

## Detective Techniques Used In Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* And *Reckless Eyeballing*

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In viewing the peripheral world of wild and black folk culture as a passive spectator of a thematic that does not touch the modernity, rather than as a constitutive moment of modernity. African American writer views the crises of modernity and the subsequent post modern critique solely within the white European – North American moment. Wild, black folk culture and the periphery are the other face, the alterity, essential to modernity. Ishmael Reed's novels are modern paradigm and assume planetary post modernism.

In his novels, Ishmael Reed uses Jazz age and Harlem Renaissance to undermine instrumental reason and to show how the novel and Western metaphysics are constructs, and thus why certain issues of heterogeneity, difference, and fluidity and the critique of closure linearity and absolute truth do not belong exclusively to a European-centered post modernism. But, unlike other African American writer, Ishmael Reed uses Jazz and other African American cultural symbols more visibly in the novels. The novels begin like a film: the action starts *in medias res*, like a detective story, before the title page. Only after the initial reports of the spontaneous epidemic one can get the title, publisher, date, epigraph and dedications. Then, like a film, it returns to the story.

This paper analyses the technique of detective stories, in the linear form of narrative and intertextuality and also focuses how it resembles a typical dime-store detective novel or television movie and the adherence to a singular truth supported by the Western detective story. Ishmael Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* writes a detective story that shows it as a linguistic invention. The novel dramatises the direct confrontation between European and African Centric thought and culture. As the novel opens, there has erupted what Ishmael Reed, signifying on Harriet Beecher Stowe, calls a 'Jes Grew' epidemic, which he associates, specifically, with African religious practice and dance. Jes Grew, writes Ishmael Reed, is "an anti-plague" which enlivens the host; it is as electric as life and is characterised by ebullience and ecstasy. Establishing, from the outset, the schism between Western and African sensibilities and recalling Loop Garoo's Innocent VIII, Ishmael Reed adds that terrible plagues are due to the wrath of the Christian God; but Jes Grew is the delight of the African gods.

From one side march the protectors of the great Western way-Ishmael Reed calls them the "Wallflower Order," and links them with the Knights Templar. The Order, in turn, is described as being a part of the "Atonist Path" (ADIC 4) - after the Egyptian King Akhenaton, a sun worshipper who, like Blake's Urizev, or Saint Paul, attempted to establish The One Law, ending polytheistic worship and effectively severing human ties with the natural world in a variety. The Order's twentieth-century goal is the same as it has been historically: to stamp out native religions and their texts. In this case, the ancient, lost Book of Thoth, which one can learn, has surfaced after centuries of absence.

Opposing the Atonists is LaBas, who unlike his antagonists, is a pluralist, and a player, like the Egyptian mythological figure Osiris, whom Ishmael Reed discusses in the long fifty second chapter of *Mumbo Jumbo*. The climax of the novel embodies an exquisite parody of the traditional detective novel's scene of confrontation and disclosure. LaBas gathers together the book's living principles in Villa LeWaro and

proceeds to explain the Atonists' active role in the suppression of Jes Grew's Text. He tells, as well, of the reason for Jes Grew's recent eruption:

The Text got out, falling into the hands of a Black Muslim named Abdul Sufi Hamid, who rendered its Egyptian hieroglyphics into English with the idea of publishing it. (ADIC 4)

Harold was found out by the Atonists, who killed him yet failed to recover the Text, the Book of Thoth. LaBas, on the other hand, seems to have done so, locating the Book's jewelled holder – only to discover, in a moment of counter – epiphany that the case is empty, the Book of Thoth having presumably been burned by the prudish Hamid, who felt that the Book depicted rites which were “nasty and lewd decadent” (MJ 231). Meanwhile, Hamid's translation, spurned by an indifferent publisher, has become a casualty of the postal system. With the written text of Jes Grew gone, its manifestations once more recede. But as LaBas explains to his assistant, there is no need for alarm, since Jes Grew's true text is not a book but a feeling or perhaps more precisely a state of mind and being. LaBas tells Earline once that Jes Grew has no end and no beginning. Ultimately, Jes Grew is the music of Charlie Parker, the ‘second line’ in a New Orleans funeral procession, the African American literary tradition.

The novel is interlaced with a plethora of pictorial and textual elements borrowed from external, and in many cases nonbellettristic, sources. There are photos, posters, and drawings; dictionary definitions, anagrams, and epigraphs; symbols, graphs, and newspaper clippings. And at the book's end there appears a hundred and four-item bibliography drawn from such diverse disciplines as psychology, history, dance, religion, mythology, music, economics and the life sciences.

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Ishmael Reed signifies on the disclosure of truth pattern of detective fiction, in the process of undermining the notion that truth is just one thing-or anything. For, Ishmael Reed, truth, as a character states at the end of his novel, *Flight to Canada*, is “a state of mind” (MJ 178). It can be experienced, felt, but not confined in a single form or shape. The way of singularity is the way of the Atonist Path. It is the way of western thought and culture and the way of the traditional detective novel, in which the one or ones who done it are exposed. The African way however recognises plurality, multiplicity, and indeterminacy. The novel actually has a legitimate detective in LaBas, and there is an actual pursuit of the crime. But Ishmael Reed does not let the form confine him. When LaBas opens the box supposedly containing the text, he finds only “a Sycamore box and under the sycamore, me bony, and under this ivory, then silver and finally gold and then empty” (MJ 196).

Science fiction is a genre of fiction. It differs from fantasy in that, within the context of the story, its imaginary elements are largely possible within scientifically established or scientifically postulated laws of nature (though some elements in a story might still be pure imaginative speculation). Exploring the consequences of such differences is the traditional purpose of science fiction, making it a literature of ideas. It is largely based on writing rationally about alternative possibilities. The settings for science fiction are often contrary to known reality, but the majority of science fiction relies on a considerable degree of suspension of disbelief provided by potential scientific explanations to various fictional elements.

To take, diverse or disparate elements and give “them same kind of organic unity, to make a collage”, Ishmael Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* mixes romance, New Orleans jazz, necromancy, Voodoo theories of history, American civilisation, Western history, movie techniques, black dance, a science fiction story and a fantasy tale with the detective story.

The reader does not know whether *Mumbo Jumbo* is a novel, a history book, a spell, or a Voodoo narrative. In his words, the novel has all kinds of techniques. There are some passages which do what painters do, using peripheral information to explain an event, meshing the factual and the imaginative.

The novel tells the reader that sixty-one lynchings occurred in 1920 alone, that sixty-two occurred, in 1921, and that “some of the victims were soldiers returning from the Great war ...after fighting and winning significant victories” (MJ 30), he is referring to historical facts, or at least to something that can be verified in the annals of history. On the other hand, he mixes these verifiable historical figures and events with a kind of alternate mythical history in a detective way. The story of Jes Grew develops simultaneously with the story of Buddy Jackson. The reader witnesses the effects of Jes Grew before he is informed of its first trace and dispersed improvisational throughout the novel are photographs of people dancing, marching, singing, and being alive – obviously as signifiers of Jes Grew. This placing of photographs, along with drawings, anagrams, graphics, dictionary definitions, and newspaper clippings throughout the text, functions not to illustrate scenes from the plot, as in a traditional novel, but to reinforce visually certain messages, feelings, ways of defining the world, and images.

These appropriated, improvisational placed modes, breaking the linear flow of the detective story, to undermine the very notion of linearity and the idea of an absolute, total history. They signify other forms of narrative that are excluded by the linear one. In exposing the Atonist’s strategies of exclusion and repression, Ishmael Reed in the novel shows that Western civilisation is not natural, not a metaphysical certainty, but makes together. Finally, by undermining closure or mastery through interpretation and mastery through interpretation and language, he plays with linguistic one that becomes fundamental to the text through the pervasive signifiers of Jes Grew.

Jes Grew is at the core of the novel; it is impetus, it is *raison d’être*, it is organisational common denominator, but Ishmael Reed withholds Jes Grew. As much as a modern reader may desire a referent for Jes Grew and as easily as he may believe he has uncovered it, the text does not have one. “Jes Grew cannot be summed up in the simplicity of the present” (MJ 66). Jes Grew traces in jazz, ragtime, the store fronts, the band on the Apollo stage, the blues, and the Creole band. It is never mastered in the text through interpretation and language, Jes Grew is never successfully labelled and classified. Like a jazz composition, which has not final chord, *Mumbo Jumbo* as a text is never final.

Without a beginning and an end, the novel is both jazz and postmodern. Both operate from notions of indeterminacy, fluidity, and incompleteness. Without origin, the novel is much like a bebop composition, in which the end often mimics the beginning. This follows the pattern such as: two horns, trumpet, and saxophone, announced the theme in unison. Ishmael Reed’s novel remarks, agitates, and refuses to conform to the desired of many readers. It holds Jes Grew “in preserve and refuses to give it” (MJ 358) to them. Looking at Jes Grew as a jazz bebop number, *Mumbo Jumbo’s* inconclusive ending has a type of tradition in jazz composition. But the inconclusive ending can also be interpreted postmodern. Jes Grew’s absence of a referent is the postmodern.

Throughout the novel Jes Grew is associated with black expressive cultures such as voodoo, jazz, and blues and as such seems to function like the blues which according to Houston A Baker, comprises a meditational site where familiar antinomies are resolved in the office of adequate cultural understanding. To compare Ishmael Reed to other postmodernist fiction writers, Ishmael Reed challenges society with the racialised,

marginalised and subaltern subject. The way Ishmael Reed presents Voodoo in *Mumbo Jumbo* is less as a religious orthodoxy with rigid rules, norms, and conventions than a way of living in the world that values flexibility, adaptability, heterogeneity, mystery, and individual creativity. In the novel, Ishmael Reed wants to preserve the power and the value of individual differences. He wants to acknowledge discontinuous African American experiences:

Individuality. It could not be herded, rounded-up; it was like crystals of winter each different from one another but in a storm going down together. What would happen if they dispersed, showing up when you least expected them; what would happen if you could not predict their minds?. (MJ 140)

Ishmael Reed also shows that there is difference, subjectively, and agency within Atonism, and Voodooism. It is clear from the beginning of *Mumbo Jumbo* that he constructs a clear binary in fact, he seems to construct the typical Western binary of exclusion, here between the Atonists, on the one hand, and the followers of Jes Grew – LaBas, Berbelang, and Black Herman - on the other. But even with this most basic binary appearing to emerge from the *Mumbo Jumbo*, Ishmael Reed finds ways to undermine it.

The technique of the novel is hard to follow like James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It is a celebration of idiom and an eclectic collection of cultural myth. Ishmael Reed mixes the technique of detective stories, Voodoo, and academic burlesque, providing unexpected visuals, news stories, history and stream-of-consciousness technique. The novel subverts the readers' expectations for the typical story. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr, notes, the plot of the novel signifies on the typical detective shown formula in which a goal must be reached: Jes Grew's desire would be actualised only by finding the text. The novel's parodic use of the presented story stated this desire. The solution of the novel's "central mystery would be for Jes Grew to find its text" (MJ 18). However, Jes Grew does not only find the text, but it does so without fanfare. And, despite the detective action, it sometimes seems like a dream. The novel seems to stop being a detective story and turns out to have been an academic lecture. It has been largely over looked by academic critics. His brilliant comic vision of American history brings together the basic ingredients of black culture in a rich musical- dramatic form.

His expansion of language into a radically personal style points to the richness of that culture as a story telling source. His wide interests in traditions outside the received mainstream of "Western Culture" courses, in magic, myth and ritual makes him a prolific writer in the novel. He expands on the Neo-hoodooism of the Loop Garoo Kid, in an effort to create and define an African American aesthetic. It is based on Voodoo, Egyptian mythology, and improvisational musical forms, an aesthetic that can stand up against the Judeo-Christian tradition, rationalism, and technology.

The novel's title is double-edged. It is a racist, colonialist phrase used to describe the misunderstood customs and language of dark-skinned people, an approximation of some critics' description of Ishmael Reed's unorthodox fictional method. But it also refers to the power of imagination, the cultural alternative that can free African Americans. A text of and about texts, it combines the formulas of detective fiction with the documentary paraphernalia scholarship: footnotes, illustrations, and a bibliography.

The detective story's attention to space reflects a larger preoccupation with spatial matters on the part of the Enlightenment – based cultural logic out of which the detective story was born. As David Harvey argues, along with the Enlightenment consciousness's impulse to solve, the conquest and rational ordering of space are an integral part of the

modernising project. It is created a new organisation of space dedicated to the detective techniques of social control, surveillance, repression of the self and the world of desire.

These are, of course, the very techniques employed by the detective in his efforts to maintain the social fabric, meaning the detective both relies upon what Deleuze and Guattari term the striating logic of Western science and also - particularly in his surveillance of the city perpetuates that logic by rationally ordering the spaces he observes. In Lefebvre's comments regarding the link between space and subjectivity, the classic detective can, in fact, be seen as the specialised subject par excellence in that his primary function is to restore order, to put everything and everyone back in its ideologically designated place or space.

In Ishmael Reed's method, Jes Grew represents that spiritual part of his writing technique and intent which is positive. It may take on any number of stylistic, guises, but its intent is to illuminate and enliven the reader. In the course of the novel, Islam and Christianity are taken to task for their failings and their infringements on the ego and individual expression. Again, one can easily see here Ishmael Reed responding to his critics under the guise of LaBas. Christianity is called 'Atonism', a word with its origin in the worship of the one, true sun-god, Aton of ancient Egypt. Atonists are forever at war to stamp out Jes Grew, as it threatens their way of doing things and their base of power. Variations of Atonism in the United States, including the Mormons and the Nation of Islam, are attacked vigorously. And one sees in the word Atonism the cognate of the word atone, another negative aspect of a guilt culture.

Abdul Hamid, the Muslim character, is trying to convince others that the way to black solidarity and prosperity is through the promotion of one religious platform; in this case, a platform composed of the belief in Allah and Islam. In the course of his diatribe, he shows how flimsy a base a religion can be constructed upon and the total lack of importance as to the shallowness of that base to its believers. The only important thing is winning through one's belief: and in American terms, winning means translating one's beliefs into money, land, and power in a detective story. Hamid says:

If we Blacks came up with something as corny as the Angel of Moroni, something as trite and phony as their story that the book is the record of ancient Americans who came here in 600 B.C. and perished by A.D. 400, they would deride us with pejorative adjectival phrases like 'so-called' and 'would-be'. (MJ 42)

Ironically, later Hamid's own monotheistic religious views which prompt him to burn the ancient scroll of Thoth, the text Jes Grew had been searching for since it became jots after being placed in a tabernacle by Moses. The Atonist order does not simply war against non-whites and non-Christians. It is equally intolerant of whites who are not following the Atonist path. Ishmael Reed asserts that the Knights Templar, one of the military, Christian orders during the crusaders, was slaughtered by the Teutonic Knights because the Templars had attained too much power and are threatening the Atonist hierarchy.

Here, again, one sees the use of one of the novel's major stylistic tropes: the use of facts the historical existence of the Teutonic's and the Templars to further fictional ends the demise of the Templars. Thor Wintergreen, a white member of the Mu'tafikah, a multi-ethnic gang which liberates Third World countries art from Western museums, is killed by another white. Biff Muscle white, head of the 'Center for Art Detention' in New York Wintergreen is audacious enough to side with those of different ethnic backgrounds. By giving an explanation of the Atonist cause and showing the danger to

that cause by blacks like the smart and stubborn Berbelang (formerly LaBas's assistant), Muscle White gets Wintergreen to free him from where the Mu'tefikah have him imprisoned:

Son, this is a nigger closing in on our mysteries and soon he will be asking our civilisation to "come quietly." This man is talking about Judeo-Christian culture, Christianity, Atonism, whatever you want to call it. The most note worthy achievements of anybody anywhere in the ... the...whole universe. (MJ 114)

So it is a battle for supremacy between powers which see the world in two distinct and opposed, ways. The separate visions are endemic to the two human types involved; one, expansive and synergetic; the other, impermeable and myopic. Ishmael Reed's battle with the critics surfaces in the polemics of the Atonish. Von Vampton is searching for a Negro Viewpoint', a black who can write what Von Vampton wants him to say about the black community.

The reader 'feels' [the emotive response to the structure of the text] that all of the catalytic actions in the individual cardinal units are the magically and rhetorically related – because they all seem to have significance to each other, carried by the fact that they all seem to be happening in the same narrative time frame. For example, the end of chapter twelve, a key chapter which includes the 'battle of religions' discussion section with Hamid, and the discussion of LaBas's *Mumbo Jumbo* Cathedral and Hoodoo practices, ends with the denouement of the religious/mystical disagreements between blacks at the Rent party.

In the novel, chapter thirteen begins with no transitional or relational segment and bricks up the story of Earline and BerbeLang, former assistants to LaBas, as they discuss Berbelang's differing and expanding concept of Hoodoo and his relationship to LaBas and the *Mumbo Jumbo* Cathedral. This discussion relates the opening of chapter thirteen to the closing of chapter twelve in similar theme, but uses present tense verbs to anchor chapter thirteen simultaneity. In a comment which relates to both his use to time and his use of fiction-filled news – flashes.

Reed's *Reckless Eyeballing* is not so much a jab as a bludgeon aimed at a corner of the cultural establishment. The novel is really an extended joke with a series of set pieces on feminism, anti-Semitism and militancy. Jokes are a concoction of image, timing and language. One missing piece, a dull stretch, an error of diction, and the whole contraption falls apart to the silence of the crowd. Richard Pryor is a brilliant satirist because of the sharpness of his images and mimicry, the timing of his spiels. Reed has been as funny as Pryor at times but he seems off his game here. His one-liners are lame and "his figure showed him to be losing a private Battle of the Bulge" (CLC 300). The episodes are mainly long, spoken riffs on the particular idiocies of the heater and it is attendant politicians. The feminists, the academic black Marxists are all figures who seem more appropriate to a work of a decade ago.

In some of his earlier work, he had a voice that could be at once giddy and razor-sharp. He had a real voice, distinctive, insulting, wild, a voice that answered to no political or aesthetic dogmatic only to him. *Reckless Eyeballing* however is recklessly casual. An American Journalist, David Remnick opines:

The prose is dull. The worst has happened. Ishmael Reed does not sound special. The ethnic jokes are so dull that they read unintentionally like the diatribes they are supposed to satirise. (CLC 301)

Reed's fiction has always bristled with parables, asides, voodoo rituals, razor blades and spikes enough to vex even the most competent plot summariser. The novel displays the familiar malice and discursiveness. And though it bludgeons several ideologies and individuals – Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry, feminists, New York intellectuals, anti-Semites, neoliberals and the new right among them-its central animus is clear. Reed is angry about what he perceives to be negative characterisations of black men in detective fiction. He is livid about Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, which shows up, Tremonisha Smarts 'Wrong-Headed Man'.

The male character in this novel is Ian Ball, a black playwright who has suffered several flops because of Becky French's sex list. Like Reed himself, Ian finds his chief critics are women who view his works as muddled and sexist, though he thinks of himself as misunderstood, even persecuted. Ian also functions as Reed's attempt to blow a kind of raspberry at certain readers. Ian's fixation on breasts and buttocks is brought to the reader's attention again and again, as is his suspicion that, given the chance, he could seduce his way out of any difference of opinion with a woman.

He is the novel's least damaged black male character only because his contemporaries have been driven to artistic impotence and near madness by feminists'. Through considerable interruption from parallel plots they try to watch the goings-on surrounding the detective novel. The first of Ian's plays in which women keep their clothes on and have strong roles. The only male character is to be the skeleton of a black man who was lynched for raping a white woman with his eyes that is, for eyeballing recklessly. Wanting to remove all doubt of the dead man's guilt, the offended woman has him exhumed and retried.

When Ian's Jewish male director is beaten to death by the audience at an anti-Semitic play, *Reckless Eyeballing* falls under Becky's control. She delegates the directing chores to Tremonisha and diverts funds from the play to a production she hopes that rehabilitate the reputation of Hitler's mistress Eva Braun. Thrown together, Ian and Tremonisha affect a rather lopsided rapprochement. Tremonisha denounces *Wrong-Headed Man* as a pandering piece of finishing school lumpen forced out of her by Becky French. She moves to a sleepy town in California, where she takes good care of her man promises to get fat, have babies and write plays in which the husband and wife live happily ever after.

As if, a second black feminist playwright, the author of *No Good Man*, suffers about with cocaine addiction and recants too, pledging to lay off black men, to write only plays that she can read in Church on Sunday morning and by all means to keep her distance from those horrid white feminists. Ian meanwhile forgives those who have transgressed against him by forbidding their students to write dissertations on his *Oeuvre*, for example and decides, after working with Tremonisha, that the girls are not so bad after all they can change.

If this resolution seems forced - and it does - keep in mind that Reed sometimes views his fiction as a form of Voodoo ritual, a literary gris-gris doll that focuses a psychic fix on anyone he perceives to be an enemy of his tribe. Given this, certain writers might do well to drape the appropriate talismans around their word processors lest they share the fate of their sisters in this novel. In *Reckless Eyeballing*, Reed occasionally produces genuine terror within farce -not at all an easy thing to accomplish. The novel, however, may serve well as incantation or rage or as a literacy gauntlet hurled down, but its symbolism is heavy-handed and the spell suspending disbelief is often broken. Many of the characters are mere effigies tortured on the author's rack and made to issue the

requisite confessions. Moreover, he seems to want his novels to be hard work. A devilishly funny plot line is obscured by arcane asides and sorties on ideological camps he wishes to demolish. Early on in *Reckless Eyeballing*, Larry Mccaffery observes that:

Throughout history when the brothers feel that they're being pushed against the wall, they strike back and when they do strike back it's like a tornado, uprooting, flinging about, and dashing to pieces everything in its path. (CLC 301)

This passage provides a perfect entryway into Reed's novel, for like many other black men, he obviously feels that the brothers' are catching it from all sides and not just from the usual sources of racial bigotry, but from 60s liberals then turned neo-conservatives, from white feminists who propagate the specter of the black men as phallic oppressor and other racial minorities anxious to wrest various monkeys off their own backs but the central betrayers in Reed's new novel are blacks themselves, especially black feminists and artists whom he presents as having sold out and joined the white conspiracy to keep black men in slavery. So, in the novel, his striking back by creating a literary tornado, a book so irreverent and sweeping in its condemnations that its certain to offend just about everyone. *Reckless Eyeballing*, like Reed's other novels, self-consciously appropriates aspects of familiar forms – in this case, the detective formula and the search for selfhood motif-but then demolishes these structures by introducing his own distinctive blend of discontinuity, verbal play and jive talk, and outrageous humor.

The book's plot revolves around Ian Ball, a native Southern playwright who has been sex listed by feminists for his first play. But who has then arrived in New York City with high hopes for a new play, *Reckless Eyeballing* in which, as ball puts it, the women, get all the good parts and best speeches. Ball initially has the support of several powerful allies notably Jewish director Jim Minsk and feminist producer Barbara Sedgwick.

The novel is a satirical narrative that mocks racial and American sexual taboos in the manner of George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) or Chester Himes's *Pintos* (1961). When one young black detective complains of a black woman playwright, "She makes out like we are all wife beaters and child molesters", an older black (male) playwright says:

It's these white women who are carrying on the attack against black men today, because they struck a deal with white man who run the country. You give us women the jobs, the opportunities, and we'll take the heat of you and put it on Mose, it the deal they struck. They have to maneuvered these white boys who run the country, but they have keep the persecution thing up in order to win new followers. (RB 97)

The question is whether Reed has uncovered a rift or a rivalry between black men and black women. His characters compete to have their plays produced. In one scene Ian Ball is in a meeting with the white feminist producer Becky French and her protege, the black feminist playwright Tremonisha Smarts. They are discussing his play *No Good Man*, which he has written according to the feminist line. It should be remembered that "reckless eyeballing", was an expression used in the South to describe a black man's glance- which a white women could accuse him of and get him lynched. He thought of them in the same households all over the Americas while the men are away on long trips to the international centers of the cotton or sugar markets. The secrets they exchanged in the night when there were no men around, during the Civil war in America when the men were in the battle field and the women were in the house. There is something going on



here that made him, a man, an outsider, a spectator, like someone who had stumbled into a country where people talked in sign language and he does not know the signs.

This is among other things, a paranoid update on the theme of the conspiratorial intimacy between Simon Legree and Cassie. Though variously described as a writer in whose work the black picaresque tradition has been extended, as a misogynist or an heir to both Hurston's folk lyricism and Ellison's irony, he is, perhaps because of this, one of the most underrated writers in America. Certainly no other contemporary black writer, male or female, has used the language and beliefs of folk culture so imaginatively, and few have been so stinging about the absurdity of American racism.

Interestingly, *Reckless Eyeballing* is one of the most accessible, even realistic, works. Perhaps this has something to do with the constraints imposed by the subject matter. But it is also very different from other fictions that approach the subject of sexuality and black life works in the naturalistic tradition like Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) or Tames Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962).

Since postmodernism represents a decentered concept of the universe in which individual works are not isolated creations, much of the focus in the study of postmodern literature is on intertextuality: the relationship between one text [a novel for example] and another or one text within the interwoven fabric of literary history. Critics point to this as an indication of postmodernism's lack of originality and reliance on clichés. Intertextuality in postmodern literature can be a reference or parallel to another literary work, an extended discussion of a work, or the adoption of a style. In postmodern literature this commonly manifests as references to fairy tales – as in works by Margaret Atwood, Donald Barthelme, and many other – or in references to popular genres like detective fiction.

An early 20th century example of intertextuality which influenced later postmodernists is "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" by Jorge Luis Borges, a story with significant references to Don Quixote which is also a good example of intertextuality with its references to Medieval romances. Don Quixote is a common reference with postmodernists, for example Kathy Acker's novel *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream*. Another example of intertextuality in postmodernism is John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* which deals with Ebenezer Cooke's poem of the same name. Often intertextuality is more complicated than a single reference to another text.

In Reed's view, *Reckless Eyeballing* is the title of a play by Ian Ball a young black writer, Ball's play *Suzanna*, had won critical acclaim but earned Ball a place on the notorious sexlist maintained by the feminists, who have seized control of the literary journals, publishing houses and theaters. Much of the novel recounts Ball's struggle to restore his literacy career by appeasing the feminists. Hence, the novel resembling the Emmett Till case, recounts the lynching of a black sexual molester, whose corpse is exhumed, tried and judged guilty by his victim and a group of feminists. Getting the play staged, however, is not so simple. When Ball's director, Jim Minsk is murdered by a gang of anti-Semites in a perverse ritual supposedly re-enacting the Leo-Frank case, Ball is left at the mercy of Becky French. French wants to give precedence to a play exonerating Eva Braun, who epitomises women's universal suffering.

Becky moves Ian's play from The Lord Mountbatten, the main stage, [to The Queen Mother, a small annex. With these names, Reed takes a swipe at the Anglophile of United States artists. The name Ian Ball, invoking John Bull, indicates that Reed's protagonist is hardly exempt]. Though, *Reckless Eyeballing* is ultimately receives a successful opening, reader never learn whether Ian's career is restored. The novel's main

subplot involves 'The Flower Phantom', a mysterious figure who punishes certain black women writers for their disparagements of black men by tying them up and shaving their heads, as the French did to women who collaborated with the Nazis.

One of the novel's central issues is whether the Phantom is a misogynistic psychopath on an underground hero. The reader is encouraged to infer the latter. The Phantom's first victim is Tremonisha Smarts, the author of *Wrong Headed Man* a play which climaxes when an ape – like black man beats a woman and hurls her down the stairs. The plot of *Wrong Headed man* brings to mind Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls*, but its movie version by the director and producer of *Little Green Men* links it to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

Indeed, his characters all ultimately emerge as idiosyncratic and distinctive individuals, not merely as representatives of some type. His hostility seems to be directed at the ideology of feminism which, in his view creates victims, distorts history, and denies or thwarts individual desire, enterprises and aspiration. The ideas of female quality, independence, and professional achievement are taken for granted in the novel. Reed's thoroughly comic vision sets him apart from most other contemporary writers who address serious political questions. Since he sees all people as flawed and quirky he pokes fun at everyone to varying degrees. Though he clearly has preferences, he does not claim superiority for any particular group over any other.

The main point of his satire is to deflate such pretensions. He seems willing to forgive people's foibles but not other exploitative designs. Ian Ball, the hero, is clearly an opportunist whose main concern is just to make it as a writer. By the end of the novel, Tremonisha Smarts as a troubled and rather confused but well-meaning writer who has been exploited by white feminists to advance their own designs. Obviously, Reed's caricature of feminism grossly oversimplifies a broad and diverse social movement, equating the whole with one of its minor and meanest elements. His distorted caricature of feminism may outrage many readers, causing them to overlook his valid and unobjectionable point that all individuals deserve to be respected and allowed the opportunity to succeed or fail on their own merits. This formulation lays bare the conservative libertarian underpinning of Reed's social philosophy.

Unfortunately, he also makes the error which characterises most of the contemporary conservative thought. In extolling individual liberty, he forgets that society itself is the organisation of individuals, whose interests both converge and conflict. Society does not exist without organisation. To focus exclusively on individual concerns leads merely to favoring one selfishness over another.

In *Reckless Eyeballing* this philosophical error causes Reed to neglect an essential distinction. The fault is far from Becky French to abuse her position of power, not for her to occupy that position. In spite of this fault, the novel is a fascinating one to read because of its pointed comments on literary politics and its thoroughgoing good humor. Furthermore, despite his strong views and polemical manner, he displays far more generosity of spirit than has generally been recognised. As it winces at his caustic remarks on United States culture, one should also note his/her profound affection for the vitality and diversity of the culture. He raises questions about romantic love, machismo, the dedicated artist, civilisation and slavery as well as racial neutrality in a detective way.

In his novels, he most effectively uses and experiments most freely with the Hoodoo concept of time for the ends of literary method. To conclude, in addition to improving on the detective story, Ishmael Reed challenges the reader through exaggeration

to abandon simplified nationalisation and the notion of an absolute truth. He gives enough facts to make the novels sufficiently plausible that the reader cannot reject it.

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