

"Black People's American Experience"

Since *Juice!* is Ishmael Reed's first novel in almost twenty years, many of its potential readers, intrigued, perhaps by its treatment of the O.J. Simpson murder trial, will probably be encountering Reed's work for the first time. Perhaps these readers are aware of him as an op-ed controversialist critical of media portrayals of African-Americans, particularly African-American men, skeptical of the achievement of African-American women writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, and a bete noire of white feminists and of the "liberal class" in general. That Reed was at one time controversial as the first, and arguably only, African-American "postmodern" writer of fiction, compared to Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme in his expression of the postmodern worldview and his disruptions of form and style, is likely at best merely an historical echo, however. Doubtless there are fewer readers now who can readily judge a new work by Ishmael Reed in the context of this earlier work and of his still-evolving career as a whole.

Those who have followed Reed's career as a writer should immediately recognize the significant differences between *Juice!* and the novels that initially brought attention to his unconventional fiction, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967) and *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969). In consonance with the defiant, iconoclastic spirit of the period, these novels employ a kind of surrealist farce that travesties all that it encompasses, including fictional form itself. They exhibit what will become Reed's signature hallucinatory imagery--"Hairy Sam" ruling over his urban kingdom (also called Hairy Same) from his seat on a toilet in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*--casual anachronism--although ostensibly a period Western, in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* characters listen to soul music and come across "old Buicks and skeletons of washing machines"--and outrageous names--Bukka Doopeyduk, Zozo Labrique, etc. They are entertaining in a deliberately zany kind of way, which on the one hand invests them with the spirit of postmodern comedy other writers of the time were venturing as an alternative to the sober realism of the 1950s, but on the other hand draws attention to the underlying racial and cultural issues more vividly than such sober realism could any longer achieve.

Even in their displacements and distortions, these two early novels maintain narrative coherence by adhering to an essentially allegorical structure through which the reader clearly is to discern a critique of American racial attitudes (on the part of both white and black characters)

as manifested in the present as well as in the historical American past (the two sometimes intersect, as they will also in the later *Flight to Canada* (1976)). *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* is a coming-of-age story of sorts, tracing its protagonist's recognition of the cultural and political corruption of his immediate environment and of the futility of his own attempts to accommodate himself to this society, given its ultimate hostility to his interests and its disregard for his well-being. While to a degree *Pallbearers* is a parody of the coming-of-age story (Bukka Doopeyduk doesn't survive to apply the lessons he's learned apart from the way he applies them by narrating his story from the grave), *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is an out-and-out parody of the Western genre. Its protagonist, the Loop Garoo Kid, also confronts a white authority figure, the rancher Drag Gibson, although in this mock Western the rancher and the outlaw (John Wesley Hardin) are united in their racism and in their efforts to do in the Loop Garoo Kid, who has escaped a Drag-directed massacre and is hiding out in a cave in the hills.

From the cave, Loop begins practicing a form of necromancy related to voodoo, an activity or state of being Reed will later explicitly identify as "Neo-HooDooism." (In *Yellow Back Radio*, the Loop GarooKid is at one point called a "HooDoocowboy.") The nature of this endeavor is suggested when we are told he performs "a tailor made micro-HooDoo mass to end 2000 years of bad news in a Bagi he had built in the corner of the cave." Although the spell is directed first of all at Drag Gibson and the town of *Yellow Back Radio*, the significance of Neo-HooDoo as a trope in Ishmael Reed's fiction is announced at the end of Loop's ceremony when he entreats "Black Hawk American Indian houngan of Hoo-Doo to

open up some of these prissy orthodox minds so that they will no longer call Black People's American experience "corrupt" "perverse" and "decadent." Please show them that Booker T. and the MG's, Etta James, Johnny Ace and Bojangle tapdancing is just as beautiful as anything that happened anywhere else in the world. Teach them that anywhere people go they have experience and that all experience is art.

While the anachronism involved here is hilarious, this incantation also rather succinctly expresses the philosophy of Neo-Hoodooism as it is further invoked in Reed's subsequent novels. "HooDoo" is the approach to both experience and art that, while most identified with the black culture of the Caribbean, later imported to New Orleans, is, in Reed's version, attributable to all non-white and indigenous cultural groups in the Western hemisphere that have in one way or another resisted the wholesale incorporation of "Western" values and practices. The spirit of

HooDoo thus animates the music of Booker T. and the MG's and the dance steps of Bojangles Robinson, and it affirms "Black People's American experience," which, although very "American" in the way it is shaped as a response to the conditions of these groups' encounter with Western values as embodied in the dominant culture, is finally not entirely assimilable to that culture. Ishmael Reed's fiction is both a celebration of the HooDoo aesthetic and itself an illustration of that aesthetic. Thus Reed writes novels, but, whether one finds them aesthetically satisfying or not, they are surely unlike novels written by anyone else in the way they explode expectations of what novels should be like.

Mumbo Jumbo (1972) and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974) are Reed's most thorough treatments of Neo-HooDooism, through the figure of Papa LaBas, portrayed as the most explicit example of what one critic has called a "HooDoo trickster." According to James Lindroth, the trickster "is driven by a mocking wit that subverts white authority and destroys white illusions of superiority while simultaneously promoting numerous value-laden symbols of black culture." ("Images of Subversion: Ishmael Reed and the HooDoo Trickster.") In *Mumbo Jumbo*, probably Reed's most intricate, resonant novel, the essence of HooDoo is evoked in "Jes Grew," a kind of spiritual distillation of HooDooism that first manifested itself in a 19th century New Orleans dance but that has its origins in ancient Egypt. Jes Grew has unmoored itself and inhabited the work of other artists and musicians. It encourages emotional release, as opposed to Western rationalism. In the words of Kathryn Hume, "those who practice the Jes Grew philosophy live for the present to enjoy every moment to the fullest, not simply to become something else in the distant future." ("Ishmael Reed and the Problematics of Control.") Acceptance of this philosophy of course threatens the established order, which profits from the ideological emphasis on "future," and so a secret society of the elite is trying to wipe it out.

Papa LaBas has been enlisted to foil this secret society and to recover an ancient text describing the original dance. He succeeds in the first task but fails at the second. Jes Grew is too appealing to too many to be stamped out, but it is also too dynamic and spontaneous to be adequately encapsulated in a single text. It has "grown" in too many directions, draws on too many different mediating inspirations to be given an authoritative expression. This variety is reflected in the form and style of Reed's novels, especially these earliest novels, which are characterized by what one critic calls their "syncretism," paralleling the syncretism of Jes Grew/Neo-HooDooism: "In Reed's novels, it is not uncommon to find the formal blend of

language mixed with the colloquial, as it is Reed's contention that such an occurrence in the narrative is more in keeping with the ways contemporary people influenced by popular culture really speak." (Reginald Martin, "Ishmael Reed's Syncretic Use of Language: Bathos as Popular Discourse.") The central narrative voice primarily acts as the facilitator of the "blend of language," allowing the different modes of language to come into contact. This voice otherwise is notable for its directness and its avoidance of "literary" dressing.

Reed's syncretism extends to the formal structures of his novels as well--although Reed uses variety and juxtaposition largely to undermine structure as associated with the conventional novel. Other texts and narrative forms are freely interpolated into the main narrative to create a collage-like effect, the phantasmagorical qualities of which are only intensified in works like *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and *Flight to Canadaby* the blurring of time and rapid shifting between characters and subplots. The latter novel may represent Reed's last really satisfying use of the syncretic method to create a broadly surreal comedy that keeps Reed's satire from becoming merely polemical. Although it focuses directly on the source of the American racial divide, slavery, in its story of an escaped slave's quest for freedom in Canada, as a parody of a slave narrative it doesn't exactly present an orthodox account of the Civil War period and the struggle for emancipation. While the portrayal of its white characters, including an antebellum slave master and Abraham Lincoln, is excoriating enough (in Reed's typical cartoonish mode), its black characters are certainly not portrayed one-dimensionally as victims in the way we would expect of a slave narrative. Both of the main characters incorporate elements of the Trickster figure, while the novel ultimately discredits the notion of "freedom" associated with the flight "north." The white-dominated culture created in North America won't willingly extend its concept of freedom to non-whites, ultimately making Reed's Neo-HooDooism a permanent form of resistance.

In the novels Reed has published after *Flight to Canada*, the satirical range has become much more constricted, the targets more personal, the issues at stake arguably more idiosyncratic, even petty. *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986) takes aim at feminism, depicting it in particular as hostile to African-American men and initiating that phase of Reed's career in which he became a scourge of white feminists (although *Reckless Eyeballing* represents black feminists as also joining in on the abuse). *Japanese by Spring* (1993) is an academic satire that savages all the scholarly tendencies of the university as excuses for self-aggrandizement and individual

agendas and depicts the academy as the redoubt of cowards and knaves. Aesthetically, this narrowing of satirical purpose has resulted in novels that are less adventurous, less interested in creating their own reality, more focused on evoking and critiquing existing reality. The humor is still there, but in this context of reduced satirical ambitions, Reed's mockery can seem heavy-handed, his exaggerated situations and behaviors merely contrivances. At the end of *Japanese by Spring*, when "Ishmael Reed" takes over as the main character, what could be if handled more nimbly an amusing metafictional conceit becomes instead just an opportunity for Ishmael Reed to editorialize and declaim.

Reed's chief editorial concern has become the problem of the besieged black man, and *Juice!* is wholly dedicated to elucidating that problem. The novel's protagonist is a cartoonist, Paul Blessings, who is fixated on O.J. Simpson, all of his trials, and the public reaction to Simpson as the embodiment of the image of the black man as killer, as "all black men rolled into one." Blessings keeps track of Simpson developments in minute detail, and his account moves back and forth from the original Simpson trial to the later civil trial to the incident in the Las Vegas hotel room that eventually led to his conviction for robbery to other episodes relating to Simpson, as well as all of the media response to and commentary about Simpson's actions. Reed uses the Simpson case to lambaste the American news media as the mouthpiece of cultural prejudice responsible for perpetuating stereotypes of the black man as Other. Since the criticisms made by Blessings (also known as "Bear") are the same criticisms--not just of media but also of feminists, academics, homosexual activists, politically correct liberals, as well as racist conservatives--made by Reed in his previous novels and in numerous of his public pronouncements, it is surpassingly obvious that Bear is a mouthpiece for Ishmael Reed, making the novel perhaps the most transparently polemical one Reed has written. It is as if the O.J. Simpson case provided Reed a fortuitously convenient instance that brings together all of his critical targets and allows him to take aim with an especially obsessive focus.

Paul Blessings' own obsession with Simpson is nothing if not comprehensive, and his insistence not just that racial fears contributed to the national fascination with Simpson's murder trial but that he was actually innocent of the charges against him initially give the novel a certain contrarian appeal. In addition, Blessings' surveys of the facts of the case and his media critique, while they occupy a large portion of the narrative, are not the only features of his story. Blessings is himself a media figure of modest renown, his cartoons featured on a public

television station in the transformation of which from an independent hippie station to a kind of low-rent Fox news he becomes involved. With O.J.'s downfall as a cautionary tale illustrating the dangers awaiting a black man who doesn't stick to the role assigned him, Blessings mutes the social commentary of his cartoons and plays along with the station manager and his reactionary agenda, even though that agenda includes using someone like Blessings to provide multicultural cover. Blessings even wins a prestigious cartoonist society prize for a cartoon perceived to be anti-O.J.

Reed thus implicates his protagonist in the very cultural practices the novel condemns, and in the process complicates our response to Paul Blessings as character and narrator enough to give *Juice!* some aesthetic credibility as a work of fiction rather than merely an extended screed masquerading as a novel. To an extent Reed holds his narrator up to satirical examination as well, if only to suggest how difficult it is to avoid reinscribing corrupt behavior while still trying to negotiate one's way in a corrupt system. But the satirical veneer is nevertheless very thin, and few readers will think that Blessings' demonstrated flaws as a human being are what invalidate his views of the O.J. Simpson case or gainsay his analysis of American society's attitude toward black men. Some, perhaps many, readers will find these views unconvincing and the analysis tendentious, but responding to the novel's argument as an argument is ultimately unavoidable given that so little effort is made to keeping that argument implicit, as is generally done in the best satire, while much is devoted to fleshing out argument in exhaustive and explicit detail.

It seems likely that Reed considers his audience to be mostly hostile to the argument. While it is possible that readers sympathetic to O.J. Simpson would enjoy Paul Blessings' contrarian account, the novel is most provocative as a challenge to readers who believe Simpson was guilty of double murder and subsequently received just, if insufficient, punishment. However, it doesn't seem likely that either set of readers would find the elaborate exposition of this account other than tedious after a while (for me it was relatively early), although perhaps all readers might be persuaded to take seriously the notion that more than concern for O.J. Simpson's victims were involved in the media coverage and commentary surrounding the "trial of the century." But at this point one might well ask: Why not offer an actual media or social critique, an essay or book on the public response to the Simpson trial and its aftermath, not a novel narrated by a substitute media critic in the guise of a fictional character? Surely Reed's

opinions on this subject are not so outrageous they couldn't be sustained through a straightforward nonfiction analysis or be accepted as seriously intended. Indeed, few people will read *Juice!* and not understand that the opinions expressed by Paul Blessings are consistent with the author's.

Certainly Ishmael Reed has always been a writer whose novels provide social and cultural commentary, often explicit rather than subtle. But some of those novels also provide complexity of form, style, and theme, as well as a more raucous kind of humor, missing from *Juice!*. Reed's best work qualifies as satire, but the satire of *Juice!*, as well as *Japanese by Spring* before it, has become disappointingly laborious, degenerating into a kind of ridicule without humor. Further, the narrowness of focus in both *Japanese by Spring* and *Juice!* means that future readers will probably find the subjects dated--in fact, they may already be dated--and the details included impenetrable. While I think readers will still come to *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, and *Mumbo Jumbo*, the arc of Reed's career nonetheless can be taken as illustration of what can happen to a writer who uses fiction as a medium for "saying something." However much what Reed wants to say leads in his best work to imaginative creations in which the "message" is just part of the interest we might as readers take in them, in *Juice!* the message now seems about the only thing of interest to the author.