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Writers Forum

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Ishmael Reed: 05-01-1974

Ishmael Reed

Stan Sanvel Rubin

Kenneth Robert Venick

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REED: "Styling before a small vintage car, let alone a bowl of cherries.
Like too many of us, my old man who never had use for a real father, and so when I am heading
for crash, no one will catch me, but me.
The year is only five days old, already accounted, as glided out,
it's glow sandbagged by the jealous son.
Happens to the best of us, our brilliance falling off
like hair from berk leaves rubbing dogs.
Even on Rose Bowl Day, an otherwise joyous occasion.
A float veered into the crowd, somebody got bruised over the incident,
like a love affair on Second Avenue.
It's a good lesson to us all, in these down hill days, of a hard hearted decade,
jetting through the world, our tails on fire.
You can't always count on things opening up for you, know when to let go, learn how to fall."

[Music]

VOICE: "Brockport Writers Forum, in a continuing series of discussions, with leading literary figures presents, The Poetry of Ishmael Reed. Considered one of the most dynamic voices among young black writers, who has published a number of books of poetry, and has written several novels, Ishmael Reed has taught at the University of Washington, and at the Berkeley Campus of the University of California. Discussing Mr. Reed's works are Kenneth Robert Venick, an English major at the State University College of Brockport, and Fine Arts editor of the Brockport student newspaper, the Stylus. And the host for today's writers forum Stan Sanvil Rubin, a poet, co-editor of the Anthology Working From Silence, and a member at the English Department of the State University College at Brockport."

RUBIN: "Do we believe it omens?"

REED: "I believe in them, and I've always tried to read them, and that's part of Hoodooism, which is my aesthetic. So nobody can call me a surrealist, or a dadaist, or put me into their aesthetics. So, I have to tell people what I'm doing, and I'm consistent with it. But in the old times, in America, in this Country, the Hoodoo people could read the signs."

RUBIN: "What's the sign in that poem?"

REED: "Well, a comet doesn't-- isn't as bright as it's supposed to be. And what happened was, I read from an article, written by an astronomer saying that the reason for this was the sun had caused an extra layer to occur on the comet, so that it wasn't that bright. So what you have here, that's why I say the sun, I personify the sun right? You get that out of the classroom, as being jealous of the comet. The other omen is that on a state occasion, or a festival, or a holiday the country has, on Rose Bowl Day, some ominous happens again. The float goes-- went haywire, and ran into the reviewing stand. Now in old times that would have been considered an omen."

RUBIN: "Does Neo Hoodoo—"

REED: "Excuse me. Another one—"

RUBIN: "Sorry."

REED: “Pull my rug, talk about the President dropping the first baseball of the season, that would have been considered an omen, you see, and that was long before the present troubles.”

VENICK: “Does Neo Hoodoo help us know to when to let go?”

REED: “What I'm saying that these omens may mean, and I think an old time reading of it would have meant that there are bad times ahead, and that's why he's a skydiving image. If you're going to fall, but you don't have a parachute, at least try to fall gracefully.”

RUBIN: “So there are omens in the poem, but the whole apparatus of the Neo Hoodoo pantheon you've constructed, in previous works, is it—”

REED: “Well, it's not only a-- Hoodooism is not only a pantheon, but it's a-- involves prophecy, and it involves conjuring, and involves dance, and it involves mystery, and it involves painting, and it involves sculpture, and all the arts, it was like multi media. And these rights were practiced in New Orleans, in our Country, in the 19th century, and I began reading the material on this, and I thought we had a gold mine. And I continued getting into it, learning French, for example, and trying to read everything I can put my hands on, because I think you can understand when you talk about maybe, Yeats, and some of the Irish poets trying to bring back their mythology, the Celtic Revival, or poets in other countries, going to their native sources instead of going to the Christian art. Trying to find their psychology, I think if you go into a people's past, you'll see what's consistent in their art, you can find their mind.”

RUBIN: “Do you see this as a black source—”

REED: “No, it's not a black source. It's eclectic-- Hoodoo is eclectic, and when I say Hoodoo, I mean the way certain African art forms are practiced in this country, because it's very different from country to country. And when people say voodoo, it's not dolls-- people sticking pins in dolls, or this kind of thing, that's kind of a corruption, or back woods practices. But you have Whites and Indians and South American Voodoo, and Voodoo is really a term for all the synthesis that took place in this country, when different tribes came together. You had the Fons, the Fon people, and Eboles, and Angolans, Tahomians, you know, there was no distinction when people were brought over here, brought over different tribes. And tribes that wouldn't ordinarily come in contact with each other, even in Africa, put all their skills, and their mythologies, and their art forms together here. And they were influenced by Indians. Like I understand that when the African gods, or spirit lords were brought here, they were very gentle, but they came up against the Indian influence in Haiti, the Haitian Indians, and they became-- some of them became mean, and there were even white influences. They were able to substitute some of the ceremonies of Christian saints, for African gods, because you find similar attributes. For example, Legba is a cross roads symbol in Africa, and here, Poppa Legba stands at the cross roads, and he stands for the intersection of the real, and the real world, and the world of invisibles. He brings two worlds together, he brings the spirits into the real world, conducts the spirits into the real world. Well, this is the same thing Saint Peter does, in a sense, and so when you get here, you get Saint Peter substituted for Legba, but that's all technical discussion. What I'm interested in here, is that the Afro-American artists have been able to use the processes of this art form, which it really is, and I think, take it farther, so you can rag time. The same process led to new spirits being created, in South America, with no antecedents in Africa, led to ragtime here. I'm reading Early Anthology by James Weldon Johnson, he said, nobody knows how ragtime came about, it just grew. You see, that's why I just grew in Mumbo

Jumbo, as being a spontaneous rising, if you want to get technical, what Carl Jung calls, [inaudible] Myths, things that come right out of the-- spring right out with no intellectual—”

RUBIN: “But do you understand the difference between Jung and Freud, and the Western Psychologist understood the forces they were—”

REED: “I think Jung did, I think Jung was really moving that direction, and if given more time, I think he would have been off into a African religion, he was going that way.”

REED: “And Neo Hoodoo—”

REED: “And Freud said that if he had to do it over again, he would've concentrated on what he dismissed as mysticism, rather than this sexual reading.”

RUBIN: “And he shows more awareness of that later in—”

REED: “This book called *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain*, which they say Freud makes his confession, which he would have gone more into-- because you know he was always ridiculing Jung for going into these, what he would call the alt cult, which is a put down term. The alt cult means that everybody else's religious systems, other than the doctrines of the church.”

VENICK: “Then you're Neo Hoodoo thing, sounds a lot like Robert Bly, we've talked about this before, when he talks about mother consciousness, and father consciousness. And in your Neo Hoodoo manifesto, you say Neo Hoodoo believes that every man is an artist, and every artist a priest. Now, Bly seems to think that we're moving that way, you know, young people are moving that way, Neo Hoodoo seems to be a liberating factor. Is that what we're doing, are we moving that way?”

REED: “Well, I was kind of like a socialist when I wrote that. As I was an anarchist at one time, until I found out that everyone couldn't behave as well as I behaved, and you've got to do something with some of these guys, but that's an early, primitive version of what I was groping for. I think when you get into a new system, you make all the mistakes, trial and error and all that, and what I've tried to do is evolve from what was written there. Which is like, kind of sensationalistic, maybe euphorite, euphoria, of having stumbled upon something I thought as new and exciting. But then you become a little older and mature, and sophisticated with it, and you're able to abstract the essential elements, and use that. And so I think Mumbo Jumbo is most sophisticated version of Neo Hoodooism that I've written. And which, I do the same thing that the Voodooist did, on an intellectual level. For example, I told you that in the Haitian ceremonies, and they use cornmeal, and they draw certain designs in the sand, to summon a lord, you understand what I'm talking about? So that if you want to summon a love goddess, you draw a heart, and nobody draws these hearts. You see, Voodoo varies from priest to priest. It has room for a great deal of variation, there's no pope, there are no cardinals, and like... It is-- it's based upon individuality, which I still think is a good thing, in a world that's moving towards a collective outlook, I think individuality is a good thing. But anyway, you draw these designs, and each priest, or houngan, as they call them in Haiti, do them differently. So, I saw the 1920's as a lord. And to summon the 20's, the spirit of the 20's, I use Art Nouveau Typeface, because that was very fashionable in the 20's, Art Nouveau Typeface, this kind of thing. And in order to create the dance element that you find at a Voodoo ceremony, I wrote about a dance epidemic that sweeps the country in the 1920's, you know they call it the Jazz Age, so I take them literally, and so on. So I think you start off with a new system, and what you try to do is develop it, and add your own information to it, or your own ideas to it, so that it

becomes your own. You become more casual with it, it's like maybe learning how to play baseball, I mean, learning how to play the violin, or learning how to play an instrument, or something. You're very awkward with it at first, but then you develop with it, and you get better, and it becomes easier."

RUBIN: "How did you make this transition from the stuff you were learning in college, trying to find your voice, and into this? How did you get into the whole Hoodoo thing?"

REED: "I think the poets I really liked in college, I think were people like Yeats, and whoever had, what you might call an idiosyncratic voice, and who were trying to create their own resources, and mythologies. Like Blake, he was a favorite of mine in school, and I think that probably led to me-- my experimentation to try to find how this would relate to me, as an Afro-American artist. How can I get in to my own thing, my own psychology, instead of somebody else's."

VENICK: "How did you discover this particular source of—"

REED: "I was-- through a painter. I think the difference between some of the contemporary writers, and I think the older writers, in the 20's, maybe except for Joyce, who was-- who hung out with musicians, and was a musician himself, a singer, and who knew painters in Zurich and in Paris. We associated with all kinds of people, like I learned more about writing living in New York for about six or seven years, than I did at the University, actually going to poetry readings, and talking to writers. And this may be the best way to do it, you get a master of something, like I'm studying-- I'm talking to architects these days, interviewing architects, and they really improve my eye. I can travel to a city, cities that I go to, and can identify certain roof styles, and certain patterns and designs, you know, houses. Like Sidney Janis, I read an article of about Sidney Janis, who has an art gallery, who was an amateur, but he hung out with Gorky. Now you know going to a museum with Gorky, or somebody like that is maybe better than hanging around the University. I don't know, maybe both of them work, but I was influenced by being at the University, but I think I was more influenced by being around writers in New York for some years."

RUBIN: "What did the paint-- what did the painting have to do with—"

REED: "So, painting-- so the painter, yeah, I always go—"

RUBIN: "Are you doing the visual trip, I wonder how that would have—"

REED: "The painter-- I was over at this friend's house, who's a painter named [inaudible], one of the best painters in America, if not the world. And he had this painting of these weird symbols. And I said, what are these? And he told me what they were, they were Voodoo symbols, which called Veve, or Ververs. And so, I wanted to get out of New York, because New York was too good to me, I come up from like a very Slavic, harsh, self-reliant kind of town, like Buffalo. You know, where people getting suspicious of things being made too easy for them. You know, these are pioneers up there, you get immigrants up there, and they're all the same, the Blacks, and the Poles, and the Germans, and the Italians, these are all very rugged people. And it's a harsh town, it was cold in the winter. And so I said, you know, I wasn't accustomed to being treated to this, being treated like royalty and all, and so I said, I got to get out of here, and go somewhere it's really rough. You know what I mean? So I was a pioneer. We-- my parents were pioneers, they uprooted themselves from Tennessee and came to Buffalo, they didn't know what to expect. A lot of people don't have them much daring, they like to know where they are. So I went to California, I had 50 bucks, and went Los Angeles and held up on this block called Echo Park Canyon, where this deserted street, where everybody's over 90. I was the youngest-- my wife and I were the

youngest people on the block. And at the bottom of it is a lake that Fatty Arbuckle drained one time to do a movie, a silent movie, see? So I held up there, and write *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*, which was like my first real, serious attempt to write a voodoo novel, combining different forms, like the old west-- the western hoodoo. So I did the research, I started the research on Hoodoo at the Los Angeles Library, and that was the beginning of it. But I got it from my eye, I got it from a painter."

RUBIN: "And you really got into it. It was a spiritual trip."

REED: "Oh yeah. Yeah."

RUBIN: "What's the different between writing a novel, and writing a poem? You're writing-- now I know you're working on a novel, and a book of poems, and you've done both."

REED: "Um. I think I write poetry more for an inspiration. I think novels are very technical, you have to have scenery, you have to have-- there's certain forums that you can't get away with. You can't abandon when you're writing a novel."

RUBIN: "You were saying it takes more maturity."

REED: "I think so, I think so. Writing a novel is hard physical work, not to say poetry is not. I work on poetry a great deal, I usually start off with-- I get inspired right out of my mind, write it on a page, stick it up on the bulletin board, and then like pencil it every day, or so often. And when I can't-- when I come to an impasse, I just put it away, and then go back to it. And some of the poems, they-- I've introduced a lot of Afro-American kids into writing poetry because they feel it's very easy. Because maybe they feel if he can do it, anybody can do it. So, I'll take credit for that. But I have a hard time, it's a very precise kind of thing you're trying to do. I try to know what I'm talking about if I'm writing a poem, you know, if I'm writing about astronomy, I'll go out and check it out. Wrote a love poem about using images from astronomy, called *Kali's Galaxy*, and try to be sophisticated with it, and try to research it, so I get everything accurate. That was an article I got out of *The Times*. I read *The Times* every day because I consider it the Bible of civilization. It's like in Vaudeville, where in the old Vaudeville days, the troops would go into town, and read the local newspapers and derive their skits from that. So what I do is I read the American newspapers, I read the *Berkeley Gazette*, which is the hometown local newspaper, with recipes for Kung Fu Clusters, and I read the *Chronicle*, which is the next step removed from that, a regional. And then I read *The Times*, which is the civilization's Bible. And I get a lot of material from reading newspapers, as a matter of fact I use pictures from newspapers in *Mumbo Jumbo*."

VENICK: "You use the Conjure image, the Conjure image, as a metaphor all over the place, in all your work, you have a book of poetry called *Conjure*? What is it? Where did it come from? Do you--"

REED: "Well, I got the idea of *Conjure*-- now *conjure up* is kind of like a transient verb, or a compound transient verb. But 'conjure' was used as a noun by Zora Neale Hurston in a book called *Hoodoo in America*, and I think Zora Neale Hurston, though neglected, is probably the best writer of the 1920's. And she did all the-- she was an Anthropologist and she went to New Orleans and these places and dug certain stuff up. And when I say *conjure*, I mean we're bringing up new spirits, new lords, new forms, and we're bringing back old art forums, which were buried like Frankenstein, you know, in the ice. Not to say I'm Dr. Frankenstein or anything like that, but you try to bring back new information. Like I think Eliot said, in *The Lost Treasure*, poets looking for the buried treasure, and I think Hoodoo is probably our buried treasure. And now, a lot of scholars, since we've begun it, working on it, some painters and I, and

lot of scholars, African American scholars are digging it up. And they will probably be the ones who put it all together, like you put together a dinosaur from some bones you find, reconstruct the whole thing.”

VENICK: “What are the [inaudible] for the 70's? We were talking before –”

REED: “Streaking?”

REED: “When is streaking mean as a [inaudible]?”

REED: “Well, it's one of these epidemics that occurs throughout American History, psychic epidemics. There was a book called *Wisconsin Death Trip*, you'll find that that was really spooky at that time. You have ghosts and visions, people having visions, and people being locked up, and all kinds of supernatural occurrences in Wisconsin. Now, my research is on New Orleans, same thing was happening there, so apparently in the 19th century, there was some kind of psychic epidemic happening in the United States, and it happens from time to time. You have these apocalyptic periods, like in the 60's were everybody thinks it's the end of the world. Or being more sophisticated in the 60's, they were saying well revolution. But it's based upon the old idea of apocalypse that you get in Europe quite often, that some great new cataclysm is going to occur.”

RUBIN: “Didn't happen?”

REED: “I don't think it ever happens. I think that-- I think that Christ contemporaries expected him to return within their lifetime, and you know, this is a Christian civilization, so Christian bookends with the apocalypse, you know, with fire next time.”

VENICK: “You don't get a wasteland in Neo Hoodoo land.”

REED: “No, Hoodoo is always changing, and it's always adapting. And it's always-- it's like-- It reminds me of the early white religions, which were very similar to Hoodoo. You know, if I talk about-- see I can trace hoodoo all the back to Africa, to Egypt. And Nietzsche starts talking about the unknown god, in German Mythology, in the 19 century. Talking about some lost god returning. I think Volton [assumed spelling], and some of the African lords have a lot in common. You have to understand, it took the Christian church 1500 years to wipe out, so called pagan religion. And in certain parts of Europe, you go to Lithuania-- somebody wrote me a letter saying that he was in Lithuania recently, and everybody has a Christian name as well as a pagan name. So they really had to stamp it out through force, and since it's so uncool to stamp it with force anymore, they do propaganda films, like *The Exorcist*. Scare the hell out of everybody. Because people leave the Christian church in droves. I don't want to get into discussion, because we're very tolerant. Because like when Augustus, for example, now this is the way Hoodoo works. When Augustus heard that there was a new god, Jehovah, he said, well let's put him in the palace, we'll worship him too, who cares, the more the merrier. That's how we are.”

RUBIN: “He wasn't into the religious trip.”

REED: “Yeah, that's the way we are, just, any amount of spirits, any amount of art forms, we're very tolerant.”

RUBIN: “You talk about going back in the past. Why are the 20's so important to you?”

REED: “Because I think the 1920's gives a good-- you can-- there's a lot of parallels between the 20's. I find all the parallels between the 1920's and the 1960's that were useful to me. For example, there was

a renaissance of black writing in the 1920's they had that here. There was a government scandal. And this was before Watergate, but I had to have Harding since I was writing about the 20's, but it just so happens that I was just supposing certain pictures with the texts, and I just luckily happened to get one of all the Watergate conspirators on the balcony, looking at a Mayday demonstration."

RUBIN: "Each of them look so guilty."

REED: "Yeah I know, I had Mitchell, Kleindienst, John Dean, LaRue, all of them were on a balcony, and I just put that in there. I used it as a background to a text about Warren Harding, who was more interesting, incidentally. I mean, Warren Harding was a libertine, you know, and as Ann Roosevelt said, if you went up to one of his rooms in the White House, you might have found his mistress, or liquor bottles left, and the poker cards. You know, at least the guy was human. But there was also, for example, I work on Egyptology, in the Mumbo Jumbo, and there was some of the most important finds were made in the 20's. Excavation in the 20's. So, I listed all a parallel between the 20's and the 60's."

VENICK: "And you said the 70's are going to be a hard-hearted decade."

REED: "Well, for the omens. You know, I'm reading the omens, just like a classical poet. A Latin poet reading the omens. You know. Beware the Ides of March."

RUBIN: "What does that mean for us?"

REED: "Or certain birds flying in formation would be an omen to the Latins."

RUBIN: "What implication is that?"

REED: "I have no idea, we'll have to see how it works out. But that's the way prophecy works, and I think prophecy is still a force in poetry. And I think that should be a government bureau, prophecy. Maybe we'd avoid some of these disasters we see in the political sphere, you know what I'm talking about."

RUBIN: "Yeah, and you're running your own bureau of prophecy in here."

REED: "Maybe so, maybe so, but I'm the nicest guy to get along with in town, you'll see. I'm not very belligerent about it or anything."

VENICK: "The books you've said you considered detective novels and westerns to be some of the best literature in America someplace."

REED: "I thought that when I was writing... I was searching for The American Soul, and I thought it was very significant that for example, you have so many ranch style homes in America. Like I'm flying through Chicago last week and I saw all these ranch style homes, and people like westerns. And I'm living in Berkeley, which is an old cowboy town, it may look hip to the East, but it's a very conservative old west town. And if you look at some of the period photographs like photos of certain streets, and they-- even now, look at Telegraph Avenue. You'll see this [inaudible] riding down the street, and all the stuff that's projected to the Nation, is just a few blocks, where the trashing takes place, these trashing sprees. But when I wrote Yellow Back, I thought maybe this was the index to the soul of America, the western. But now I'm beginning to think that maybe the forum that represents the United States best is a small town novel. And that's why I'm thinking maybe Sherwin Anderson, Thornton Wilder, these people were closer to the truth than New York writers, who write about experiences that, you know, most people in the United States can't relate to."

VENICK: "You also have a thing with cross cultural reference, which I find kind of interesting. In the little section I read of Louisiana Red, there was Amos and Andy."

REED: "Mm-hm. Antigone."

VENICK: "You're able to make a whole ingenious group..."

REED: "Painters used to call it a collage. Painters would do that, they'd get dispirit material from-- I mean material from dispirit sources and give them to a unity, a coherence, and that's what I'm trying to do. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't work."

RUBIN: "Mumbo Jumbo could really be called a novel of collage."

REED: "Uh-huh."

RUBIN: "Novel. And everything is important in it. The type, the sources, the languages, the pictures. What about those-- all the visual material, did you select everything?"

REED: "I just-- I would go around and collect pictures of clip 'em out of newspapers, and over a three or four year period, I was able to collect all these interesting photographs, and some were useful to Mumbo and I was able to use in Mumbo Jumbo."

RUBIN: "I wonder if you'd like to read a section from the novel?"

REED: "Mumbo Jumbo?"

RUBIN: "Yeah."

REED: "Oh sure."

RUBIN: "If you'd like to read."

REED: "Oh yeah, I'll read the first—"

REED: "Okay fine."

REED: "Chapter. I want to read...There's a section in here that goes for about a page and a half, and Chapter 24-- And the Jes Grew crisis is taking over America, and everybody is dancing in the streets. And so they called in the government to stamp it out, and to-- and Harding is reluctant you see, because I'm using the theory that's been promulgated that Harding was a black man, was a Negro. And you might be interested to know that when the Republican Party heard rumors that Harding was Negro, they approached him, and said well this is going to ruin us. And they said, well are you a Negro? And Harding said, well I don't know, one of my ancestors might have jumped across the fence back there somewhere. And so what happens is that Harding's [inaudible] Jes Grew, 'cause you know, he's Afro blood. And so they're trying to stamp out this crisis where everybody's dancing, and singing, and all on the streets, and it was all over the country, and the government breaks down. And so they consult Irene Castle, the woman who introduced Jazz to Park Avenue in the 20's, and they accept her suggestions. So this is Chapter 24."

After Meeting with top aids, Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty faces the newsreel, cameras, and microphones. He reads recommendations in a bill to be sent to Kongress, spelled with a k. Away of allay

the Jes Grew crisis, which threatens our national security, survival, and just about everything else you can think of. He adopts a plan, based upon the ideas of Irene Castle, the woman who in 1915, inspired a generation of young women to cast aside their corsets and petticoats. He delivers a plague edict, pelvis and feets controls. One, do not wiggle the shoulders. Two, do not shake the hips. Three, do not twist the body. Four, do not flounce the elbows. Five, do not pump the arms. Six, do not hop, glide instead. Seven, drop the turkey trot, the grizzly bear, the bunny hug, etc. These dances are ugly, ungraceful and out of fashion. From the bedroom of the Whitehouse, where he sits sipping whiskey, Warren Harding glares down at his Attorney General, a mere mason, he is helpless to prevent what is about to take place. Raids on Washington's speakeasies take place until dawn. No dancing signs, of huge black letters with exclamation points posted throughout the city. Anybody caught doing it, doing it, doing it, is a federal crime. It has been a busy day for reporters following Jes Grew. The morning began with Dr. Lee Deforest [assumed spelling], inventor of the three element vacuum tube, which helped make big time radio possible. Collapsing before a crowded press room, after he pleaded concerning his invention, now when the grips of Jes Grew, quote, "What have you done to my child? You have sent him out on the street in rags of ragtime to collect money from all in sundry. You have made him a laughingstock of intelligence. Surely a stench in the nostrils of the gods of the ionosphere".

RUBIN: "It's just very funny, the way that so much of *Mumbo Jumbo* is. And Jes Grew, your anti-plague comes back. They don't really stamp it out right?"

REED: "Yeah, right."

RUBIN: "They think they've got it, but the text has been—"

REED: "The text is brought to America by a Knight's Templar named Hinkle Von Vampton, and who was learned to cheat death by an old Arabic formula. And what happened is, he stored the book in the basement of a cotton club, and this uptight guy named Abdul Sufi Hamid is the only guy who was able to translate. And it falls into his hands because-- and he's the only one that's able to translate, but when he finds out the way the Egyptians really practice their rights, which are very-- well they aren't very squeamish, but very sensual rights, he's uptight so he burns it."

VENICK: "He says lewd in—"

REED: "Right, so he burns it. So without the text, the epidemic dissipates."

RUBIN: "The important thing-- one thing about that book is the importance of the text. What is the importance of the text, for the manifestation of the—"

REED: "Well, because I think in ancient African American times, words were considered to be Holy, or amulets. And so in order to put the old art form together, you have to have the words, as well as the dance, you see. And the other rights, or else it's like incomplete. And so if you have the certain rights, yearning for completion, for the text, and they try to meet up with the text. That's why the dance epidemic heads for New York, that's where the book is, but when he burns the book, that's the end of the crisis."

VENICK: "Look at all of those people, explaining it to the Poppa Laba, standing in front of the University. I like how you show that, it was kind of like he's a funny old man. This is a funny old man from New Orleans, he's cute."

REED: "Yeah, the epilogue, yeah. I bring Laba back, actually Laba is ageless. And in my new novel, in the old days, 19 century, slavery. A lot of blacks didn't know when they born, they didn't have any dates, and so they would say, I was born in sweet potato planting time, or I was born in hog butchering time. You know, they saw time in terms of what was happening in the farm culture. And so Laba doesn't even know how old he is, and so in the new novel, Laba is 70, but he just takes the name 70 because it's a play on the decade. And he solves a mystery in Berkeley, California, of all places. Last days of Louisiana Red, the new book that's coming out from Random House, in October. I'm continuing Laba. This is-- now that's conjured you see, because Laba kind of represents the past, our past, and our heritage. And this kind of figure was seen as an Uncle Tom in the 60's, but now we're seeing Laba as a wise man. And in Brazil-- in Brazilian religion, they have a figure named, The Black Man, the old black slave. And people who get possessed by the old black slave, there's certain things you have to do, you smoke a cigar, and you walk like an old man. And the old black slave of Brazilian religion represents the collective unconscious of all the slaves who died in the crossing, from Africa to here?"

RUBIN: "So like Railroad Bill? Thar sort of—"

REED: "Yeah, that kind of figure. And so we see this old wise man, and heritage rising in the 70's, so I say, well, conjure, because all the sudden you see this figure in literature, and you see it in art, maybe. And I think one thing I've done-- I've been able to do through my research on Neo Hoodooism, is that a lot of young kids are talking to their grandparents now. A lot of young black kids are talking to their grandparents, and their going through their trunks, their family trunks, and all this kind of thing. Because in the 60's, they were very-- people were very future oriented, because the basis of a lot of the politics that were-- you know, that we were exposed to, were Marxist, which is future oriented. Future, well you know, it seems to think that everything's in the future, everything's for the future."

VENICK: "What do you think of the nostalgia kick?"

REED: "Well, they call Mumbo Jumbo nostalgic, but I think that's-- people call, if somebody goes back to the 20's, the Civil War someplace, to get material for his work, and he lives in his country, that's called nostalgia, but if I went back to Upstairs Downstairs, like you see on public educational television, or if I went back to Kinder Clark's time, they don't call that nostalgia, they call that civilization. And I think the reason these people called it nostalgia, these people in New York called it nostalgia, because they really yearn to be in another country, or they yearn to be someplace else. That's why I get Turgenev, I don't say Turgenev and these guys are not great novelists, but I hear a lot of Turgenev, and Dostoevsky, and Kafka, and all these great names bandied about in New York City, but when we have our great writers in this civilization. So I think the people who say you're using the-- the material that-- you're using this because you're nostalgic, are just people who have contempt for the American past, and don't think it's worthy of being treated as a serious art, or being useful for serious art. But see a person like me, who's had a lot of ancestors, and you know, White, Cherokee, Black, buried in this country, I have a different opinion about it. If I can go back five generations, I'm really a classical American, because my people are buried here, and I can go walk around their tombs, and look at their pictures, and scrapbooks and things like that. I have a different feeling about-- this is all I know. I don't know anyone in France and—"

RUBIN: "Who are some of our important writers that we—"

REED: "There are a lot of them, there are so many, you really can't keep track of them. But I like a lot of good writers. I think, we're doing a publication in the West Coast called Yard Bird Reader. And we're the

first ones to print Asian American writers, because nobody took them seriously. And we find that we have a lot in common, like people grew up in black neighborhoods, or white neighborhoods. And they really knew this country, and we're very interested in their work. And a lot of other good writers, lot of good Afro-American writers, and others that I read. I read a lot of stuff though, I read newspapers, and novels, and nonfiction, and all that, poetry."

VENICK: "In your Anthology, you talked about exclusionary-- White anthologies, we were talking about consciousness, but do you think that's still the thing?"

REED: "Well, I think the ideal situation would be-- like I was in a-- I come from the West coast where you see more people, and more groups, races than you do in the east coast. I was in a-- we had a reading in Seattle, Washington on April 12th. And the Shoshone Indians were there, and the Cherokee Indians were there in their dress, their costume, and there were Chicano Americans, and Puerto Rican Americans, and White Americans, and nobody said a harsh word to anybody all night. It was like, you know, people brought their kids, and things like that. I think that's the ideal situation, because people are really teaching one culture like they are now, at the Universities, Chaucer to what..."

VENICK: "Whatever."

REED: "Yeah. That'll be the ethic studies in ten years, they'll be out there in the shacks, and maybe the University will be a global place where anybody wants to get any kind of experience they want. That's kind of where we're moving towards, ideally, it looks that way."

RUBIN: "You see this change in Universities now."

REED: "Oh yeah, sure, sure. So I think that that's a-- that's-- that may be where the culture is heading."

RUBIN: "Is a poet a teacher?"

REED: "UH—"

RUBIN: "Are you a teacher when you write?"

REED: "I don't know, I taught school at a couple colleges, I'm going to be teaching again in the fall. But I'll be teaching writing, and I think-- yeah I think so. I think you can, if you practice enough stuff, write a lot of books, and write millions of words, you pick up certain useful habits. And that's the best way you can-- you can't do anything without talent. I don't know how you can teach somebody talent—"

VENICK: "Didn't that image where—"

REED: "But you can save them a lot of time."

VENICK: "When you write, do you-- some poets have this feeling like a great past, like the Greek sort of poet--"

REED: "I don't, I don't, I'm becoming more of a casual, like you know, hard-hearted decade, I know that's a cliché, but in the context in which I'm using it, it works. You become less rigid. If you're thinking about, I'm going to be Rambo, or somebody all the time, where you have-- that can cripple somebody, that can frustrate you. But I think-- like when I was in school people said it was not a good idea to rhyme. Don't rhyme, don't do any sing song kind of rhyme stuff, and they said, oh be sophisticated. So, I'm beginning

to rhyme again, who cares, you know? I enjoy it, and sometimes other people like it. Like I have a poem called 35, that everybody who is who's 35 years old can identify with."

RUBIN: "I want to read that."

VENICK: "I think someone can tell an Ishmael Reed poem when they read it."

REED: "I think so. It's usually cranky and-- yeah sure. This is called, The Author Reflects on his 35th Birthday.

35? I have been looking forward

To you for many years now

So much so that

I feel you and I are old

Friends and so on this day, 35

I propose a toast to

Me and You

35? From this day on

I swear before the bountiful

Osiris that

If I ever

If I EVER

Try to bring out the

Best in folks again I

Want somebody to take me

Outside and kick me up and

Down the sidewalk or

Sit me in a corner with a

Funnel on my head

Make me as hard as a rock

35, like the fellow in

The story about the

Big one that got away

Let me laugh my head off

With Moby Dick as we reminisce

About them suckers who went

Down with the Pequod

35? I ain't been mean enough

Make me real real mean

Mean as old Marie rolling her eyes

Mean as the town Bessie sings about

"Where all the birds sing bass"

35? Make me Tennessee mean

Cobra mean

Cuckoo mean

Injun mean
Dracula mean
Beethovenian-brows mean
Miles Davis mean
Don't-offer-assistance-when
Quicksand-is-tugging-some-poor
Dope-under-mean
Pawnbroker mean
Pharaoh mean
That's it, 35
Make me Pharaoh mean
Mean as can be
Mean as the dickens
Meaner than mean

When I walk down the street
I want them to whisper
There goes Mr. Mean
"He's double mean
He even turned the skeletons
In his closet out into
The cold"

And 35?
Don't let me trust anybody
Over Reed but
Just in case
Put a tail on that
Negro too

This guy doesn't trust himself."

RUBIN: "What is this from the book Chattanooga. What do you see is the difference in your poetry in that book? What's Chattanooga a metaphor as? We explored conjure--"

REED: "Yeah, Chattanooga was seed of a Cherokee nation. I have a lot of Cherokee relatives, as a matter of fact, when I was younger I was taking care of by a Cherokee woman for a year. And Chattanooga's Cherokee's word means the top of the mountain, the summit of Lookout Mountain. And Lookout Mountain is also a scene of one of the most important battles of the Civil War, called The Battle Above the Clouds, which was a turning point in the Civil War. And there a lot of place names that are dear to me, and it's autobiographical. And the title poem, Chattanooga, I wrote when I really began to think about place. I think what you do is you leave your home town, you leave your origin, and you go out and you-- you go out into the world, and you have a lot of experience, and then suddenly when you're my age, you start thinking about origin. You know what I mean? And I was feeling-- I was feeling-- I was thinking about when I was a kid, lived in back-- in front of the Tennessee River. Tennessee River was down a path from where we were living. And I remember the most gorgeous sunsets that you ever want to see. And I could see Lookout Mountain from my backyard when I was a kid, and saw these and I was

thinking about all my relatives, who are all, the people who took care of me, who are all dead now, and that was like a sentimental poem.”

RUBIN: “Could I ask you, we're running out of time, but, just ask you to read this poem in conclusion here?”

REED: “This poem is called, Beware Do Not Read This Poem. Which guarantees the reader will read it, see? And I grabbed this off the tube too, because I don't think you have to go to any esoteric places to find images for poetry.

tonite, thriller was
about an old woman, so vain she
surrounded herself with

many mirrors

it got so bad that finally she
locked herself indoors & her
whole life became the

mirrors

one day the villagers broke
into her house, but she was too
swift for them. she disappeared

into a mirror
each tenant who bought the house
after that, lost a loved one to
the old woman in the mirror:
first a little girl
then a young woman
then the young woman's husband

the hunger of this poem is legendary
it has taken in many victims
back off from this poem
it has drawn in your feet
back off from this poem
it has drawn in your legs

back off from this poem
it is a greedy mirror
you are into this poem. from

the waist down
nobody can hear you can they?
this poem has had you up to here

belch

this poem aint got no manners
you cant call out from this poem
relax now & go with this poem

move & roll on to this poem
do not resist this poem
this poem has your eyes
this poem has his head
this poem has his arms
this poem has his fingers
this poem has his fingertips

this poem is the reader & the
reader this poem

statistic: the US bureau of missing persons re-
ports that in 1968 over 100,000 people
disappeared leaving no solid clues
nor trace only
a space in the lives of their friends”

RUBIN: “Thank you.”

REED: “Sure.”

REED: “That's very uh—”

[Music]