The Satire of Ishmael Reed

Jiří Šalamoun

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From Non-standard Sexuality to Argumentation

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Contents

1 INTRODUCTION

This book came into existence as a result of an interesting paradox. Although Ishmael Reed is one of the key African American satirists, his satire has not generated as much critical attention as his postmodern texts,[1] his involvement in culture wars, and the key role he has played in the establishment of American literary multiculturalism.[2] Apart from these areas of Reed scholarship, critics often prefer to decipher his complex intertextual works, explain at least some of the plethora of references, and expound on their meaning rather than to comment on his satire. Nonetheless, such scholarship is valuable, as first time readers of Reed's novels are often confused because of their syncretism, synchronicity,[3] and the resulting

1 Even though Reed himself has rejected the label of a postmodern writer because of its Eurocentric emphasis, Dickson-Carr is correct in claiming that Reed's novels "in the 1970s provide excellent examples of both ironic revision and theories of postmodernism at work" (*African American Satire* 169). To an extent, this is a label that keeps accompanying Reed even up to the present day.

2 For example, Ludwig says that Reed is "nowadays in many ways the dean of American multiculturalism" because his writing influenced by African paganism was "in many ways the best representational model to promote a new pluralistic culture of secular variety" ("Ishmael Reed, the Sentimental Heathen" 139). For more information on the matter see Shinn's "The Art of War: Ishmael Reed and Frank Chin and the U.S. Black-Asian Alliance of Multicultural Satire," in which he claims that Reed is "one of the foremost publishers and promoters of multicultural works of literature that have been rejected and dismissed as 'minoritarian' and 'other'" (65).

3 The phrase is borrowed from literary scholar Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure, who summarises the relationship between Reed and his audience in the following way:

> Readers and critics have been complaining that Reed's books are difficult to read because of their numerous subtexts, their non-Aristotelian plots (or artistic arrangement of events), and their stock, flat characters – in almost all of the nine novels. Reed returns the favor by having characters either mock the conventional ways of writing novels or proclaim their being in favor of Aristotelian aesthetics and round characters. The point to be made here is that Reed always has many non-related things (Syncretism) going on at the same time (Synchronicity), while

complexity.[4] Monographs such as *The Dark Heathenism of the American Novelist Ishmael Reed* (Mvuyekure 2007) and *Ishmael Reed and the Ends of Race* (McGee 1997) help to enhance the readability of Reed's works – as does Darryl Dickson-Carr's *African American Satire* (2001), which examines Reed's satire more than any other monograph, and yet it also comments more on the why than on the how. Therefore, by choosing to describe what the aims of Reed's cultural wars are rather than to examine how he wages them, these seminal studies touch upon Reed's satire only fleetingly. Paradoxically, Reed is a key African American satirist and yet his satire remains largely undescribed – an omission that this book seeks to address.

The sole purpose of this book is to describe the undescribed satire of Ishmael Reed by answering the following research questions: How has the satire of Ishmael Reed evolved? Which satirical techniques are dominant at which stages of his literary career? Finally, if there are changes in Reed's preferences for satirical techniques how can they be explained? To answer these questions, I examine the satire present in ten novels against Leonard Feinberg's taxonomy of satirical techniques[5] to establish which satirical techniques are most frequently used by Reed and when.

The short answer to the three questions is that Reed's satire has evolved from a stage in which it very frequently ridicules through reference to non-standard sexuality to a stage in which it very frequently ridicules through logical argumentation. I connect this evolution to new social realities emerging in the United States—especially to a closed chapter of American history called post-racial America[6]—whose validity at the time of writing this book is rightly questioned. Nonethe-

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> his readers and critics tend to follow a straight line or one thing at a time in their reading. ("American Neo-HooDooism" 203–4)

While this complex relationship seems to be non-problematic in Reed's early works, his later novels (where he attacks exaggerated feminism) remain largely misunderstood. This in turn leads to a questionable understanding of Reed as an anti-feminist which contributed to Reed's less prominent position in American letters (in comparison with his early career, especially the publication of *Mumbo Jumbo* in 1972).

4 The resistance with which Reed's texts are greeted by university students is described in Kalenda Eaton's paper, "'You Have to Know Way Too Much?': Teaching Ishmael Reed in the University Classroom," which aptly summarizes the challenges faced by those who read Reed (and teach Reed) at the university level. One can only presume that the reactions of non-university readers who approach Reed's texts without the guidance of instructors might be even more abysmal than the title of Eaton's paper suggests.

5 Feinberg's taxonomy of 22 satirical techniques, which he describes in his seminal work *Introduction to Satire* (1967), is to my knowledge the most detailed taxonomy of satire put on paper. I have therefore chosen it over other descriptions of satire as I believe its usage leads to more nuanced results.

6 According to the *Random House Dictionary*, a post-racial era is "characterized by the absence of racial discord, discrimination, or prejudice previously or historically present" (n. pag.). This hopeful vision of American social life was especially common during the nation's first election of an African American president. As sociologists McAdam and Kloos claim, "when Barack Obama captured the White House in 2008, many heralded his victory as marking the long overdue onset of color-blind politics in America" (3). Yet, the reality of political life soon revealed that the concept of a post-racial

less, this was not the case during the late 1980s, the 1990s, and the 2010s, when Reed's latter novels were written and in which Reed tries to convince his fellow countrymen that racism has not left the country but only changed its appearance. This book shows that to influence such a changed audience a new mode of satire was needed, as the earlier one—which was inspired by the radicalism of Black Power and the Black Arts Movement—would no longer have been relevant in the changed conditions. The long answers to the above-cited research questions are presented in the following five chapters of this book. Before we progress further, however, allow me to discuss some potential pitfalls which lie along the way.

Traditionally, satire is understood to be a protean, unstable phenomenon and since this project works with satire it abounds with theoretical rabbit holes through which it can fall through. I would like to pay particular attention to two of them. The first one concerns definition; that is, the challenges of finding acceptable and agreed on definitions of satire and irony. Since satire and irony are fields where definitions have been contested for centuries, I have no intention of producing an authoritative account of satire in general, let alone that of Ishmael Reed in particular. For a different scholar might opt for different definitions and arrive at different results for the very same project. The second rabbit hole brings me to the intricacies of applying definitions, since some scholars rightly point out that irony is not given but instead lies in the eye of the interpreter (Hutcheon 43; Muecke 44), which I believe is also the case of satire. Hence, in spite of the fact that I have tried to limit my interpreter bias with the help of a linguistic theory of humour, my results cannot avoid being influenced by the social, cultural, and historical experience that has shaped my interpretation of the world and, by extension, that of the novels as well. Consequently, even though chapter five describes the evolution of Reed's satirical techniques from using non-standard sexuality and contrast-based irony to preferring argument-based satire, I offer this interpretation as a personal one with no claims as to its ultimate validity. Rather I think of my results in the same way as Wittgenstein thinks of the possibility of any language being complete at a given point in time.[7] Hence, my intention is only to add another street on the map of Ishmael Reed scholarship.

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society is nothing more than an ephemeral vision. Race expert Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw says that post-racial society "failed to produce a fundamental redistribution of racial power, nor did it eradicate white racism" (105). Nonetheless, in spite of being nothing more than an example of wishful thinking, as recent history clearly shows, the post-racial society is a concept with whose positive message many Americans identified. As such, it deserves critical attention and I fully examine the tenets of this concept in chapter six.

7 Of which he says the following:

> Do not be troubled by the fact that languages ... consist only of orders. If you want to say that this shows them to be incomplete, ask yourself whether our language is complete;— whether it was so before the symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus were

Speaking of maps and organisation, this book is divided into five chapters. Since the misinterpretation of satire is less likely to occur once the interpreter is more knowledgeable of the satirist's intentions and opinions (Hutcheon 87), the first chapter starts with an overview of the most constant opinions and observations on Ishmael Reed. It examines sources which Reed has rejected (such as the Black Arts Movement, the label of satirist, and the stereotypical portrayal of African Americans in the media) but which nonetheless have influenced him. It also examines sources which have been consistent companions to Reed in his cultural wars, namely the concept of Neo-HooDoo; the improvisatory nature of jazz, which carries over into his plotting and writing; and the power of everyday life to shape the subject matter of his novels.

The second chapter describes the methodological steps which I pursue in order to extract satirical episodes from the novels for analysis. It does so by focusing on what constitutes humour from a linguistic perspective and examines the lesser studied part of the common understanding of satire, which is often seen as a combination of attack and humour. The chapter details why I consider humour to be a critical component of the definition of satire and describes how it influences the interpreter's decision about what is satire and what is not.

The third chapter describes how I modify Frye's understanding of satire as a combination of humour and attack so that it remains relevant for the analysis of Reed's postmodern fiction. It also examines why this research project does not subscribe to the protean simile of satire according to which satire simply cannot be defined and why it favours the research of satire scholar Peter Petro, who claims that "we are dealing with a genre whose definition should be no more problematic than a definition of, say, 'mathematics.'" (8) Finally, it discusses textual episodes which include attack but not humour (and thus violate Frye's definition of satire) and yet can be considered satiric. Following the path charted by Swift in his *The Modest Proposal*, the chapter thus ends on why it is culturally acceptable that humour is at times omitted from the equation.

The fourth chapter departs from theory and examines the evolution of the satirical techniques employed by Ishmael Reed over the five decades of his literary career. It provides the reader with representative satirical episodes that document the transition of his satire and irony from contrast-based modes to argumentation-

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> incorporated in it; for these are, so to speak, suburbs of our language. (And how many houses or streets does it take before a town begins to be a town?) Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses. (18)

Wittgenstein's observation can be applied to the current state of research in scientific disciplines as well. Hence, both language and knowledge are, to an extent, open systems always in need of new stimuli.

based modes. Since these two modes are dominant in my analysis, I focus on them to the exclusion of others which appear less frequently or even scarcely (such as, for example, satire based on wordplay). The chapter proceeds chronologically starting with Reed's use of the dominant satirical technique of the early novels (non-standard sexuality) and ending with the dominant satirical technique of the later novels (argument-based satire). Nonetheless, at times, a technique is not represented frequently enough in a novel to be considered significant. Such a novel is then omitted and does not appear in my analysis.[8]

Last but not least, chapter five interprets the evolution of Reed's satire in the light of the recent social changes in the U.S. and ties it to the country's transition from the post-civil rights' stage to the post-racial stage. It examines the dependency of satire on social norms, the changed social norms associated with the transition of America into post-racial America, and the toll this change has had and continues to have on African Americans. In this final chapter I argue that the satire and irony of Ishmael Reed have evolved to remain effective and capable of influencing their audience in a country whose understandings of racism and multiculturalism have changed tremendously; I also argue that such satire and irony are more likely to effect change once both become more argumentative and perhaps less radical. And now, with preliminary matters over, let us begin our examination of the thoughts and sentiments that have shaped the literary output of Ishmael Reed.

Throughout the book, I use the MLA reference system, as outlined in *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (7th Edition). References are cited in the text and only very long references are presented in footnotes. While the context should make it clear what author and what text is being quoted, the full references can be found in the Works Cited section at the end of the book.

8 This can, for example, be seen in the discussion of non-standard sexuality in section 5.1, where *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* are omitted for this reason.

2 ISHMAEL REED: THE OPINIONS OF THE MAN BEHIND THE NOVELS

Ishmael Reed is a prolific African American author of ten novels, eight collections of essays, six collections of poetry, seven plays, and one opera. Over the five decades of his literary career, Reed has creatively exploited almost all Western literary genres: He revised the Bildungsroman (*The Freelance Pallbearers*), the Western (*Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*), the detective story (*Mumbo Jumbo, The Terrible Twos, The Terrible Threes*), Greek tragedy (*The Last Days of Louisiana Red*), the slave narrative (*Flight to Canada*), the epic (*Reckless Eyeballing*), the campus novel (*Japanese by Spring*), and the mockumentary (*Juice!*). These narrative excursions have drawn much attention to Reed,[9] who was described as a writer of exceptional erudition and imagination (Jařab 312). As such, Reed has had a significant impact on other seminal figures of African American literature and theory. For example, Henry Gates, Jr. says that Reed's "revisionary techniques of parody and pastiche generated the ideas" which he examines in his seminal *The Signifying Monkey* (*The Signifying Monkey* ix). And although Dickson-Carr notes that Reed has influenced "at least some of the younger satirical novelists of the 1980s and 1990s" (*African American Satire* 163), Reed's output also affected others such as "Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, August Wilson, Reginald Martin, Terry MacMillan, and Trey Ellis" (Mvuyekure *Dark Heathenism* vii). On account of his output, Reed has been described as "the most experimental of contemporary [African American] novelists" (Graham 11) and has received numerous awards.

9 According to Martin, in the late 1970s, "only one black male writer, Ishmael Reed, continued to receive any considerable attention in the American press" (*Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* 27). This level of critical attention has not waned over the years and hence Dick can claim that Reed has been given "more critical attention than almost any other contemporary African American male" (Dick, *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed* xix).

This chapter examines the sources which have influenced Reed and which have enabled him to reach this prominent position. It places emphasis on racially motivated sources in spite of the fact that at the beginning of his career, Reed was routinely likened to such prominent white writers as Pynchon, Burroughs, Barthelme, Mailer, and Vonnegut (Schmitz 69; Dick *Critical Response* xxiii). However, it would be mistaken to look for many common features between these writers and Reed, apart from a reliance on roughly similar postmodern forms and motives of writing. McGee is correct in observing that all of the mentioned writers "are never marked or marginalized by 'race'" and that "Reed never speaks from a position of authority within the dominant or hegemonic culture" (129). Since Reed is marked by race and speaks from a profoundly racial position, this chapter narrows down its inquiry to racial sources only. The chapter is divided into two parts: the first examines sources rejected by Reed which nonetheless influenced him. It pays special attention to the Black Arts Movement, the label of satirist, and the stereotypical representation of African Americans. The second part examines sources which have nourished Reed from his beginnings to the publication of his latest novel. It discusses the influence of the Umbra Society, African American jazzmen, and conception of everyday life which have prominently influenced Reed's multicultural art.

2.1 Sources, Labels, and Stereotypes Rejected: On the Black Arts Movement, the Label of Satirist, and the Media Portrayal of African Americans

True to being a proper satirist, Ishmael Reed has, in his novels and essays, consistently mocked the prejudices and blind spots of white American society.[10] Nonetheless, Reed has managed to be a consistent source of irritation for the African

10 Despite the numerous grants and prizes awarded to him, the critical reception of Ishmael Reed has been complex and disharmonious at times. One reason for this may lie in the fact that Reed has used his race-based sources of inspiration to experiment with Western literary genres in order to "undercut their conventional heroes and histories" (Jessee 6). Angered by what he perceives as the unjust treatment of African Americans in most media, Reed explains that his main occupation was to "humble Judeo-Christian culture" (Reed, "The Writer as a Seer" 63). Although such an intention might be shared by other writers, Reed is writing from a marginalized position as an African American. It is therefore understandable that his subversive fiction might not be to everyone's liking. This is, for example, documented by the fact that his current collections of essays—namely *Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media* (2010) and *Going Too Far* (2012)—had to be published in Canada because Reed says that American publishers refused to publish them in America (*Barack Obama and the Jim Crow Media* 13). Reed's iconoclastic position was further emphasised when his 1980s and 1990s novels started to attack exaggerated feminism. Yet, while his early novels explain why they attack Judeo-Christian culture and the reader can thus evaluate whether their attacks are justified or not, the latter novels are not as clear. Unfortunately for Reed, these novels (which I fully discuss in chapter four) have been misread and Reed has been labelled as a misogynist. Consequently, for much of the white population of the United States of America, Reed can be considered to be a wilful writer who is not willing to respect the status quo.

American intelligentsia as well.[11] This is surprising as his career began in the 1960s, when rebellion against the literary and political establishment in the form of Black Power and the Black Arts Movement was in vogue. It would hence be logical had Reed found allies in the prominent figures of the movement. Yet, as the following paragraphs show, this was not the case.

The Black Arts Movement was an artistic organisation affiliated with the Black Power movement, which came into existence as a result of what some African Americans in the 1960s perceived as the failure of the U.S. government to "protect civil rights workers," which led "to a shift from integrationist politics to the nationalistic slogan of 'Black Power'" (Umoja 539). The Black Arts Movement was related to Black Power and both demanded that art produced by African Americans mirrored "a radical new state of black consciousness" (Thompson 485). Since both organisations were most influential in the 1960s and 1970s (i.e., at the start of Reed's literary career), they had a formative influence over Reed's early literary output. Dickson-Carr, who calls Reed "a de facto leader of the Black Arts Movement generation" (*African American Satire* 163), pertinently summarises the overlap between the aims of the Black Arts Movement and those of Ishmael Reed, which is why I quote him in full:

> In the main, Reed agreed with the Black Aesthetic's goal of offering a richer portrayal of African Americans' complexities, free of demeaning stereotypes. Reed also posits a vision of history in his novels that places African and African American history and culture in the center rather than at the margins, where they had been cast by Western hierarchical thinking. Finally, Reed's novels demonstrate that art should be functional to the extent that it forces an alteration of the way the reader views and interprets history and culture. (*African American Satire* 120)

Yet this was not the case as Reed refused to be a "protest writer or an exponent of the black experience" (McGee 10). According to Martin, Reed's refusal to subscribe to a mode of literature championed by the New Black Aesthetic Critics angered its leading figures (such as Houston A. Baker and Addison Gayle), who in turn criticised Reed (*Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* 45–50). Yet, according to Dickson-Carr, such a critique did not alter Reed's decision not to "fit within prevalent notions of what an African American author should write about, both as a creative artist and cultural critic, especially when faced with criticism from the African American critical community" (*Contemporary African American Fiction* 193).

11 Hence, even though scholar of African American literature Chester Fontenot, Jr. argues that Reed's unwillingness to meet the expectations of white and African American critics helped Reed to be considered "as one of the best contemporary American writers" (20), Reed enjoys this position without receiving widespread acclaim.

In line with this view, Reed dealt with New Black Aesthetic Critics in his 1969 *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, where he mocks them by exaggerating their opinions ad absurdum: "All art must be for the end of liberating the masses. A landscape is only good when it shows the oppressor hanging from the tree" (36). To that, the novel's protagonist suggests the antidote of creative freedom by claiming that: "No one says a novel has to be one thing. 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). Fabre suggests that it is symptomatic of this fluidity of form that no "character, no episode, no detail, is more important than another" ("The Dialectics of Shit" 11), which eventually resulted in Reed's severance from other African American authors writing protest fiction.

Hence, in spite of early common features, the open nature of Reed's multicultural literature became incompatible with the movement's drive "to support black separatism/nationalism" (Thompson 485), because the latter was in direct contradiction with Reed's aesthetics, which "calls into question the tendency of literature to monumentalize one canonical form of discourse as *the* discourse" (Fox 49). As Reed states in an interview with Joseph Henry: "My idea of 'Neo-Hoodooism' is quite different from the Black Nationalist approach because I see West African imagination as capable of being inspired by many different cultures" (Dick and Singh 211). Consequently, despite the early similarities noted by Dickson-Carr above, one must conclude that the influence of the Black Arts Movement on Reed was partial and definitely over at the moment when Reed described the members of the Black Arts Movement as "mono-cultural" (Dick and Singh 211).

The rejection of the label of being only a satirist is also related to the Black Arts Movement, for which Reed was too innovative, because he used satire to discuss serious content. Martin suggests that while the New Black Aesthetic Critics "demanded a direct confronting of social issues ... [it] was most often done in serious prose" (42). He points out that when Reed started using satire to discuss serious matters, he used it to deal "with subjects only entertained with seriousness before" (42). He argues that, in the 1970s, Reed quickly realised that though the label of satirist might have been useful in attracting early positive reviews, at the same time it could also weaken the social criticism inherent in his novels (36–7). Being a very socially conscious author, Reed naturally wished to avoid such a possibility, which led him repeatedly to reject the idea of being considered only as a satirist.

It seems that Reed must have felt the possibility of being sidelined as a satirist as all too real, as he rejects the label of a mere satirist in one interview after another. For example, in an interview with Peter Nazareth he says that: "People would like to dismiss me as a humourist or a satirist or a parodist" (Dick and Singh 184). Further, in an interview with Abbott and Simmons he goes on to say: "I use all the techniques that are available, traditional and new ones. Lots of people say

I'm a satirist but I also write mystery and I write poems which are not necessarily satirical, and I write ballads" (Dick and Singh 84). Ultimately, he expresses the unease behind such statements in an interview with Helm, "Satire is one of the techniques I use. But a lot of people just want to leave it at that" (Dick and Singh 148). This tendency to overlook his critical commentary seems to accompany Reed throughout his career as, even later, he feels the need to point out that his satire does indeed include social commentary:

> The Raven myths of the Pacific Northwest are comic, but they deal with serious subjects: the creation of the world and the origin of Death. The major toast of the Afro-American tradition, "The Signifying Monkey," is comic, but it makes a serious point: how the weak are capable of overcoming the strong through wit... My work is also comic, but it makes, I feel, serious points about politics, culture, and religion. ("The Tradition of Serious Comedy in Afro-American Literature" 139–40)

This need to justify the use of satire hints at larger problems at play in the context of racial equality. Even though social commentary has been a customary part of the satire written by white authors for centuries, Henry Gates, Jr. claims that Reed's white targets might use the label of satirist to dismiss his critique.[12] It can be presumed that Reed's vehemence in rejecting the label might have been inspired by multiple such dismissals. Yet, this in turn shows that Reed's satire has been successful in angering its targets, as otherwise there would be no need to dismiss or diminish it. Interestingly enough, Reed's rejection of the label only shows how much he cares about the efficacy of his satire – which in turn validates his use of satire for the discussion of serious issues because it is effective and is noted by its targets.

Finally, the last source of influence which Reed often rejects—yet which has had a formidable sway over his literary output—is the stereotypical portrayal of African Americans in the media. For example, when watching the news in 1992, Reed observed a discrepancy between a news item and its visual representation. While it was suggested that crime rates were high in impoverished urban areas and affected

12 Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains Reed's motivation by saying that:

> Reed's reputation most often is subsumed under the vague, dubious, and often derogatory euphemism of "satirist"—as if that form of writing relegated his stature as an artist to some nebulous corner of the absurd or else, as with so many labels, allowed him to be dismissed summarily. ("Rev. of *Flight to Canada*" 120)

Despite the fact that the relationship between the men grew more complex after this review, Gates at that time defended Reed by commenting that his voice was important in revealing the essential role of African Americans in the creation of the culture of the United States of America (120), and hence that no dismissal should be in order.