it is now a metaphor for the elements of a culture which appeared inexplicable, but in fact was quite comprehensible. Reed explains that no single metaphor completely encompasses or explains the world” (105). Boccia indicates that no single metaphor can uncover the truth, but he fails to mention that no two metaphors can, either. Each metaphor represents a view steeped in what it represents. It provides a biased view that is always in contention with its opposing side. Since neither can provide an answer to the truth, it makes sense to say that the truth lies between the two versions. Swope provides significant insight to this phenomenon, commenting on the crossroads within the text:

Mumbo Jumbo leaves us in a state of suspense, . . . or at the crossroads, for a reason, for the crossroads is where the opposites meet—black and white, East and West, science and mystery, smooth and striated—and potentially create new ‘combinations.’ [I]t is only in this space [a spatial amalgamation] that Reed’s vision of multiculturalism can be realized and difference embraced (rather than repressed or dismissed . . .). Atonism is not, then, defeated by the instantiation of a different ‘right way,’ but rather by the obliteration of the either/or, by the rupture of planes that occurs at the crossroads where the smooth and striated interact, compete, and potentially explode. (626)

As Swope so accurately explains, the readers must not dwell in the spaces of opposition, for nothing new can abound within these areas. Readers must identify these binary

conflicts, yes, but they must go beyond the boundaries and look within the crossroads to create a new reality that can deconstruct, build upon, or improve previous notions.

As Gates's theory suggests, the message in Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* cannot be directly located, for, as Gates reminds us, "Signifyin(g) is a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon ever closer examination" (44). Therefore, Reed does not necessarily propose a solution to, say, the race problem, religious domination, Western assumptions as the preferential mode of thought, Western history as fact, etc.; rather, he focuses on the boundaries in between as a strategy to encourage readers to explore the multifarious possibilities surrounding them, to drop their assumptions, even momentarily, and explore, as Parks says, "other ways of knowing" (169).

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