SELF-REFLEXIVITY AND HISTORICAL REVISIONISM
IN ISHMAEL REED'S NEO-HOODOO AESTHETICS

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Abstract

Throughout his literary career, African American novelist Ishmael Reed has shown constant concern for historical issues and for their expression through reflexive narratives. This blend of the historical and the aesthetic is one of the many amalgamations that are achieved in his texts. In terms of both form and ideology his work is characterized by syncretism. In form, all novels he has published to date overstep the boundaries among genres, as well as the gulf between academic and popular culture; in ideology, Reed supports multiculturalism as an expression of the plurality that constitutes US society. This essay explores how Reed’s novels seek to produce a narrative hybrid that blends fiction and reality, satire and mysticism, the mass media and the African and Western literary traditions.

Key words: self-reflexivity, metafiction, history, revisionism, Neo-HooDoo, aesthetics, satire

Resumen

A lo largo de su carrera literaria, el novelista afroamericano Ishmael Reed ha mostrado un constante interés en temas históricos y en su expresión mediante narrativas metaficticias. Esta combinación de lo histórico y lo estético es una de las múltiples amalgamas que configuran sus textos. Tanto desde un punto de vista formal como ideológico, su obra se caracteriza por el sincretismo. Formalmente todas las novelas que ha publicado transgreden las barreras entre los géneros, así como la separación entre la cultura académica y la cultura popular.

Ideológicamente Reed propone el multiculturalismo como expresión de la pluralidad que constituye la sociedad norteamericana. El presente ensayo estudia la forma en que las novelas de Reed aspiran a producir un híbrido narrativo que mezcla la ficción y la realidad, la sátira y el misticismo, los medios de comunicación de masas y las tradiciones literarias de África y Occidente.

**Palabras clave:** Autorreferencialidad, metaficción, historia, revisionismo, Neo-HooDoo, estética, sátira

In each of his novels, as well as in his poetry and essays, Ishmael Reed has outlined a personal theory of art and literature that he refers to as Neo-HooDoo aesthetics. In point of fact, terms such as voodoo, hoodoo, and Neo-HooDoo occur throughout Reed's fiction, poetry, and critical essays. Voodoo is a word that originated from the Dahomey language and originally signified “the unknown,” “spirit,” or “deity.” For the purpose of this essay voodooism is defined as a set of beliefs and religious rituals practiced by most blacks who were brought to the New World and that is still alive today in many places in the Americas, especially Haiti and Brazil. Voodooism incorporates the language, mythologies, rituals, folklore, and knowledge of many cultures that came to the New World as a result of the slave trade. Yet, although most of its symbols and images originated in western Africa, it is actually a phenomenon characteristic of the Americas. Voodoo emerged from the cultural interchange that occurred when members of tribes such as the Senegalese, Bambara, Quiamba, Wolof, Foulbe, Arada, Mina, Caplau, Fon, Mahi, Congo, Mondongou, Ibo, Loango, and Fula, among others, were split up and disseminated throughout Haiti and other Caribbean and New World countries. Consequently, it is a combination of those beliefs and customs shared by a wide variety of African peoples and transplanted to an alien continent. In spite of the many tribal differences, these groups had certain common beliefs—ancestor worship, the use of dance and music in their religious ceremonies, and the adept’s possession by the god (Deren 58)—around which they began to develop the ritual forms of what today we know as voodoo.

The Haitian voodoo pantheon is divided into two classes of deities: the Rada and the Petro. Each group traces its roots to a different region of Africa. According to Hurston (116), Rada and Petro are benevolent gods commanding supreme mystery whose symbol is the serpent. They are said to come from the Congo and have the popular Petro deities are the three Barons: Baron Saturday, Baron Cimitière (Lord of the cemetary), Baron Cimitière (Lord of the Cross).

Most voodoo rituals are acts of piety offered (spirits), or long celebrations that take place in Unlike other religions, voodoo lacks a complex hierarchy. Although there is a priest (houngan or mambo), a priest or a priestess is being referred to, his/ her role is to ascertain that the loas are properly fed. In voodoo, offerings and dances play a central role. Offering food, alcohol, and animals that are given to the loas to win their favors. Dances are performed to the rhythm of drums. The climax of the ceremony where the worshippers (“horses”) is possessed (“ridered”)

As a result of the slave trade, voodooism arrive through New Orleans. The form practiced in New Orleans, or hoodoo, and it reached its peak during the 1880s. Hoodoo challenged the civil authorities’ ability to control it, and was therefore forced to go underground, which is the case in the US black ghettos until the present (New 20). Because it adds elements of North American culture and folklore of the city, from its gastronomy as its festive carnivals. For Reed, New Orleans’ most flamboyant manifestation of hoodoo spirit, he recognizes that Mardi Gras also exemplifies this concept of art: “Mardi Gras is the one American a...
propone el multiculturalismo como expresión de nituye la sociedad norteamericana. El presente en que las novelas de Reed aspiran a producir mecha la ficción y la realidad, la sátira y el de comunicación de masas y las tradiciones cediente.

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region of Africa. According to Hurston (116), Rada deities come from Dahomey and are benevolent gods commanded by Damballah (the supreme mystery whose symbol is the serpent). Petro gods, conversely, are said to come from the Congo and have the power of evil. The most popular Petro deities are the three Barons: Baron Samedi (Lord of the Saturday), Baron Cimitière (Lord of the cemetery) and Baron Croix (Lord of the Cross).

Most voodoo rituals are acts of piety offered to particular loas (spirits), or long celebrations that take place in the ouanfo (temple). Unlike other religions, voodoo lacks a complex hierarchy of celebrants. Although there is a priest (houngan or mambo, depending on whether a priest or a priestess is being referred to), his/her function is simply to ascertain that the loas are properly fed. In this sense, sacrificial offerings and dances play a central role. Offerings generally consist of food, alcohol, and animals that are given to the loas to appease them and win their favors. Dances are performed in the center of the temple to the rhythm of drums. The climax of the ceremony takes place when one of the worshippers ("horses") is possessed ("mounted") by a loa.

As a result of the slave trade, voodooism arrived in the United States through New Orleans. The form practiced in North America is known as hoodoo, and it reached its peak during the 1890s. According to Reed, hoodoo challenged the civil authorities' ability to maintain control and was therefore forced to go underground, which explains its persistence in the US black ghettos until the present (New and Collected Poems 20). Because it adds elements of North American culture to the already hybrid Haitian rites, hoodoo represents one more step in the syncretic tradition of voodoo. Its center, New Orleans, is also a multicultural paradigm, since its cultural personality was formed by the blend of French, Spanish, North American, and African American traditions. In spite of the secretive character of its practices, hoodoo pervades the culture and folklore of the city, from its gastronomy to its music, as well as its festive carnivals. For Reed, New Orleans' carnivals exemplify the most flamboyant manifestation of hoodoo spirit and serve to further develop his concept of voodoo/hoodoo as a metaphor for his cultural utopia. While Reed emphasizes the syncretic and popular qualities of voodoo, he recognizes that Mardi Gras also exemplifies its participatory character, and this spectacle becomes the epitome of Reed's communal concept of art: "Mardi Gras is the one American art I have witnessed in
which the audience doesn’t sit intimidated or wait for the critics to tell them what to see. The Mardi Gras audience talks back to the performers instead of sitting there like dummies, and can even participate in the action” (Shrovetide 26).

Reed’s hypothesis about the voodooistic vision of culture does not stop here, because voodoo beliefs and practices are not simply a relic of the past invoked yearly in festive celebrations. Indeed, they have survived under new forms, one of which is Neo-HooDoo. With this label, Reed refers to the contemporary manifestations of hooDoo that are the result of the blending of its beliefs and practices with US popular culture. The Neo-HooDoo aesthetic agenda is exemplified by Reed and other writers who belong to the ‘Manhattan Project’ of writing (New and Collected Poems 26). In music, Charlie Parker is, for Reed, a prime example of the Neo-HooDoo artist as an innovator and improviser; to his name Reed adds a long list of jazz, blues, and rock-and-roll musicians. Among its theoreticians, Reed mentions Zora Neale Hurston and Julia Jackson, the former for her studies on Haitian voodoo and on hooDoo in African American folklore, the latter for having “striped” hooDoo of its oppressive Christian influences. Neo-HooDoo is, therefore, described as a highly flexible construct in which a common base—which is seen as multicultural, pluralistic, and participatory—is permanently enriched by new contributions. Its open character is best illustrated in Reed’s poem “The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic,” which ends with the exclamation: “The proportions of the ingredients used depend upon the cook!” (New and Collected Poems 26).

This configuration of Neo-HooDoo aesthetic doctrine is part of a sequence that Reginald Martin (107) has organized chronologically into five stages: 1) The pantheistic and syncretic worship of Osiris in Ancient Egypt; 2) West African religions (especially Yoruba and Fon) until the beginning of the Arabian and European slave market; 3) Voodoo, as the result of the transplantation of tribes from the Gulf of Guinea to the Caribbean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; 4) HooDoo, as a consequence of the Diaspora of African Americans in the US (nineteenth and twentieth century); 5) Neo-HooDoo, proposed by Reed as the syncretism between voodoo-hooDoo forms and US popular culture.

In each of these five stages, the different manifestations of voodoo have suffered persecution by fanatic followers of Judeo-Christian culture, which is represented as monolithic, foreboding, and repressive. Neo-HooDoo sensibil is plural, participatory, open, lively, and tolerant, religious history, Judeo-Christian civilization—cultural and religious dogmas. The Neo-HooDoo values dissension and syncretism on all possible to the Western manipulation of the environment advocates absolute respect for Nature. Finally, world privileges rationalism and cold scientific a system favors intuition, mystery, and emotion.

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Self-reflexivity is an important aspect of Ishmael Reed’s work, particularly in his exploration of the concept of Neo-Hoodoo, a form of cultural expression that is rooted in African American traditions and is characterized by its openness, participation, and tolerance.

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culture, which is represented as monolithic, hierarchical, rigid, foreboding, and repressive. Neo-Hoodoo sensibility, on the other hand, is plural, participatory, open, lively, and tolerant. In Reed’s vision of religious history, Judeo-Christian civilization defends orthodoxy and cultural and religious dogmas. The Neo-Hoodoo world view, in contrast, values dissension and syncretism on all possible levels. In opposition to the Western manipulation of the environment, Neo-Hoodoism advocates absolute respect for Nature. Finally, if the Judeo-Christian world privileges rationalism and cold scientific analysis, Reed’s counter-system favors intuition, mystery, and emotion.

In his first novel, The Free-Lance Pallbearers (1967), Reed establishes some of the techniques and motifs present throughout his later works. If there is one single element that clearly stands out in this early narrative experiment, it is the use of satire and parody. At this early stage of his career, Reed focuses on a satiric portrayal of sixties US history and literature. The novel’s plot reveals his caustic view of cultural and political history. Its protagonist, Booka Doopeyduk, is an African-American youth who, after a life of sacrifice and humiliation, rebels against the Nazarene Creed (a parody of Christianity) and the absolute power exercised by Harry Sam (an embodiment of the United States). Although his revolt succeeds in deposing the tyrant, Doopeyduk is ultimately crucified in front of television cameras, and a new despot restores Sam’s police regime.

From a historical point of view, the satirical component of the novel is aimed at two main targets: US political institutions, and certain sectors of the black community. As a satire of political power, Pallbearers criticizes the monolithic power structures embodied by Harry Sam, who rules omnipotent over a wasteland. As a satire of African-American opposition movements, Reed reveals the corruption of some of their leaders and the “embourgeoisment” of North American black culture (Fox 42). His humorous denouncement culminates in the novel’s final scene, in which Doopeyduk is betrayed and crucified by his own people.

Reed’s satirical thrust is similarly manifested through a caustic parody of both Western and African American literary traditions. The novel’s portrayal of Doopeyduk’s passion and sacrifice and of Sam’s death parodies the Gospel and the Book of Revelation. Rites of initiation
and the great mythic voyage are distorted to the point that their original sacredness is grotesquely mocked. Pallbearers has also been interpreted as a multifarious parody of many other motifs, genres, and specific works. These include Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (Fox 40), the popular subgenres (gothic, horror, fantasy, science fiction, B movies), African American confessional narratives (Gates 297), the traditional American success-story (Byerman 219), black popular literature of the sixties, literary criticism, and the academic profession in general (Martin 66; Collins 423).3

Numerous reflexive images and self-referential devices complete the dense web of intertextual allusions and give the book its metafictional dimension. One example of these reflexive techniques is the use of allegorical names. Thus, the novel’s protagonist, Bukka (book), encounters doom as a result of the wrong reading of the wrong books (especially the Nazarene Manual), and one of the most authoritarian characters is called Mr. Spellman, a veiled allusion to what Reed considers the repressive power of writing codes.

In Pallbearers, episodes are superimposed to form a collage in which the linear sequence of events or cause-effect relationships lack the importance they may have in more traditional fiction. In fact, the novel’s dynamic and lively language recalls cinematic and television montage rather than other more proper literary models.4 Besides these media techniques, Pallbearers evokes the universe of cartoons and science fiction.5 The general impression is that of a hybrid in which ultimate success depends not on specific components, but on the sum of its parts. It is precisely the successful interaction between the historical and experimental components that creates such originality and impact in Reed’s first novel.

US political and literary history and the myths of Christianity are again targeted in Reed’s next novel, Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down (1969). However, unlike Pallbearers, which takes place in the sixties, in Radio the action is set in the far West during the nineteenth century. The work presents the adventures of Loop Garoo Kid, a black cowboy initiated into the secrets of voodoo, who must confront the aggression of tyrannical landowner Drag Gibson and his underlings in the army (Field Marshal) and in Congress (Pete the Peek). This basic story line conceals a complex discourse about the conflict between Judeo-Christian civilization and African American culture. As in Reed’s subsequent novels, this conflict has implications for both historical and aesthetic levels.

From a historical reflectionist point of view, Reed takes a fantastic version of North American history, de la Vaca’s extraordinary “pilgrimage” in the sixteenth century. Among the myriad of events that take place, Reed proves especially interested in the extreme events presented by official chronicles. Radio valorizes, for example, black action in the expansion of the US frontier and the heritage in the cultural tradition of the American West, and Reed’s tolerant syncretism of African American culture and authoritarian ideology of the US establishment.6

Regarding the metafictional aspect, Radio evokes the universe of popular genres begun in Pallbearers. In this respect, the intertextual code is provided by Westerns and radio literature discussions also occur throughout the novel. Radio establishes Reed’s position in relation to the popular aesthetics advocated by critics such as Howard Gayle, and Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones). A debate begins and the members of the so-called neo-social realist aesthetic opinions within the text itself. Reed’s criticism of Loop Garoo closely parallels the battle between the “new black aesthetic critics” against Reed. Loop Garoo’s response offers important clues to the aesthetic views, views in which literature is liberating activity, inclusive and not exclusive, which the artist’s creative freedom should be able to use. “... what if I write circuses? No one says a no...” Crazy dadam... You are given to fantasy and are off in my esoteric bullshit is where you’re at. Why in the hell do I write about my old neighborhood and how the machine is in place while your work is a blur...? Loop Garoo’s response offers important clues to the aesthetic views, views in which literature is liberating activity, inclusive and not exclusive, which the artist’s creative freedom should be able to use. “... what if I write circuses? No one says a no...” It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by de a first novel in which Reed associates his aesthetic views with popular genres. Reed’s subsequent novels will further develop this aesthetic.
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extremes, Reed proves especially interested in those elements ignored
by official chronicles. Radio valorizes, for example, the presence of
blacks in the expansion of the US frontier and the importance of African
heritage in the cultural tradition of the Americas. Reed contrasts the
tolerant syncretism of African American culture with the exclusive and
authoritarian ideology of the US establishment, represented in
the novel by capitalism and Christianity.

Regarding the metafictional aspect, Radio continues the parody
of popular genres begun in Pallbearers. In this case, the most obvious
intertextual code is provided by Westerns and science-fiction novels;
literary discussions also occur throughout the novel. In particular,
Radio establishes Reed's position in relation to the type of black
aesthetics advocated by critics such as Houston Baker Jr., Addison
Gayle, and Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones). A debate between Loop Garoo
and the members of the so-called neo-social realist gang lays out Reed's
aesthetic opinions within the text itself. Realist leader Bo Shmo's
criticism of Loop Garoo closely parallels the type of charges made by
the "new black aesthetic critics" against Reed: "The trouble with you
Loop is that you're too abstract ... Crazy dada nigger that's what you
are. You are given to fantasy and are off in matters of detail. Far out
esoteric bullshit is where you're at. Why in those suffering books that
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machine is in place while your work is a blur and a doodle" (35-36).
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It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o'clock
news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons" (36). Radio is the
first novel in which Reed associates his aesthetic and cultural program
with voodooism, and from this point on, voodoo (hoodoo in the North American version) will recur in Reed's works as a metaphor for his amalgamating artistic utopia.

It is in his following novel, _Mumbo Jumbo_ (1972), that Reed systematizes his historical view of the black world. Through a complex detective plot, _Mumbo Jumbo_ allegorizes the search for a genuinely African American aesthetics. The intricate web of references is skillfully articulated through endless reflexive motifs, which makes this novel Reed's masterpiece and his greatest experimental undertaking to date. Its pages contain an endless series of discursive modes, including, among others, fantasy, history, mythology, religion, and popular culture. Literary elements coexist alongside an array of visual paratextual materials, such as photographs, posters, drawings, graphics, symbols, Tarot cards, telegrams, party invitations, headlines, and newspaper clippings. _Mumbo Jumbo_ conveys the impression of an interdisciplinary collage and, in this way, informs the reader that the novel does not only refer to the literary tradition, but also includes a multifarious cultural context. This complexity in the novel's nature requires a clarification of its structural level and story line.

_Mumbo Jumbo_ is organized into fifty-four narrative segments of very different lengths, ranging from a simple paragraph to a chapter of over thirty pages. The bulk of the novel is framed by a prologue (chapter 1) and an epilogue. The prologue offers some significant details about the plot and establishes its most important themes. After this false beginning, the novel lists its credits and provides a group of epigraphs that announce future events. Toward the end, it closes with an epilogue in which the action returns to the time when the novel was written, and several of the central motifs are recapitulated. A "Partial Bibliography," in which the author displays most of his documentary sources, concludes the narrative.

In terms of the story line, the action is initially set in New Orleans during the roaring twenties. An epidemic called Jes Grew has broken out and is spreading dangerously in the direction of the great urban centers of Chicago and New York. The infection's most obvious symptom is a frantic desire to dance. This inclination toward spontaneous frenzied dancing is often described in terms similar to those of "possession" in voodoo. From the beginning, the origin of this outbreak is identified with the reemergence of the "Text," which refers to a sacred anthology that recounts the mysteries of Thoth. The Text soon acquires a metaphorical value with the code of the new African American aesthetic.

The central plot deals precisely with the search for the Text that has two antagonists: on the one hand, the detective trying to find it in order to unleash the Jes Grew, and, on the other, Hinckle Von Vampton, a KKK member who attempts to ritually destroy the Text in this way.

Parallel to this central story line, the novel whose mutual relationship is revealed as the result of these subplots a powerful secret society, the Wallflower Order (a pun alludes to the Wallflower sisters), an attempt to create a fake black intellectual discourse to discredit the true protagonists of the African American Renaissance. At the other extreme of the ideological spectrum, a subplot introduces the activities of the Mu'tafikah, an urban guerrilla group that seeks to return a stolen book (known in the novel as a Detention Center in the Third World. The fictitious activities of the Mu'tafikah alternate with historical and paratextual materials such as the ancestry administration, and death of Harding and the occupation of Haiti by US troops.

However, the central action in _Mumbo Jumbo_ is a history of the Text (from its origin in ancient Egypt to its reappearance in North America in the twenties), and the search for the Text. Von Vampton possesses the book and translates it and is killed soon after. A hands an epigram in which the key to locate the book passes accidentally to the black native who translates it and is killed soon after. LaBas deciphers this message and finds the center of the Cotton Club.

In an episode that parodies the "recognizable detective novels, LaBas reveals some of the nature and meaning of Jes Grew, the origins of Thoth, and the plots of several secret societies. In front of an audience composed of..."
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Mumbo Jumbo (1972), that Reed's greatest experimental undertaking to date. The intricate web of references is skillfully endless reflexive motifs, which makes this novel his greatest experimental undertaking to date. The endless series of discursive modes, including, history, mythology, religion, and popular culture. Parallel to this central story line, the novel develops several subplots whose mutual relationship is revealed as the reading progresses. In one of these subplots a powerful secret society, the Atonist Path, and its militant arm, the Wallflower Order (a pun alluding to the Ivy League), attempt to create a fake black intellectual—a Talking And1'oid—to discredit the true protagonists of the African American cultural Renaissance. At the other extreme of the ideological spectrum, another subplot introduces the activities of the Mu'tafikah, a multicultural urban guerrilla group that seeks to return artworks kept in museums (known in the novel as Art Detention Centers) to their places of origin in the Third World. The fictitious activities of the Atonist Path and the Mu'tafikah alternate with historical and pseudo-historical subplots, such as the ancestry, Administration, and death of President Warren G. Harding and the occupation of Haiti by US troops.

However, the central action in Mumbo Jumbo revolves around the history of the Text (from its origin in ancient Egypt to its reappearance in North America in the twenties), and LaBas' and Von Vampton's search for the Text. In Von Vampton's possession since the Middle Ages, the book passes accidentally to the black nationalist Abdul Sufi Amid, who translates it and is killed soon after. Abdul dies grasping in his hands an epigram in which the key to locating the Book is encoded. LaBas deciphers this message and finds the Book, buried in the very center of the Cotton Club.

In an episode that parodies the "recognition" scene of traditional detective novels, LaBas reveals some of the novel's central mysteries: the nature and meaning of Jes Grew, the origin and history of the Book of Thoth, and the plots of several secret societies to exploit the book's wisdom. In front of an audience composed of the novel's main characters,
LaBas ties up some of the novel's loose ends. Finally, he opens the box found in the Cotton Club and finds that the Text is gone. A letter written by Abdul just before his death and reproduced at the end of the novel tells us that Abdul himself had burned the Text on the grounds that it was obscene. We also discover that Abdul’s translation had been lost in the labyrinthine postal service, after having been rejected by an editor who considered it outdated and not “Nation” enough. With the book’s destruction the Atonists believe the epidemic has been extinguished, but, as LaBas finally reveals, the spirit of Jes Grew is invincible and will always make use of new texts to manifest itself. The epilogue of *Mumbo Jumbo* presents LaBas as a hundred year old man giving a lecture on Jes Grew to a group of students in the sixties or seventies (the years during which the novel was written). After several decades of oblivion, Jes Grew begins to show signs of reemerging.

*Mumbo Jumbo* combines real historical events, documented—but probably false—gossip, and fantasies completely invented by Reed. Although most of the characters that are part of the main action (the search for the Text) are fictional, they are frequently representative of historical figures. The novel’s two antagonists, for example, allude to mythical and/or historical characters. In terms of his name, physical aspect, and function, PaPa LaBas represents the voodoo trickster deity Papa Legba (Gates 300; Byerman 225; Shadle 20). Labas is in reality the name that this Haitian loa (spirit) has been given in the United States. This character is also described in the novel in the same way as Papa Legba—he is an experienced old man who likes to wear showy hats and sunglasses and walks leaning on a stick or crutch (Cosentino 265): “He is a familiar sight in Harlem, wearing his frock coat, opera hat, smoked glasses and carrying a cane” (Reed 26). In voodoo, Papa Legba is the lord of the crossroads, the messenger of the gods, the guardian of the threshold, who regulates traffic between the visible and the invisible worlds (Métraux 101; Hurston 129). LaBas is, significantly, the character in charge of resolving the novel’s principal mystery: the meaning and the origin of the Text. In order to do so, he puts the characters, and therefore the readers themselves, in contact with the spiritual world of African American tradition. LaBas is the guide who allows us access to the dark areas of myth and history.

LaBas’ antagonist, Hinckle Von Vampton, is reminiscent of Carl Van Vechten (De Filippo 125; Gates, 302). Van Vechten was one of the most controversial white patrons of the Harlem Renaissance, the black arts through his articles in fashionable *Vanity Fair*; a novel (*Nigger Heauen*, 1926), praiseworthy and strongly criticized by James Weldon Johnson and strongly criticized by Bois; numerous soirées in which black artists, musicians, and interacted with art dealers, producers, and publishers; numerous photographs of almost all well-known African American artists (Douglas 287-91; Kellner 368). Van Vechten was one of a wave of curious whites who invaded Harlem in search of the exotic and primitive, and who then exploited its creative potential (Ottley and Weatherby 24). Reed’s fictionalization in *Mumbo Jumbo* enables Reed to satirize this exploitation by this kind of patron, who was so interested in marketing a hair straightening process (the “W” part of her immense fortune, she built a sumptuous house called Villa Lewaro, where the novel’s famous recitation takes place. A'Lelia Walker Robinson was well known for her sponsorship of young black artists. Her mansion became one of Harlem’s social centers for many years. Among her cultural soirees she offered these young creative artists the opportunity to meet the influential whites who were sympathetic to African American arts (Ottley and Weatherby 25).

Some religious and political leaders of the time, like the dogmatic Abdul Sufi Hamid. Abdul’s career paralleled that of Malcolm X. Both are ex-convicts who became Muslim, and both are Islamic black activists whose audience among the black masses (De Filippo 13).
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In another context, Hinckle Von Vampton, is reminiscent of Carl
odo 125; Gates, 302).5 Van Vechten was one of the
outrious white patrons of the Harlem Renaissance who popularized
the black arts through his articles in fashionable magazines, such as
Vanity Fair; a novel (Nigger Heaven, 1926), praised by Alain Locke
and James Weldon Johnson and strongly criticized by W.E.B. Du
Bois; numerous soirees in which black artists, musicians, and writers
interacted with art dealers, producers, and publishers; and many
photographs of almost all well-known African Americans in the United
States (Douglas 287-91; Killner 368). Van Vechten is representative
of a wave of curious whites who invaded Harlem in the twenties in
search of the exotic and primitive, and who then commercially exploited
its creative potential (Ottley and Weatherby 246). In this sense, his
fictionalization in Mumbo Jumbo enables Reed to attack not only the
manipulation by this kind of patron, who was so typical of the time, but
also something he considers endemic of the white intelligentsia: the
tendency to exploit, manipulate, and enrich themselves at the expense
of the black world's creative efforts.

Another character associated with Harlem patronage, in this case
black, has escaped the attention of most of Reed's critics: the anonymous
hostess at whose party LaBas solves the novel's main mysteries. This
character is clearly a synthesis of Sarah Breedlove Walker and A'Lelia
Walker Robinson, mother and daughter, respectively. The former, better
known as Madame C.J. Walker, was the founder of the first dynasty of
black plutocrats (Douglas 289; Ottley and Weatherby 255). Although
formerly a washerwoman, she became wealthy after discovering and
marketing a hair straightening process (the "Walker system"). With
part of her immense fortune, she built a sumptuous palace known
as Villa Lewaro, where the novel's famous recognition scene takes
place.11 A'Lelia Walker Robinson was well known in her own right for
her sponsorship of young black artists. Her mansion on 136th Street
became one of Harlem's social centers for many writers and artists. At
her cultural soirees she offered these young creators an opportunity to
meet the influential whites who were sympathetic to the new trends in
African American arts (Ottley and Weatherby 257; Killner 371-72).

Some religious and political leaders of the time are represented by
the dogmatic Abdul Sufi Hamid. Abdul's career primarily recalls that
of Malcolm X. Both are ex-convicts who became self-educated while in
prison, and both are Islamic black activists whose rhetoric has a wide
audience among the black masses (De Filippo 132). Gates also points
to the figures of the editor Duse Mohammed Ali and W.D. Fard (Elijah Muhammad's mentor) as possible historical references for Reed's character (302). However, all of Reed's critics overlook the fact that a Sufi Abdul Hamid actually existed. Known also as Bishop Conshankin, just "the Bishop," Hamid was a charismatic cult leader in Chicago in the late twenties. He soon became involved with Muslim organizations and led a movement to force business owners in black neighborhoods to hire black employees. In 1932 Hamid moved to Harlem, where he tried to repeat the success of the Chicago campaign, yet there he found strong opposition from the Left and from conservative African Americans. After being arrested in 1935, he became disillusioned with political activism and returned to his former mysticism. In addition to representing the flourishing religious cults in the Harlem of the twenties and thirties, Hamid has come to be remembered as the organizer of the first black consumer boycotts in the United States (Ottley and Weatherby 252; Kellner 150-51).

In Mumbo Jumbo the characterization of the fictional Abdul is quite ambivalent. While the novel openly mocks his deeply moralistic view and censors his dogmatic tendencies, it evaluates positively the recuperation and embracement of African origins that characterizes black nationalism. The character Benoit Buttraville, a fictionalization of the historical leader of the fight against the North American occupation, is important for the novel's exposure of the dirty war the United States waged in Haiti. Through his dialogue with PaPa LaBas in chapter 42, we obtain several important keys to understanding both the significance of voodoo in the history of the Americas and the effect secret societies have had on US politics. Among those societies, the Wallflower Order is the most active in Mumbo Jumbo. Its chieftain Walter Mellon, to whom the novel refers often as "the "is pointedly reminiscent of Andrew Mellon, the US Secretary of in the twenties and early thirties who had amassed one of the largest fortunes in North America. Mellon's inclusion within the conspiratorial schemes of the novel allows Reed to reinforce his fictionalized version of US reality, in which the highest hierarchical power position is occupied by big business, with political and military groups offering behind-the-scenes support.

Some other minor characters are also vaguely reminiscent of historical figures of the times. Dutch Schlitz, for example, is a fictitious reconstruction of Dutch Schultz, a famous Prohibition Era gangster.

According to De Filippo, the name Harry "Safe railway tycoon Jay Gould, while LaBas' assistant, Mademoiselle Charlotte, one of the few white loa (125). However, as Gates has rightfully pointed out, characters serve to exemplify attitudes and provide great cultural conflict they dramatize, because attitudes and values are sometimes reminiscent of historical figures, their personalities and interrelations. Many of the historical characters, such as presidents Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, black leaders Malcolm X, Johnson, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, black musicians (Scott Joplin, Louis Armstrong, European thinkers (Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung), historical background of the novel, but are not major story line, which is the search for the Text and its mysteries.

In Mumbo Jumbo, Reed lays the foundation for an aesthetic world view that he has developed throughout his career. Stemming from a heterogeneous collection of ideas, he constructs a whole new mythology that seeks to transcend the dominant assumptions regarding the role of fiction in the novel's goals must ultimately be understood in his overall aesthetic world view that he has developed throughout his career. Stemming from a heterogeneous collection of ideas, he constructs a whole new mythology that seeks to transcend the dominant assumptions regarding the role of fiction in the novel's goals must ultimately be understood in his overall aesthetic world view that he has developed throughout his career. Stemming from a heterogeneous collection of ideas, he constructs a whole new mythology that seeks to transcend the dominant assumptions regarding the role of fiction in the novel's goals must ultimately be understood in his overall aesthetic world view that he has developed throughout his career. Stemming from a heterogeneous collection of ideas, he constructs a whole new mythology that seeks to transcend the dominant assumptions regarding the role of fiction in the novel's goals must ultimately be understood in his overall aesthetic world view that he has developed throughout his career. Stemming from a heterogeneous collection of ideas, he constructs a whole new mythology that seeks to transcend the dominant assumptions regarding the role of fiction in the novel's goals must ultimately be understood in his overall aesthetic world view that he has developed throughout his career. Stemming from a heterogeneous collection of ideas, he constructs a whole new mythology that seeks to transcend the dominant assumptions regarding the role of fiction in the novel's goals must ultimately be understood in his overall aesthetic world view that he has developed throughout his career. Stemming from a heterogeneous collection of ideas, he constructs a whole new mythology that seeks to transcend the dominant assumptions regarding the role of fiction in the novel's goals must ultimately be understood in his overall aesthetic world view that he has developed throughout his career.
According to De Filippo, the name Harry "Safecracker" Gould suggests tycoon Jay Gould, while LaBas' assistant, Charlotte, evokes Mademoiselle Charlotte, one of the few white loas in the voodoo pantheon (125). However, as Gates has rightfully pointed out, Reed's fictional characters serve to exemplify attitudes and personalities within the great cultural conflict they dramatize, because although their names and attitudes are sometimes reminiscent of historical or mythological figures, their personalities and interrelations are mostly fictional. Many of the historical characters, such as presidents (Woodrow Wilson, Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge), black leaders (James Weldon Johnson, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois), black musicians (Scott Joplin, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker), and European thinkers (Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung), help make up the historical background of the novel, but are not main agents in its major story line, which is the search for the Text and the deciphering of its mysteries.

In Mumbo Jumbo, Reed lays the foundation for the historical and aesthetic world view that he has developed throughout the rest of his career. Stemming from a heterogeneous collection of cultural systems, he constructs a whole new mythology that seeks to undermine some of the dominant assumptions regarding the role of blacks in history. The novel's goals must ultimately be understood in light of this oppositional nature. Rather than attempting to impose a new cultural system, Reed focuses on the relentless critique of prevailing views. Byerman synthesizes Reed's oppositional drive when he states that "the test for the power of his art is his ability to expose and negate, not to assert and control" (221). In his negation of the dominant forms, Reed targets the conventions of traditional historical and fictional discourses. As do other postmodernist historical novels, Mumbo Jumbo articulates historical reflection and metafictional experimentation without encountering a contradiction between the two. On the contrary, reflexive metaphors are used to clarify historical motifs, and historical motifs are used to exemplify the novel's inner workings. Reed's use of both history and metafiction is ultimately aimed at directing the reader's attention to the textual nature of the received versions of the past.

From a historiographic point of view, Reed's novel seeks to displace the prevailing notions of history. Mumbo Jumbo was originally conceived as a response to those who denied the existence of a unique
African American cultural tradition and accused black artists of being derivative. In this novel, Reed undertakes the task of reconstructing the origin and history of that tradition. To that end, he recreates a past in which documented and apocryphal characters and events coexist, the result being a hybrid that inverts stereotypes about African American cultural inferiority. In Reed’s version, the cradle of civilization is located in the black world, which has been immemorially plundered and exploited by the West. Although Reed frequently resorts to apocryphal data, he also supports his version with others that are empirically demonstrable. His intention is to make the boundaries between fact and fiction problematic so as to question the legitimacy of those discourses that have been used to validate the dominant ideology.

Regarding its metafictional aspect, the novel’s radical reflexiveness stems from its main allegorical structure. This structure depicts a novel (Mumbo Jumbo) in which an archetypal reader (LaBas) seeks a book, produced by an archetypal writer (Thoth), which inaugurates literature, and which, all seems to suggest, is a book with the same characteristics as Mumbo Jumbo. The result of this self-begetting plot is a most complex reflexive figure: the endless spiral that originates in what Dállenbach calls aporetic duplication ("a sequence that is supposed to enclose the work that encloses it"). As a consequence of this mechanism of paradoxical duplication, Mumbo Jumbo spotlights the textual nature of its whole referential universe, including the historical referent itself. Both the novel’s starting point (supposedly The Book of Thoth) and its end (Mumbo Jumbo) underscore the textual nature of all cultural constructions, be they historical or fictional.

This revisionist concept of history and fiction is integrated into a cultural project that Reed calls Neo-HooDooism. Built on the contributions of West African cultures, Haitian and North American voodoo/hoodoo, and some forms of US popular culture, this project seeks to update the artistic expressions of African American culture. Unlike other world views, Neo-HooDooism resists restrictive encodings. Reed thus avoids open definitions of the term and prefers, instead, to demonstrate it through the works of many modern artists. From these examples and their manifestations in Mumbo Jumbo, we can identify a series of tendencies that constitute Neo-HooDooism, including: 1) formal and ideological syncretism, which results in the use of interdisciplinary collage and the amalgamation of different cultural systems; 2) openness on all possible levels, which leads to a conception of discourses that are susceptible to new interpretations, intuition, mystery, and emotion, as opposed to the patterns of Western thought; 4) improvisation and endless variations; 5) participation, which considers experience and not as the privilege of an individualistic hedonist world view, according to which the most important thing is to enjoy the pleasures of life intensely. All these constitute a historical-aesthetic counter-system that seeks to denaturalize and literary traditions in order to denaturalize their representation.

After a work as ambitious and innovative as Mumbo Jumbo, it is not surprising that critics were less enthusiastic about Reed’s novel. While Mumbo Jumbo’s novel that offers a complete view of African American culture, Louisiana Red is limited in that it simply establishes a historical-aesthetic counter-system that seeks to denaturalize its representation.

Parallel to this central plot, the novel develops a character named Chorus to regain his importance in society. Chorus is representative of the situation of the industrious black bourgeoisie in a world of multinational capitalism and Judeo-Christian morality. As a result, he is excluded from the dominant place previously occupied by the чернокожий.

The progressive diminishing of the importance of the black community allows Reed to reflect upon the inherent value of African American culture. Besides PaPa LaBas’ detective story and Chorus’ participation in the novel creates an allegorical subtext in which...
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on all possible levels, which leads to a conception of history and literature as discourses that are susceptible to new interpretations; 3) subjectivity, intuition, mystery, and emotion, as opposed to the rational and logical patterns of Western thought; 4) improvisation and expressive freedom, both of which reject the value of pre-established codes and seek, instead, endless variations; 5) participation, which considers art as a communal experience and not as the privilege of an intellectual elite; and 6) a hedonist world view, according to which the most important value is to enjoy the pleasures of life intensely. All these characteristics form a historical-aesthetic counter-system that seeks to rewrite historical and literary traditions in order to deconstruct the hegemonic forms of representation.

After a work as ambitious and innovative as Mumbo Jumbo, it is not surprising that critics were less enthusiastic about The Last Days of Louisiana Red (1974). While Mumbo Jumbo is a groundbreaking novel that offers a complete view of African American history and culture, Louisiana is limited in that it simply re-elaborates (in a rather limited way) the mythical and aesthetic counter-system already established in Reed's previous novels. Like Mumbo Jumbo, this new novel is structured along a detective story line, in which two parallel plots are united in a final resolution. In the central plot, PaPa LaBas, Mumbo Jumbo's hoodoo detective, investigates a murder in the town of Berkeley during the sixties. The victim, Ed Yellings, is representative of the industrious black bourgeoisie. The novel suggests that Yellings had been a member of a secret society at war with a conglomerate of multinational capitalism and Judeo-Christian culture known as the Louisiana Red Corporation.

Parallel to this central plot, the novel describes the fight of a character named Chorus to regain his importance in contemporary society. Chorus is representative of the position of blacks in a white world, caught in a restricted role and permanently threatened with expulsion. According to Reed, the origin of this loss dates back to the Greek play Antigone, in which monologues first began to usurp the dominant place previously occupied by the chorus in Aeschylus' works. The progressive diminishing of the importance of the chorus in Greek drama allows Reed to reflect upon the inherent evils of Western culture. Besides PaPa LaBas' detective story and Chorus' aesthetic struggle, the novel creates an allegorical subtext in which each of the characters...
corresponds to the protagonists of Sophocles’ play. However, Reed does not reproduce Antigone’s drama but instead reworks it in his own personal way, making Creon the hero and Antigone the protagonist of an unjustified rebellion. In actuality, however, Reed is attacking the tragic sense of life that has permeated both Judeo-Christian culture and black liberation movements. Through the so-called Moochers, Reed criticizes the intolerant attitudes and gratuitous violence rampant among the most radical sectors of the black nationalist movements, something he had already condemned in each of his previous novels, and that now becomes the main focus of his satire.14

The publication of Flight to Canada in 1976 signaled a return to the levels of quality and originality in Reed’s first three novels. In this great example of historiographic metafiction (Harris 461), Reed once again uses parody to chronicle US history. Published the same year as the Bicentennial, Flight to Canada contains Reed’s response to two hundred years of official history. In its pages he attacks the most untouchable myths of US tradition, focusing on the period of the Civil War. Both the Union world view and the Confederate ideals are undermined by Reed’s biting satire. Harriet Beecher Stowe is a snob who becomes rich at the expense of others’ suffering (her Uncle Tom’s Cabin was “lifted” from Josiah Henson, who appears in the novel as Uncle Robin). The new capitalist order introduced after the Union victory is personified by Yankee-Jack, a plutocrat who controls the nation’s destiny. Southern values are embodied by Sville, the ruler of a decadent empire that is haunted by Edgar Allan Poe’s ghost and modeled on the image of King Arthur’s Camelot. Along with nineteenth-century characters and situations, the novel introduces elements from twentieth-century technology (telephones, walkie-talkies, microphones, cassettes, xerox machines, radios, TVs, videos, computers, cars, airplanes, and helicopters). Raven Quickskill, the protagonist, escapes to Canada in a jumbo jet. Lincoln’s assassination is broadcast live and replayed as part of a TV broadcast of the play My American Cousins. The novel’s language is not typical of traditional historical fiction, but is instead composed of contemporary colloquialisms and slang. The result is one of the most aggressive expressions of what Brian McHale has called the postmodernist revisionism of the historical novel. In introducing twentieth-century material culture into the past, conventional chronology and thereby twists the life that dominates canonical historiography. Above version of the events allows the reader to witness political history that identifies the past’s true pro its true victims.

Regarding its metafictional nature, Flight with Mumbo Jumbo—contains the greatest conc metaphors in all of Reed’s works. This work pres dynamic that likens its own basic situation to the that is, the type of novel that takes credit for a ch to the point at which he or she is able to begin have just finished reading (Kollman 3). Flight the process of its own writing. It begins with a p Canada” that summarizes its main motifs. The fis with the protagonist, Raven Quicke, as he b Robin’s (Uncle Tom’s) biography (Robin’s story fasified by Harriet Beecher Stowe). The novel Quprobably Flight to Canada, and its narration tak pages. In addition to this proleptic mise en abyme: it begins Mumbo Jumbo, from its first pages the no levels of self-reflection.15 Raven’s poem incorpora with its commentary (reflection of the enunciation according to which the novel must be interpreted ( and introduces the trickster (the cultural hero as origin in Native American and African American t and temporal coordinates soon acquire an overtly Quickskill’s flight to Canada allegorizes the search represented by writing in a state of liberty, an ide fought in all his works. The novel ends with its p an understanding of his own condition: Canada is a desirable ideal the black writer has to strive fo may be physically. The fact that Reed has his pro South and devote himself to rewriting history is sy engagement with his immediate reality and cont escapism that social-realist critics have launched

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of Flight to Canada in 1976 signaled a return to originality in Reed's first three novels. In its metafictional nature, Flight to Canada--together with Mumbo Jumbo--contains the greatest concentration of reflective metaphors in all of Reed's works. This work presents a self-referential dynamic that likens its own basic situation to the "self-begetting novel," that is, the type of novel that takes credit for a character's development to the point at which he or she is able to begin writing the novel we have just finished reading (Kellman 3). Flight to Canada describes the process of its own writing. It begins with a poem called "Flight to Canada" that summarizes its main motifs. The first chapter then opens with the protagonist, Raven Quickskill, as he begins to write Uncle Robin's (Uncle Tom's) biography (Robin's story had been stolen and falsified by Harriet Beecher Stowe). The novel Quickskill writes is most probably Flight to Canada, and its narration takes up the subsequent pages. In addition to this proleptic mise en abyme, similar to the one that begins Mumbo Jumbo, from its first pages the novel offers all possible levels of self-reflection. Raven's poem incorporates Flight to Canada with its commentary (reflection of the enunciation), establishes the code according to which the novel must be interpreted (reflection of the code), and introduces the trickster (the cultural hero associated with myths of origin in Native American and African American traditions). The spatial and temporal coordinates soon acquire an overtly metafictional quality.

Quickskill's flight to Canada the search for an aesthetic utopia represented by writing in a state of liberty, an ideal for which Reed has fought in all his works. The novel ends with its protagonist coming to an understanding of his own condition: Canada is only a state of mind, a desirable ideal the black writer has to strive for, no matter where he may be physically. The fact that Reed has his protagonist return to the South and devote himself to history is symbolic of the author's engagement with his immediate reality and contradicts the charges of escapism that social-realist critics have launched against him.

Flight to Canada is simultaneously a declaration in favor of creative freedom and a denunciation of the plunder of black culture by twentieth-century material culture into the past, the novel undermines conventional chronology and thereby twists the linear logic of discourse that dominates canonical historiography. Above all, Reed's apocryphal version of the events allows the reader to witness a rewriting of US political history that identifies the past's true protagonists and rescues its true victims.

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the white cultural establishment. In its pages Reed develops tendencies he had outlined in previous novels, especially *Mumbo Jumbo*. In terms of plot, however, Reed abandons the detective genre as the novel's structuring convention in order to focus on the recreation of slave narratives. The successful result of this work (Reed's best after *Mumbo Jumbo*) stems from the multiplicity of its levels of interpretation, from the inexhaustible richness of its network of allusions, and, above all, from the effective interaction between parodic play and historiographic reflection.

Reed's experimental leanings, which culminated in *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Flight to Canada*, are interrupted in *The Terrible Twos* (1982). Although witty and humorous, this new work rehashes the basic schemes and ideas presented in Reed's early works, giving one the impression that his technical and thematic repertoire was starting to shrink.

*The Terrible Twos* chronicles a conspiracy launched by big business and the White House to monopolize the Christmas market. This trivial plot as a pretext, Reed again dismantles the most sacred elements of US politics (the presidency and lobbyists), economics (capitalism and large corporations), and folklore (St. Nicholas, Christmas, and Thanksgiving). The action in *The Terrible Twos* is set in the present and immediate future (the eighties and nineties), and at first glance may be considered a commentary on the Reagan era and its aftermath. Metaphorically, however, Reed's work censors the monopolizing tendencies in North American culture. The United States is portrayed as a self-centered two-year old child who sees the world as an extension of himself; the diversity and depth of African American legends and myths serves as a contrast to this narcissistic and egocentric view of contemporary North America.

Although in *The Terrible Twos* Reed recycles the detective plot of *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Louisiana Red*, in this case it is a new character, Nance Saturday, who must discover the intricacies that make up the novel's tangled plot. One of the central enigmas of the novel is "Operation Two Birds," a conspiracy organized by a gang of businessmen, corrupt politicians, mock missionary men, and paranoid militarists. The plan entails a holy war against the "surplus people" in the United States (the homeless, the poor, women, blacks, Hispanics, and Jews) and a West African country (most likely Nigeria, the original land of the Yorubas). In this way Reed continues his traditional inclination—initiated in *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986). The setting is an intellectual intellectuals are victims of an aggressive fanatic feminist conspiracy. Once more, Reed makes a fiery and impassioned statement against the social realist critics, and the witty dialogues and a few clever comic scenes falls short. Too frequently *Reckless Eyeballing* to settle old personal scores with his personal intelligentsia, the social realist critics, and the cultural imperialism, intellectual turncoats, literal correctness, black and white nationalists, and feminism are now some of the objects of Reed's
establishment. In its pages Reed develops tendencies of previous novels, especially *Mumbo Jumbo*. In terms of its network of allusions, and, above all, interaction between parodic play and historiographic inclinations, which culminated in *Mumbo Jumbo*, are interrupted in *The Terrible Twos* (1982). Reckless Eyeballing (1986). The setting is an imaginary present where intellectuals are victims of an aggressive wave of neo-Nazism and a fanatic feminist conspiracy. Once more, Reed blends fiction and reality to make a fiery and impassioned statement against authoritarian attitudes within the cultural establishment. The novel’s protagonist, Ian Ball, is a black playwright whose work reflects his own situation as well as Reed’s actual creative problems. In this case, the metafictional effect is achieved through playful interaction on three levels: the diegetic (the story of Ball’s misfortunes), the metadiegetic (the story told in Ball’s play) and the extradiegetic (the author’s well-known and long-standing dispute with feminists). However, other than the witty dialogues and a few clever comic scenes, Reed’s satiric potential falls short. Too frequently *Reckless Eyeballing* seems to be an attempt to settle old personal scores with his personal enemies (the white intelligentsia, the social realist critics, and the feminist movement).

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Between the two *Terribles*, Reed published what seems to be his most straightforward—and probably most unsuccessful—novel: *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986). The setting is an imaginary present where intellectuals are victims of an aggressive wave of neo-Nazism and a fanatic feminist conspiracy. Once more, Reed blends fiction and reality to make a fiery and impassioned statement against authoritarian attitudes within the cultural establishment. The novel's protagonist, Ian Ball, is a black playwright whose work (Reckless Eyeballing) reflects his own situation as well as Reed’s actual creative problems. In this case, the metafictional effect is achieved through playful interaction on three levels: the diegetic (the story of Ball’s misfortunes), the metadiegetic (the story told in Ball’s play) and the extradiegetic (the author’s well-known and long-standing dispute with feminists). However, other than the witty dialogues and a few clever comic scenes, Reed’s satiric potential falls short. Too frequently *Reckless Eyeballing* seems to be an attempt to settle old personal scores with his personal enemies (the white intelligentsia, the social realist critics, and the feminist movement).

Similar concerns provide the dominant motifs in *Japanese By Spring* (1993), Reed’s most recent novel to date. In this work Reed takes on the subject of intolerance in the academic world. Neo-conservatism, racism, cultural imperialism, intellectual turncoats, literary fashions, political correctness, black and white nationalists, and radical middle-class feminism are now some of the objects of Reed’s relentless satire. In each
of these cases, *Japanese* proposes the celebration of multiculturalism that has its most irrefutable expression in the California setting of the novel.

In both ideological and formal terms *Japanese* is replete with metafictional devices. The novel as a whole is a reflection on the role of literature and criticism in North American society. It also raises ideas that occur throughout each of Reed’s novels: the importance of the African influence on Western culture, the distortion of aesthetic ideals in contemporary society, the literary critic’s overly important role in academia (which sometimes even overshadows the creative writer himself/herself), and the need for a syncretic vision of US cultural reality. A brief cameo appearance by the author also spotlights the novel’s self-reference. When invited to lecture at the fictitious Jack London College in California, Reed discusses his work and again presents his own literary theory.

In general *Japanese* demonstrates the satirical features that have characterized its author’s style thus far. It is unlikely, however, that his work would be of any interest for a reader who is not part of the academic world or who is not already familiar with Reed’s other works. In fact, this last novel is a confirmation of his already noted tendency to condense his frame of reference and therefore limit his target audience. His basic aesthetics was already outlined in his first two novels and more definitely established in *Mumbo Jumbo*. In his later works, except for *Flight to Canada*, Reed has merely developed those elements further.

All of Reed’s novels follow a process of continuity in terms of aspects of the postmodernist historical novel. They frequently refer to the dark areas of the past in order to understand present reality. Indeed, history is seen as the eternal conflict between the tragic and repressive spirit of Judeo-Christian civilization and the humorous and liberating forces represented by African American culture and the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Reed’s historical revisionism causes him to reveal and question the conventions and norms of canonical history; it is a historiographic revisionism as well, aimed at demystifying and deconstructing the myth-making mechanisms of cultural history.

In metafictional terms, Reed shapes his novels into scenarios where aesthetic and cultural projects are debated. By repeatedly dramatizing the acts of reading and writing and using metaphors, Reed rejects the traditional forms of white monoculturalists and black social-realists proposes is an oppositional aesthetics free from ideological constriction. This search for freedom him to experimentation with all genres—especially culture—remodeling them into a new blend of nature.

**NOTES**

1. It is this vision of voodoo as a collective creation from different Reed to make it into “the perfect metaphor for the multicultur”/S
2. Judeo-Christian dogmas are the ongoing target of Reed’s criticism. He frequently aims his satire against their most sacred myths. Thus, in “a dangerous paranoid pain-in-the-neck a CopGod from the post-law and order culture of the mythological relgion of the 6th cent. punishment. The H-Bomb is a typical Jehovah’s ‘miracle,’ Jehovah’s ‘Some go to heaven and some go to hell, the world’” (New and Collected Poems 256). For a more informed account of Reed’s borrowing of Judeo-Christian civilization and the humorous and liberating forces represented by African American culture and the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Reed’s historical revisionism causes him to reveal and question the conventions and norms of canonical history; it is a historiographic revisionism as well, aimed at demystifying and deconstructing the myth-making mechanisms of cultural history.

3. For a consideration of Mumbo Jumbo as Reed’s masterpiece, see, e.g., Weatherby give of:Vladame Walker’s palace (254). Reed also mentions Van Vechten’s famous biographical “People of Europe, protect that which is yours” (Van Vechten 1955). On Carl Van Nichten and his relations with Harlen, see Loe Van Vechten (1985).

4. For a discussion of *Suburbania* and the Californian setting of the novel, see, e.g., Weatherby’s discussion of its “California setting of the novel” (*Suburbania* 183).

5. Gate has also pointed to German engraver Hermann Knackfuss’ familiar heliogravure “People of Europe, protect that which is yours” (Van Vechten 1955). On Carl Van Nichten and his relations with Harlen, see Loe Van Vechten (1985).

6. Most details in the description of this scene—e.g. the name of the luxurious 24-karat-gold-decorated piano—are taken from the *Weatherby’s* give of Madame Walker’s palace (354). Reed also mentions Van Vechten’s book, *Harlem Renaissance Day* (*Suburbania* 256). For more information on Van Vechten’s middle class tastes with its predilections for hair straightening see Loe Van Vechten (1985).

7. The life and personality of the historical Hamid must have been taken from a Reed novel, rather than from real life.
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1 The acts of reading and writing and using all types of specular metaphors, Reed rejects the traditional forms of representation of both white monoculturalists and black social-realists. What he ultimately proposes is an oppositional aesthetics free from any kind of formal or ideological constriction. This search for freedom on all domains leads him to experimentation with all genres—especially those of popular culture—remodeling them into a new blend of a hybrid and original nature.

Notes

1 In this vision of voodoo as a collective creation from different cultures (Down 59) that has led Reed to make it into "the perfect metaphor for the multicultural" (Shoopside 232).

2 Indo-Christian dogmas are the ongoing target of Reed’s criticism in all of his works, and he frequently aims his satire against their most sacred myths. Thus, the God of the Hebrews is described as "a dangerous paranoid pain-in-the-neck a Cop God from the get go. Jehovah was the successful law and order candidate in the mythological relay of the 4th century A.D. Jehovah is the God of punishment. The H-Bomb is a typical Jehovah-miracle. Jehovah is why we are in Vietnam. He told Moses to go out and "subdue" the world" (New and Collected Poems 24). The figure of Christ, whom Reed considers to be an "impostor" (97), is subjected to a similar treatment in his irreverent style: "Neo-Hoodoo tells Christ to get lost! (Ousias Iscariot holds an honorary degree from Neo-Hoodoo)" (New and Collected Poems 21).

3 Reed himself has frequently commented on the influence of the visual media (especially television editing and film montages) in his work. See, for example, O’Brian (73-76).

4 For a discussion of the impact of cartoons and comic books on the writing of Pulpheeres, see Navaneeth’s interview with Reed (117).

5 For a consideration of Mambo Jumbo as Reed’s masterpiece, see, for example, Byerman (128), Shadle (130), Fox (149), Martin (91), and De Filippis (112).

6 These complex intertextual and interstitial networks have led Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to define Mambo Jumbo as "a book about texts and a book of texts, a composite narrative composed of sub-texts pre-texts, post-texts, and narratives within narratives" (199).

7 According to Gates, Legba is invoked through the phrase "eh lo-ba" in New Orleans jazz recordings of the twenties and thirties (300). In a self-interview, Reed himself has identified Latass as the same by which Legba is identified in North America (Shoopside 132).

8 Gates has also pointed to German engraver Hermann Knackfuss as another possible historical model for Van Vampton. In fact, page 155 of the Atheneum edition (1988) of Mambo Jumbo reproduces Knackfuss’ famous heliographe of Europe, protect that which is most holy to you,” in which the German artist justified European domination over Asia (Gates 302-03).

9 On Carl Van Vechten and his relations with Harlem, see Lueders (1965), Huggins (1971), and Van Vechten (1980).

10 Most details in the description of this scene—e.g. the name of the villa created by Carugo or the luxurious 24-karat-gold-decorated piano—are taken from the description that Otley and Westbrooke give of Madame Walker’s palace (254). Reed also mentions Madame Walker in his article “Harlem Renaissance Days” (Shoopside 236). For more information on Madame Sarah Walker and Harlem’s middle-class taste with its predictions for hair straighteners and skin lighteners, see Anderson (1969).

11 “The life and personality of the historical Harriet must have fascinated Reed. Both McKay (1987) and Kellner (1984) provide many details about Harriet that define him as a novelistic figure very much attuned to Reed’s penchant for the scenic. Like the character of Latass ‘Egyptian legend,’ Harriet claimed to be born in the Sudan (when in fact she was a native of the US South). His death—he died trying to demonstrate his mystical powers while aloft in an airplane—seems to have been taken from a Reed novel, rather than from real life.
Houston A. Baker, for example, points out that *Louisiana Red* is modeled on the same patterns used in *Mumbo-Jumbo*, but it lacks the interest and ambition of the previous novel (51-52). For other negative reviews of *Louisiana Red* see Peter Dreyer (1974), George E. Kent (1975), Christopher Herron Lee (1975), and Neil Schmitz (1975).

The forms and possibilities of the *mise en abyme* have been thoroughly studied by Lucien Dällenbach in *The Mirror in the Text*. In his examination of the ways in which an element of a work can mirror the work as a whole, Dällenbach establishes a typology of the modalities of *mise en abyme* as *any internal mirror that reflects the whole of the narrative by simple, repeated or 'specious' (or paradoxical) duplication* (36).

### WORKS CITED


Santiago, Juan-Navarro points out that *Louisiana Red* is modeled on the same structure as *Red* and *Peter Dreyer* (1974; George E. Kent (1975)).

The novel provoked some of the most hostile attacks on the novel. Houston, for example, notes that *Louisiana Red* lacks interest and ambition of the love (51-52).

In his examination of the novel, Dallenbach establishes a whole level of the narrative by simple, repeated use of the *mise en abyme*. He does so with a whole 01' the narrative by simple, repeated use of the *mise en abyme*.

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