

# Ishmael Reed's Subversively Potent Images

Narrative strategies in *Mumbo-Jumbo* and *Japanese by Spring*

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The image of African-Americans has undergone a tremendous re-structuring in the American novel over the past several decades. The methods of deconstructing and reconstructing, no matter how one defines those terms, have been various and substantial. Many writers have taken an aggressive approach in demanding a re-evaluation of how "African-American" can be conceived and defined, while others have taken a quasi-legalistic accounting of historical abuses that swing between the self-righteous and the self-pitying. Of course, novels slip aside those descriptions and often work with many approaches at once. One thing is certain, though, the African-American novel has demolished former images and recreated compelling new ones.

While some novelists feel politically misguided or relish accusative tones, in general, African-American novelists write with circumspect care and keen awareness of the images they create and promote. They know all too well how images shape attitudes and actions in the real world. For the best writers, the intensity of their overall creativity has not been hindered by this hyper-attention to images. Instead, their creativity seems to flourish amid the often conflicting demands of setting the record straight, expressing justifiable outrage, and forcing a fresh image into the fray that works within the novel as a viable construct, within society as a criticism and within culture as a potential new archetype. Few other groups of writers have ever had to struggle with this particular burden of historical, social and narrative claims to creative attention. Few other groups have been so successful.

Among the African-American writers of the post-war generation, Ishmael Reed is one of the most compelling for the way he constructs the image of African-Americans without foregoing a lively imagination, potent sense of humor and a commitment to many ends at once. Like the trickster archetypes he draws on for inspiration, Reed knows how to have a good time. He takes more than his share of poetic liberties, exploits his narrative license and relishes post-modern ironic play.

He uses the past and the present as ironically as any African–American writer working today. Of course, even the term “African–American” must be taken with a spoonful of irony as Reed’s background and aims are a mish–mash of influences, genetic and narrative, and of loyalties, progressive and entertaining.

In particular, his two novels, *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Japanese by Spring* take direct aim at the confusing images of African–Americans by interrogating their deepest structures and hidden interiors. He creates a fable of subversion in *Mumbo Jumbo* (MJ) and a re–vamped Bildungsroman in *Japanese by Spring* (JBS). Both novels seek to re–establish the image of African–Americans on far different foundations than many of his contemporary novelists, and with more earnest intent disguised in his playful exterior. He succeeds as much because of his sense of humor and narrative strategies, as because of the righteousness of his cause.

Reed’s narrative methods of constructing images stand out for their ironic sensibility, balanced point of view and clever strategizing. Several of his techniques are essential to understanding how he creates images and how different he is from other writers. First of all, Reed is a master of subverting from the inside what he sees as being imposed from the outside. His focus is on opening up pre–conceived images and re–imagining them. Secondly, his narrative is a continual disruption of coherent process. His plots move to their own rhythms, a consciously musical metaphor in MJ and to their own tempo, as in the unusual pacing in JBS. Third, in both novels, Reed combines the realism and fantasy that grows out of a sharp foregrounding of language, whether arising from the tradition of oral literature and communal storytelling, as in MJ, or from the everyday patter of modern campus speech, in JBS. Kinds of language use create their own images, and Reed wants to re–fashion those with different kinds of language.

The fourth key strategy that Reed employs draws from the tradition of African mythology and oral storytelling. Both novels have a kind of thematic tricksterism, where the reader comes to believe the narrative heads in direction with one intent, only to find it is really another direction altogether. Reed himself becomes a kind of trickster figure, as Lindroth argues “Reed, like his protagonists, dons the trickster’s mask to expose society’s hidden evils” (Lindroth 1). It is easy to see why Reed likes the trickster imagery. The sense of re–historicizing in this trickster fashion, as in MJ and re–politicizing, also in trickster fashion, as in JBS offer a unique vision of how to reconvene images in the hard work of cultural growth and historical understanding that the novel offers. This rewriting of history and repositioning of power dynamics creates a different pattern of image–construction altogether.

These specific strategies considered one by one may not appear radical, but the combined effect shows Reed’s status as one of the masters of the contemporary

novel. *Image*–ination and re–*image*–ination are very different processes, but run parallel to each other. This double movement, to take apart the ideologically constructed image already accepted and to recreate a new one, requires a delicate sense of balance. This is a double burden on the writer, but one that many have succeeded in accomplishing. His commentary not only positions himself within the larger culture, but brings the novel out into the political academic debates raging in America in the early 1990s.

Image and identity are closely intertwined, though can be separated within a narrative sphere. Image is the external counterpart to the interior experience of identity. In this paper, image will refer to the representation of a coherent singularity in the social or cultural sphere, while identity will refer to the individual or interior experiencing of coherence. An examination of how Reed ironizes from the inside, disrupts narrative process, employs language, plays tricks with the themes and re–historicizes and re–politicizes cultural constructs can show the achievements not only of his novels, but all novels that travel a similar path.

### Ironizing from inside

Turnabout is fair play for Reed and he clearly delights in exposing the limitations of African–American images from his position inside. His irony achieves both hilarious and critical effects. He is a satirist bent on exposing cultural mendacity and social hegemony. His strategy for achieving that is his ironic point of view, one that is bitter, but never aggressive. In *MJ* and *JBS*, he easily sketches caricatures based on predominant stereotypes, but renders those ineffectual as characters within his narrative or inverts their characteristics through plot twists or humorous reversals.

In the campus novel *JBS*, Reed finds a sleepy, ‘second–class’ university set in its ways. All the characters, from teachers to administrators to students, have staked out their positions and eagerly defend them, though without much show of teeth. Into this academic and political stalemate comes Dr. Yamato, who, when Japanese backers buy the university and install him as president, starts to institute changes to the university with ironic fury. In what could be a direct quote from many an actual college president, Yamato says, “My backers would like to eliminate all of these courses which allow for so much foolishness” (*JBS* 90). What foolishness he refers to is all of the African, Chicano, Asian–American, Native–American and African–American studies departments. In one directive, they are summarily eliminated. In place of those departments, “We will have a new department, European Studies, with the same size budget and faculty as the rest” (*JBS* 90). Reed here perfectly captures the process of university politics with all its authoritarianism and absurdity.

His point, though, underlines the random and precarious nature of departments, which seek to argue for bodies of knowledge that further or ignore images. The images created within a methodology or discipline achieve social effects far beyond the simplicity of their formation. His sense of irony is furthered when Yamato decides that the entire history of Western philosophy could be reduced to one week. Reed indirectly poses the question of what type of image would be created by such a syllabus. How important would the “dead white males” of the western canon appear to be given one week in a survey course?

Reed's satiric intent brings out the frail interior structure of the university system, one that Reed knows from his own position as a faculty member himself. From another direction, too, Yamato's takeover poses problems for the ways academia establishes images. Japanese language becomes a required course for all students, and teachers. The central character Puttbutt has no problem as he has been studying Japanese, but many of the other faculty members have their learning abilities exposed as at least semi-fraudulent by this requirement. Reed of course is indulging in exaggeration, a standard of American satire, but as each faculty member is presented with a copy of a Japanese textbook, the language text becomes an ironic marker, (much like English dictionaries in Japan), of what must be acceded to in the process of ideological conquest.

A further component of the academic system is put to the test through Reed's irony. As Puttbutt takes over the college in JBS, he sends out letters:

He had sent a letter to the campus deconstructionists, informing them of their termination. The letters said you're fired. Those who believed that the words “you're fired” meant exactly that could finish the semester. Those who felt that the words only referred to themselves would have to leave immediately. (JBS 132)

This satirical play aims at part in deconstructionists and emphasizes the degree to which satire is seen not as a play of signification but as a real-world action that has meaning beyond the novel. Irony is the basic, underlying tone of Reed's works as he seeks to move from imposed discourse to flexible knowledge. He achieves this with several strategies (as mentioned before, disrupted narrative, playing with language, thematic tricksterism and re-historicizing and re-politicizing) that all manage, like a trickster to “contuse communication, reveal the ambiguity of knowledge and play with perspective” (Davis qtd in Anderson 3). Reed's biting the hand that feeds him—the university system—is at the center of his approach.

His attack on the stereotypical roles offered in academia, though, must be juxtaposed against his positive view of the role of writer. Anderson notes importantly that “For

Reed, it is all about the artist with no boundaries and no limitations” in which “the artist is merely one of several arbiters of meaning”(Anderson 4). The rather narrow focus of JBS contrasts with MJ. That novel also works with exaggeration, but with a broader focus. As Ludwig points out, “Most statements in Mumbo Jumbo may be hyperbolic or far-fetched, yet their intrinsic content as statements is clear” (Ludwig 2). MJ stretches its boundaries much farther and uses language as a scalpel to open up festering internal problems.

The characters in MJ have no ironic function in themselves, as Puttbutt does in JBS, but they serve larger goals of satire and parody. Papa LaBas, Black Herman and the other figures take action, rather than cynically observe from the sidelines. The “inside” from which Reed ironizes in MJ, is American society itself. His huge jumps in narration, massive canvas, and sharply directed hyperbole, are directed towards ironizing the American culture as a whole. The division of forces into the Dionysian dancing of Jes Grew and the controlling ideology of the Atonists is satire of sweeping force and disruptive chaos. Reed’s method of creating images intends to “expose society’s hidden evils, and the weapon wielded with telling force is scatological parody bordering on the obscene” (Lindroth 1). Reed’s novels have a repeated sense of opening up what appears to be a self-referential, complete system to reveal its failings and insecurities.

That he does this within the context of African-American images manages to simultaneously redirect attention to the origins of those images, ponder the purpose and process of their original formation and suggest directions for reconsidering more accurate and productive images. Through satire and irony, Reed works from inside hegemonic structures, America and academia, outwards towards a more open and honest expressive territory.

### Disrupting narrative process

Another strategy Reed employs is a disruptive narrative. For Reed, this means setting aside narrative conventions to enhance or sublimate elements of his novels that contribute to images. Reed’s narratives refuse to produce images in even the same ways as other contemporary African-American novelists. Though JBS makes use of the conventions of the campus novel and MJ of the detective novel, MJ eventually reveals itself as an anti-detective novel while JBS ranges far beyond the usual campus political debates. Reed’s inversions, tangling and departures from those forms create less stable images, but ones whose uncertainty have a powerful authenticity.

In JBS, Reed takes apart the monoculturalist ideology of the American campus by a hyperbolic insertion of the monoculturalist ideology of Japanese. His intent is

not a counter-racist repositioning of African-American culture as better than Asian, instead, what he attacks is any and all monoculturalist ideologies. The outrageous statements of Dr. Yamato put even right-wing nationalists in Japan to shame. So, too, one senses that Reed is being provocative by including the Japanese. Repeatedly through the novel, he displays a love of Japanese culture, especially in the details of paintings, writers and the language that Puttbutt has accumulated, if not quite internalized. The Japanese takeover is more plot device and rhetorical question than representation of any actuality.

So, too, Reed employs ideological types, whose purpose is "as one-dimensional vessels for his critiques of monoculturalism and university life" (Womack 3). The characters do not necessarily demand fleshing out, as he sketches their essence in traditional satiric form. Whenever one expects a realistic presentation of character, Reed gives a typology, and when one expects a certain simplicity of characterization, he offers a telling, fleshed out set of details. In short, his characterization is a disruptive process that keeps the narrative from accruing a totalizing ideological power. He subverts not only the dominant culture, but also subverts his own narrative.

One of the characters he includes in his novel is Ishmael Reed. In *JBS*, this has satirical effect, but also seeks to disrupt the narrative. As with his way of ironizing, authorial intrusion seeks to ground the narrative in the outside world, rather than in itself. The character Puttbutt knows the "character" Ishmael Reed and talks with him at lunch. Their conversation heightens the ironic criticism. When Puttbutt mentions his search for a better home, Reed gives him the name of a realtor. The irony here is the difficulty of African-Americans needing a special realtor to find housing in traditionally white neighborhoods where homes are hard to find, and secondly that a "real" character is giving an "imaginary" character help. The doubling of irony here attacks the process of "redlining," an American practice of segregation through housing, while making a joke out of a serious practical problem faced by many African-Americans.

In their conversation, Puttbutt and Reed also touch on other issues such as diversity on campus. Puttbutt, who has been vocal against diversity in an "Uncle Tom" manner for years, has changed his mind when it serves his promotion. Puttbutt says, "From now on my policy is one of enlightened self-interest" (*JBS* 131). Reed is shocked at his hypocrisy and when Puttbutt hands him a copy of his Japanese language textbook "Japanese by Spring," (the same title as the novel itself), Reed can only look at him in a daze, not even having the energy to argue back when Puttbutt claims that "the twenty-first century is going to be a yellow century" and that Reed better get on the "yellow Shinkansen before it leaves the station" (*JBS* 131). Previously, Puttbutt had already reviewed a book by Reed with this summary

dismissal, “For those looking for plot, character development and logic, skip this one.” The irony here of course is that Reed’s techniques rely almost entirely on “disnarrated” plot, undeveloped characters and emotional and comic logic far removed from the Platonic logic that Dr. Yamato disdains. The narrative disruption of this conversation hardly furthers the underlying plot but offers a tantalizing bit satiric critique. Reed doesn’t mind stopping for a joke, even at his own expense.

It’s hard to ascertain how Reed’s quoting of himself affects the flow of the narrative, but it does slow the pace, yet grounds it outside the diegesis. That Reed wants to speak for himself inside a novel that is speaking for him is a marvelous play of narrative force that suggests conversations might just be as relevant to genuine dialogue as novelistic forms. The effect of his disruption also moves the discourse of the novel to of a spoken language, rather than written, and the charade of authorial intent is given a good laugh. This movement towards orality is part of Reed’s strategy for re-creating images based on traditional African motifs, rather than western forms.

Including such conversations comically undermines the force of the author’s voice, while disallowing a totalizing ideology. It’s as if he says, you can’t have your novel form and take it seriously, too. Rather than have the novel speak for Reed, as many authors, critics and readers might imagine, he undercuts this authorial belief by putting himself in as a character that speaks for himself. It’s as if to say, the potential for misunderstanding what his narrative says, as has been the case with many African-American writers, is so high that he needs to doubly enunciate his words, once in the novel as a whole and once in his own character’s voice.

In *MJ*, his disruptive technique is considerably different. Reed contrives huge leaps in narrative time, inserts facts from research, such as bomb tonnage in America’s wars, and has different voices speaking through different narrative threads. All of these strategies make the novel an uncertain provider of definitive images. In contrast to the corrective, didactic tendencies of African-American writers such as Ralph Ellison or James Baldwin, Reed challenges the very notion that a narrative can provide a meaningful and relevant image of any type. His characters remain symbolic ciphers of ideological positions, yet they do not seek to speak for all African Americans or claim to be better images. Rather, the image-making capacity of narrative is brought into question.

*MJ* appears to be a detective novel with a central quest to find the cause of “Jes Grew,” the dance-infection that keeps spreading in all directions. However, *MJ* is “no conventional work of detection, but a metaphysical detective novel that defies western logic and refuses closure” (Swope 2). Like the trickster figures that appear as central images, Reed’s novel works at the “cultural crossroads,” both

metaphysically and narratively. He sends the reader in all directions from that crossroads and thereby, as Swope argues, creates “opposing versions of space...” in “new spatial forms and new combinations that in their very production upset the spatial order of the West; that is, the spatial logic upon which the detective relies” (Swope 3). One might consider Reed’s work an anti-detective novel, as the discovering, rather than solving, of mysteries is a central thrust of the novel.

The crime detective narrative is taken apart in other ways as well. Not only does the classic detective reconstruct the past to make sense of it, but the goal is to expose a crime. However, the “crime” remains a mystery. The Hoodoo religion that informs the narrative is not concerned with explanations but with respect and admiration for how Jes Grew converts its believers. The western detective narrative is thus refused completely, and the narrative disruption he enacts is a sort of undoing of the crime itself. Encoded into the narratives of history and crime is an ideological quest for rectitude, retribution and punishment. Reed denies the initial crime that initiates history, and the images that history produces. The refusal expresses itself as chaos within the novel, but a type of chaos that is fertile and productive of new images. As Swope points out,

Reed suspends his reader, not on a side—as does Atonism—or at an end point—as does the science of detection—but at a multi-directional, multi-cultural crossroads where the lines that define history and reality are ruptured, regenerated, and revised.” (Swope 7)

Whether or not the crime is solved or the narrative of history established is less important than how the crossroads works as an ongoing symbol of creative cultural production. Reed directs us not to a new image of African-Americans but to the cultural fount where images originate.

This theme is emphasized by many of the attempts by the Atonists to stop the growth of Jes Grew, and by extension the power of dance, the central expressive art form of African culture. All through MJ, the Atonists seek to build highways, clear paths dissected the landscape that can be policed and controlled, while Jes Grew spreads like jazz in unexpected spiritual directions.

Atonism is not, then, defeated by the instantiation of a different ‘right way,’ but rather by the obliteration of the either/or, by the rupture of planes that occurs at the crossroads where the smooth and striated interact, compete, and potentially explode. (Swope 12)



The pattern of Reed's narrative draws on this symbol of the crossroads to create his novel's story lines, symbolic patterns and fresh sets of images, even if those images manifest themselves only as passing voices.

Throughout MJ, Reed leaves the voices to speak for themselves. Ludwig calls this "free indirect discourse focalizing," (Ludwig 2) a complex narratological term that is highly postmodern, yet in Reed's usage more mythological than deconstructive. The structural form of this multi-narrational pattern is perhaps less relevant than its ironic usage. Even though all levels of the diegesis are pronounced similarly, making the meta-levels hard to disentangle (Ludwig 2), the effect of this creates a continual sense of irony. No voice has predominance over any other. The combined effect of his hyperbole together with the equal-leveled pronouncements of various voices creates a heightened tension. The voices seem to erupt from inside the narratives and create multiple points of view whose juxtaposition is ironic.

It is the juxtaposition of those voices that begins the formation of new images. The disruption of Reed's narrative in MJ is a kind of inversion of the typical mystery-detective plot. The mystery remains a mystery at the end, and if anything is deepened into a respect and appreciation of its beauty. That appreciation is not the creation of a new image or identity, but an appreciation of the one that forms naturally in an organic process.

### Other images, other languages

Perhaps the most compelling way Reed produces new images derives from his inclusion of African-American cultural forms into his novels. Reed "places the products of the black creative imagination in all areas of endeavor, but particularly in music, on a par with the best that the European imagination has accomplished" (Lindroth 8). In MJ, Reed centers the narrative on the hoodoo religion, which derives from the JuJu religion of Africa, on a level with the Judeo-Christian tradition. The novel's title is a term used disparagingly for nonsense and hoodoo itself is an opprobrium for superstition. Reed rejuvenates those terms and uses them as a central source of new images.

The cultural products deriving from JuJu take different forms than the lasting, concrete patterns of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In particular, music, as performance, not composition, forms a central part of Reed's imagery. The tradition of performed communal music, which is not written down or transcribed transcription, infuses Reed's novel with an alternative language. The Judeo-Christian tradition of music based in the written form of compositions contrasts strongly with the African tradition based on performance. The distinction would not be important except for the

western European priority accorded written cultural products and the denigration of cultural forms that remain rooted in oral tradition.

In this sense, Reed has taken a cue from deconstructionists on how hierarchies are constructed, and why, but Reed subverts those hierarchies by re-positioning them, though without criticizing the products of Judeo-Christian culture. Nowhere does he say that classical music is in any way lesser than jazz, but rather he seeks to position jazz as equal to classical, storytelling as equal to novels, and hoodoo rituals as equal to Catholic cathedrals. In all these, the oral communal nature of the art form is re-positioned and re-evaluated.

Reed's inclusion of non-written art forms inside a written art form has a degree of irony, but it is not that he exploits the novels heteroglossia but how he does it that is of interest. By focusing again and again on the details of African-inspired music, Reed redefines the driving force of American history. He sees jazz musicians as incarnations of gods and the work ethic as a need to jam (or improvise music).

1920 Charlie Parker, the houngan (a word derived from n'gana gana) for whom there was no master adept enough to award him the Asson, is born. 1920-1930. That 1 decade which doesn't seem so much a part of American history as the hidden After-Hours of America struggling to jam. To Get through. (MJ 16)

Here, Reed reduces the events of a decade to musical desire and individual development. Charlie Parker brings "the word" in the form of musical improvisation and the hidden nature of America is its addiction to music. The mysterious dance infection of "Jes Grew" becomes a central concept, tied to the Ancient Egyptians, rehistoricized as black Egyptians, and contrasted with the white America of Brooklyn Bridge salesman and circus barkers and the British Empire's sunset in Europe. Indeed, the novel starts in New Orleans, the cradle of jazz, and quickly moves to New York City, the childhood home of jazz. The only other geographical settings are Africa and Haiti.

The central place setting of New York's Harlem is the site of Papa LaBas' Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral, a hoodoo palace filled with rooms named after specific musical styles, "Weary Blues" "Groove Bang" and "Jive Around." These types of blues and jazz rhythmic styles are equal, in Reed's narrative argument, to that of European music. The crimes of racial oppression as well as the suppression of historical accuracy come from a group called the Atonists, who have no sense of music, dance or other activities that the Jes Grew phenomenon inspires. Music becomes the dividing line in Reed's rewriting of American cultural history.

In addition to music, Reed incorporates into the narrative another language, one impossible to fully represent in words—dance. His descriptions of types of dance “Eagle Rock,” “Sassy Bump” and “Mooche” (MJ 4) all point towards the state of trance resulting from ritualistic dance. The African roots of dance as a communal expression are essential to understand how Reed’s incorporation of this non-linguistic element into his novel redefines how novels produce meaning in images. Unlike the “phallogocentric” texts of western narrative, Reed wants to insert aporias in the form of dance as key elements of his narrative. These aporias point out the weakness of narratives that include them unconsciously, while restructuring the language of the novel in other than linguistic terms.

Similarly, one of the plot threads involves the inability to bring together a divided text that might reveal the mystery of Jes Grew. If brought together, the text would form a coherent explanation of Jes Grew and the ancient mysteries of Egypt, but was divided and sent in different directions, both as protection and as temporary destruction. The connection between the dispersal of the texts and the African diaspora resulting from slavery repeat through the novel. With this metaphor, Reed seems to be denying hope of reconstituting the original core from which new images could be derived, but the tension the dispersal creates remains highly productive. At least, the ongoing confrontation between the dancers infected with Jes Grew and the attempts by the Atonists to stop the dancing offer a continuing source of dynamic tension. Papa LaBas understands this as the beginning of a re-conceptualization for African-Americans in the new world.

Reed challenges language as the only meaning-creating system by showing that language cannot contain all cultural expressions. In that sense, the image of African-Americans is simply inexpressible in a language-based text like a novel. What is left out of the text is part of Jes Grew, which is “nothing we can bring into focus or categorize; once we call it 1 thing it forms into something else...This is a psychic epidemic” (MJ 4).

This psychic epidemic results in confused language and hoodoo language in MJ and in different voices and ways of speaking in JBS. The hoodoo language of MJ is foregrounded repeated and given a radically “other” position. The many manifestations of the language occur in slang, used extensively in the novel, and magical language, used to placate the loas in ritual ceremonies. Reed also employs the language of myth and of western science, juxtaposing those voices as eternally opposed.

In JBS, the language learning text for Japanese becomes a repeated symbol of miscommunication. The lessons Puttbutt undertakes in Japanese bring in radically different conceptions and attitudes. He understands those differences to some

extent, yet Puttbutt ultimately speaks the language of power and academia. The academic communication that flies back and forth through the story serves as satiric counterpoint, revealing that a true African–American identity may simply not be achievable in the language of academia. Language is more divisive than communicative, with each of the academics staking out their position by means of key phrases and jargon.

The academic language in *JBS* ends up as much mumbo jumbo as the language of musical subculture in *MJ*. But that mumbo jumbo has meaning for those who speak it. Reed suggests that language ultimately fails to bring together a coherent sense of identity, yet can still be a powerful ally in the dismantling of oppressive stereotypes. Reed uses his satiric wit to uncover the absurd workings of language and to give respect to its alternative manifestations.

### Thematic tricksterism

This trickster figure is central to Reed's novels, both as plot element and metaphoric imagery. Both novels' central figures are tricksters, one of great power, the other of more comic persuasion. The archetype of the trickster appears in African storytelling with tremendous frequency. One of the most notorious, and most loved, of figures, the trickster changes stories, informs the misguided, fools vast numbers of people and distorts the commonly mistaken belief towards a more realistic view of the world. The trickster figure also plays a part in religion, incarnating into gods and goddesses in Hoodoo religious practice and acting as a potent ally of humans amongst the deities. Reed uses these trickster figures as central elements of his novels.

The figure of Papa LaBas in *MJ* is a Haitian incarnation of Papa Legba who derives from the African deity Legba. This trickster figure mediates between the material and spiritual world and holds an esteemed place in the pantheon of voodoo deities. Having lived for thousands of years, LaBas exerts force on the direction of history, as wise man, teacher and conjurer. He holds tremendous power in his person, yet wields that power with care, intervening in events only when the time is right.

Puttbutt in *JBS*, as his comic name suggests, is more of a shape shifter. He is done with family, a lone figure, you may not know entirely what he is doing, but is still capable of changing the course of events. He is a mediator between different worlds, but so pliable that he becomes an academic everyman. His father and grandfather act more obviously as trickster figures, moving between the secretive world of international organizations and the everyday academic world where Puttbutt lives. The male ancestors appear at key points in the narrative to change the direction of events and

intervene as protective deities. In *JBS*, Reed also inserts himself as a character. His role is not exactly that of trickster, though authorial intrusion always has that element, but of commentator, summarizer, and father figure sent in to bring events to some resolution.

Reed suggests that African–American images are, like these deities, essentially unrepresentable in all their manifestations. That is, he makes the argument that without the trickster figure, the western novel form is unable to create African–American images. “A fundamental source of Reed’s subversive imagery is hoodoo, with its rituals, conjure men and women, and its spirits, or loas of whom chief examples re the trickster deities Legba, Guede and Erzulie.” (Lindroth 1). That is, the deities serve a subversive function, able to undermine what happens at the surface level of the novel, but additionally broaden the underlying shifting of symbolic forces. Without considering that African imagery, Reed’s novels cannot be understood and his images of African–Americans lose their context.

Anderson goes even farther in noting, “one way to read the paradoxical way Reed explores race in his fiction is to acknowledge its trickster nature” (Anderson 2). The trickster is not a metaphor so much as a communal signification that indicates the unrestrained aspects of the human psyche (Anderson 2). That is, Reed’s exploration of race, the way he creates racial images, roots itself in the trickster figure. Understanding the trickster image explicates his symbolism and furthermore centralizes his thematics. Race is a central issue in Reed’s novels, and the appearance of trickster figures signals both the chaotic injustice of the current situation and the idealistic hope for its rectification. Reed, like the tricksters, creates order through lessons embodied in acted–out tricks. The trickster serves as a sort of *deus ex machina* that rights wrongs and restores social values. For Reed, the trickster reinstates cultural values when multiple cultures collide with unfair results.

The trickster, though, is a different kind of figure from western archetypes. The trickster exposes the “unity of opposed forces” (Anderson 3), without necessarily resolving those forces in one direction. Instead, a more complex dynamic results where narrative forces remain opposed yet in balance. In contrast, the European concept of Greek and Roman culture heroes seek clear resolution of multiple opposed forces into a singular, coherent paradigm. This important difference becomes one of Reed’s most important contributions to the contemporary African–American novel and its range of images.

The trickster figure exposes the coexistence of narrative forces, disparate images and seemingly unrelated events. In *JBS*, Reed uses the trickster figure to extol multiculturalism, though ironically through the hyperbole of extreme monoculturalism. He does this by bringing in another point of view through the character of Yamato

and through his grandfather's trickster character to the cultural debates in American academia. The effect of this wedging in of Japanese culture at first divides and separates the campus groups but ultimately brings them back together into a coherent set of counterpoised approaches.

Through this strategy of splitting up to expose then bringing back together, "Reed reminds us of the inherent dangers of any agenda that neglects to avail itself of the values of inclusiveness and pluralism" (Womack 8). The trickster figure is one that "right wrongs" and resets the agenda through an eventual inclusive and pluralistic resolution. The trickster serves as a role model with two aspects: subversive and destructive of existing paradigms and inclusive and reparative of multi-part integrations. The trickster figure wants not just to enlighten but moreover to produce an understanding that will continue to enlighten. That is, Reed, like his trickster figures offers a set of strategies that will continue to produce new images. His "hoodoo aesthetic" is a trickster strategy that deconstructs ideological images and reconstructs stronger images of African-Americans.

In MJ, the trickster figure Papa LaBas operates as a trickster figure that spans the ages. LaBas' experience over thousands of years produces an understanding of "how things are," and a patience to not try to enact change until the consciousness of the world has ripened. Papa LaBas has no age, but in the 1920s arrives in Harlem and in the 1970s is lecturing again. He is a trickster figure that changes, shifts. His origins and ancestry is uncertain, "Some say his ancestor is the long Ju Ju of Arno in eastern Nigeria...another story is that he is the reincarnation of the famed Moor of Summerland himself, the Black gypsy..." (MJ 23). His mysterious origins remain mysterious, refusing the detective paradigm, and position him as a recurring force in the history of the African diaspora, in short, an archetypical image of that history.

LaBas acts as shepherd and overseer to the phenomenon of Jes Grew, which is a force that itself contains a certain trickster-like character. Jes Grew originally arose from a loa, or not-yet-incarnated force, and spread with ironic results. As people become infected, they dance and can no longer be contained by the strictures and impositions of the Atonists. Jes Grew is in undying conflict with the Atonist powers. Constantly pushing the boundaries and upsetting their systems of control, Jes Grew is not a trickster figure so much as a trickster force. "Jes Grew's transgression of the clearly demarcated space of the State is met with swift and militant efforts to reproduce a more limited space that would restrict future flows" (Swope 8). Reed's repoliticizing and rehistoricizing will be considered in more detail in the next section, but it is important to note that Jes Grew has an oppositional, disruptive nature that connects to Reed's narrative disruption and foregrounded language, as

well as his ironizing from inside.

As with his counterbalanced ending in *JBS*, the phenomenon of *Jes Grew* has no certain resolution, but the trickster nature of its force keeps the dynamic in play, seemingly forever. “*Jes Grew* has no end and no beginning. It even precedes that little ball that exploded 1000000000s of years ago and led to what we are now...*Jes Grew* is life” (MJ 204). This ongoing nature of tricksterism as an underlying metaphysical force contains the critical attack on western narrative and offers a source for the creation of new images. “*Jes Grew*, a ‘Creeping Thing,’ embodies this ‘nomadic potential’ in its resistance to the striating logic of Western Science” (Swope 8). That is, the resistance to the logic of western logic embodied in western novels offers a nomadic potential for the establishment of a new type of image.

To further this “argument,” Reed goes back to the mythological origins of storytelling. He re-stories another trickster figure from ancient Egypt—Osiris. Reed’s re-mythologizing of Osiris is particularly compelling as it broadens the scope of his critique of western culture by rewriting its roots. Reed presents, or rather re-presents, Osiris in an extensive retelling of the Egyptian myths of death and resurrection. Like African culture reborn in America, and connected to the life-force of *Jes Grew*, Osiris’ story contains the core of trickster values, and a new origin for the narrative development of new images of African-Americans. This rehistoricizing is taken up in the next section in more detail.

It is important to remember, though, that “trickster-based racial discourse is not postmodernism in ethnic garb. Rather, it directly challenges postmodernism’s radical relativism” (Anderson 4). Reed’s narrative method is not racially oriented deconstruction, but moves far past that, in multiple directions, to posit an ethical position beyond relativism, where values can be asserted if not ascertained.

## Re-historicizing and re-politicizing images

Rather than simply rest on the novel’s interior world, Reed offers a grounding outside the novel. His images do not rely on deconstructive self-referentiality but offer a historical and political framework for re-conceiving and re-creating images of African-Americans. One of the consistent foci in his works is the search for an explanation of how racial oppression continues historically and politically.

In *MJ*, he looks at root causes, the history of the African diaspora and slavery by revealing what values were repressed. He shows what a subversive tool the novel can be in reevaluating how other narratives perform their functions. He manages this re-historicization in an ironic and entertaining fashion, of course, but most importantly, he does not seek to simply transfer one set of values to another,

but wants to show how history continually works in the interests of the powerful, while continually working in oppressive ways against those who have less access to narrative power.

At times, it seems, his argument in *MJ* is that music can never compete with history in taking control, that the very narrative of history necessitates oppressive ideological struggles. “Two correlative sources of Reed’s subversive imagery, sources tied closely to hoodoo, are jazz history, with its abundant depictions of the playful artist, and black Egypt, an Egyptology promoting the black Osiris over the white Nefertiti” (Lindroth 1). Jazz works in the present, while Osiris works in the past. Though at times the *Jes Grew* dancing infection seems a chaotic expression of rebellious attitudes (the novel was published at the end of the 60 s), in the end, his provocative style uncovers the source of much of the images produced by historical and novelistic narration. Jazz becomes a manifestation of a different historical tradition that produces different types of images altogether.

The historical rewriting takes place in a curious chapter tucked in towards the end of the novel. In this chapter, *MJ* re-tells the mythic origins of Egyptian history, using up some 30 pages of the novel to rewrite the history of the western hemisphere. His historical mythology finds Egyptian gods advising Biblical characters how to handle ravenous goddesses in the afterworld, juxtaposes charts of bombing tonnage against a touring musical group and emphasizes an entirely different set of events from what is typically presented in the European re-telling of Egyptian mythology. What he combines and recombines connects to American history through Europe and its history of cultural imperialism. What Reed reveals is the degree to which historical patterns repeat themselves, and continue to play themselves out again and again in America. History is seen as an endless spirals of events with Papa LaBas as a figure who lives through it all and can comment more knowingly about the meaning of the past and its relevance to the present.

This chapter forms Reed’s crucial rewrite of the image of African Americans. In it, Reed digs deep into the history of the African diaspora to look for identity. He examines how the image of African-Americans has been constructed, but at the same time is also concerned with the location of wellsprings for identity. He takes music as a core text in this process, rather than looking at scientific studies or slave narratives, and in this sense, Reed is unique. He reclaims dancing as a central feature of African and African-American culture. The novel then repositions the identity of African Americans in terms of dance, and repositions dance as equal to other cultural expressions. Other aspects of African history, such as Hoodoo, become re-founded, as evidence in his ironically titling his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* to reflect the inaccurate appraisal that misuse of the term implies, when in fact voodoo



remains a serious religion. Reed's vision is broad, and in several hundred pages he sweeps aside many of the historical inaccuracies and reinstates a different set of images with which to read history.

In *JBS*, Reed examines how the current system continues to exploit, uphold and reinforce oppressive values through the politics of academia. In examining the workings of one political microcosm, a university, he reveals the process whereby an ongoing set of values and images is perpetuated and accepted. His central character, a kind of African-American everyman, adapts with increasing absurdity to each situation, taking "enlightened self-interest" as his motto. The novel reveals the political forces, both benign and malignant, that continue image-distortion and identity-confusion. The novel stands as a powerful example of how historical and political systems work, or rather fail to work for many.

In *JBS*, Reed cracks open the black-white racial paradigm. While some writers such as Anderson, find Reed ultimately to reinforce this divide (Anderson 7), Reed reveals how the dynamics of that paradigm work. Perhaps Anderson misses the satire, but Reed is certainly not trying to reinforce the prevalent images and attitudes but to interrogate them in hopes of dismantling them. By inserting a third culture, Japanese, into this divide, Reed disrupts the concept of superiority and re-positions identities in a circle of competing cultural claims rather than in a vertical hierarchy. First, Reed shows how the media associates Japan with prosperity, order, exclusion, empowerment and other positive attributes. Blacks, on the other hand, are associated with poverty, chaos, inclusionary politics and a disempowered position. Reed exposes Puttbutt early on as a black pathology merchant who knows how to "paint the inner cities as the circles of hell in the American paradise—the suburban and rural Americas which were, in the media's imagination, wonderlands with sets by Disney" in order to write his way "to the top of the best-sellers list" (*JBS* 10). Puttbutt's self-serving politics become a reflection of America's power-serving racial politics.

Anderson's fears that Reed "perpetuates stereotypical ideas about the Japanese" (Anderson 7) are well-taken, but Reed's essentially ironic tone and use of satiric exaggeration show that he is being more rhetorical and comic than serious and definitive in his depictions of the Japanese. His satire is directed towards the racial politics of America, not towards the Japanese. The novel exploits Japanese as a critical means to expose political hypocrisy and in so doing he achieves a kind of narrative *reductio ad absurdum*. The Japanese become the straw that breaks America's racial back. The inclusion of another culture superior to white American culture involves an appropriation and stereotypical representation but one that creates an ethnic dynamic. Most importantly, though, as Anderson more to the

point notes, "Reed's discourse compels readers to become conversant in the literary and cultural production of various ethnic groups and to interrogate the ways in which ethnic cultures converge" (Anderson 7). Surely, this is the central thrust of Reed's approach. His focus is more on the inter-ethnic dynamics than on the accuracy of appropriation, on political criticism rather than on cultural sensitivity.

Most importantly, this political finagling of ironic conflicts exposes the fact that "all multiculturalisms are not created equal" (Anderson 1). More importantly than that, Reed seeks to understand the political clashes and the ways experience is shaped by cultures other than the dominant one. If Reed were only transferring the black-white dynamic onto Japanese, then the Japanese would stand as a simplistic example of ethnic supremacy. Reed wants to understand the political process as ongoing, not simply one particular moment or situation of power relations. This focus on the process would seem to absolve him of the charge of stereotyping and redirect the focus of the novels onto how images are created and by what political mechanisms. That Reed is aware of the perils of these explosive issues is evidenced by his inclusion of himself as a character in the novel. He conceives of his politics as a personal one, yet in his role as trickster, a universal one as well. For Reed, the image of any group in the political tension of America is always one replete with irony.

## Conclusion

There is something sloppy in Reed's prose, something loose in his narratives and something half-baked in his ideas. Reed seems to follow his instincts without apology. However, like a folk artist rather than a polished craftsman, Reed's novels have a rough, go-ahead energy to them that refuses to hold back. His creativity is that of a jazz soloist, pushing ahead without being entirely sure of where the melody might go, but confident of the chords supporting his direction. Critics of the novel might want to forgive him his narrative, prose and conceptual weaknesses by focusing instead on the strength of his images and the richness of his imagination. So, too he draws on creative inspiration from new sources, outlining potentially radical histories and hard-to-process novelistic imagery. In short he's a different kind of writer, more of a thoughtful arguer and a likeable friend than impeccable stylist.

In that, Reed suffers from many of the limitations of all satirists. In any event, Reed's satiric effects are more the point than the occasional sloppiness in plotting or over-use of caricature. His satire is directed, in other words, and remains open. "Reed's especially volatile form of satire seeks to expose the ways in which institutions, particularly academic and governmental bodies, abuse their missions in order to

maintain their circles of power and fulfill the personal ambitions of their leaders” (Womack 2). In that sense, Reed may just well be one of the best essayists in novel form.

Reed is different from other multiculturalists because he shows that not all experience and not all identity is shaped by the dominant culture. He holds out the promise that numerous experiences, such as love relationships or education, have intrinsic value, not pre-determined connections. Unlike other African-American writers, his novels are filled with such experiences presented with the hope of transformation and the promise of some secular form of salvation, if an ironic one. Reed’s interior dynamics feel the secular, joke-loving cousin to no one more than Martin Luther King. That may seem a stretch, but one of King’s legacies is the reformation of images in the mind of all Americans.

Like King, Reed’s re-presentation of images and identity is not pessimistically closed, but opened up through a freely creative expression. The “double consciousness” that W.E.B. DuBois posited at the turn of the century is for Reed one that offers a constructive dynamic that spins off creative energy in all directions. He utilizes deconstructive and disruptive means, but then goes on to examine those fragments and broken pieces for new values and meanings. He suggests ways of re-ordering culturally imposed images and fragmented identities. The reliance on traditional ethnic story forms and a highly conscious sense of irony makes Reed’s images more resonant and potent. His confrontations are productive ones and supportive ones.

One interesting point to mention about his novels, and another connection to King, is the relative lack of violence. Reed never imposes a choking sense of complete entrapment, as is the case with many multicultural writers. Instead, what he proposes in his novels is a constant series of problems to be solved, of social forces to be routed, of preconceptions to be disentangled. This approach may seem anodyne to radical writers seeking to violently dismantle a system based on barely sublimated violence. Yet, it also allows for the establishment of a dialogue with unsympathetic points of view. Reed’s novels, too, can be considered open to attack from all points on the political spectrum, as compromised by his privileged position inside academia and inside America, yet if Reed’s novels seem conciliatory to some, but they are genuinely conciliatory and fully aware of the ironies conciliation entails. If too much compromise seems imminent, Reed always reverts to more subversion. His satiric strategies do not destabilize hierarchies only to collapse into relativism, but rather suggest directions ripe for further development. His singular voice offers a sense of strategic humor and expansive irony that is profoundly moving.

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