

ISHMAEL REED BETWEEN AMIRI BARAKA AND GEORGE S. SCHUYLER

by

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In an essay written from Oakland, "Ground Zero," the novelist Ishmael Reed predicts that the time is fast approaching when the Black working class - 'people who've suffered all manner of degradation so that their children might become achievers' - will have to take the offensive against 'Black terrorists . . . the brutal crack fascists.' Comparing daily existence in East Oakland to the oppression in Haiti under the Tontons Macoutes . . .

-Mike Davis, "Los Angeles: Civil Liberties between the Hammer and the Rock," *New Left Review*

Ishmael Reed, one of America's premier novelists today, is a real paradox: in his critical and cultural essays, assembled in *SHROVETIDE IN OLD NEW ORLEANS* (1978) and in *GOD MADE ALASKA FOR THE INDIANS: SELECTED ESSAYS* (1982), he is capable of making the most nonsensical political and historical statements; yet in his very impressive novels, especially in the great *MUMBO JUMBO*, one encounters a most lucid historical imagination inhabiting complex literary figurations. It is presumably this incomparable novel which impelled Fredric Jameson to place Reed among the leading postmodernist writers, in company with John Ashbery and others. ¹ Though the postmodernist constituents in literature have still to be precisely located, defined and theorized, one cannot accept Harold Bloom's scorn and dismissal of the concept of postmodernism, substituting for it the continuation of Emersonian Romanticism. *MUMBO JUMBO* is remarkable not only for its convoluted literary structure, but also for its historicity, in that it articulates its postmodernist nature against the modernism of *HEART OF DARKNESS*. Jameson in *THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS* has taught us that it was in Joseph Conrad that modernism constelated towards its unity, and it was in him also that it began the elementary configurations of its configurations. The historical imagination displayed in *MUMBO JUMBO* is deep, in that it not only disputes and challenges Conrad's interpretation of African history and African civilization, but it also attempts to postulate the cultural unity of the African world (in Africa and in the diaspora). Elsewhere, in the context of attempting a critique of Houston A. Baker's poststructuralist reading of African-American modernism and Henry Louis Gates' poststructuralist mapping of black American postmodernism, we attempted to indicate the importance of this here postmodernist novel. Here our concern is Reed's critical imagination, or really, its profound absence.

If the historical imagination is bristlingly present in MUMBO JUMBO, it is insufficiently present in his literary essays. It is this insufficiency which has been at the center of Reed's political and intellectual reaction, so much fashionable with neo-conservatives, who nearly exercise cultural hegemony in political habits is profoundly disconcerting to someone from the Third World, especially to this black South African exile. For instance, in an address to a National Conference of Afro-American Writers given on November 9, 1974 in Howard University, Reed seriously postulates: "Marx recognized man's material needs, but he didn't recognize man's psychic needs. That's why the people come up with a Nixon from time to time---' cause Nixon knows more about the people than Marx did; and I suggest that just because Marx spent twenty years in the library, doesn't mean he's all that smart. I used to work in a library, and a lot of people just came in to get warm." How can one possibly respond to this supposed intellectual comparison! In which way Nixon had a better grasp of human history than Marx, a superior understanding of human culture than Marx, a finer intellectual culture than Marx. Such a mediocre talent; but Reed is a man of outstanding literary abilities, who has written a great novel, and has a potential of being a very great writer. It is not by chance that Derek Walcott, whom Joseph Brodsky considers to be the greatest poet in the English language today, considers Ishmael Reed to be a writer of the first rank. Clearly then, a writer of such formidable literary abilities, who comes from an oppressed and dispossessed national group, has a historical and intellectual responsibility to educate, as Ngugi was Thiongo and Chinua Achebe so well understood over twenty years ago, in the middle 1960's. By expressing such a supposedly serious intellectual estimation, Ishmael Reed mis-educates Ameri-people, especially the African-Americans, who are already disadvantageously placed within American 'culture', i.e., the American social structure is predicated on the mis-educating of African-Americans. Reed merely compounds the problem, instead of providing solutions to it. In other words, Reed mis-educates on behalf of the American ruling class. His uncritical invective against Marxism knows no limits, for in another context, he writes: "Notice how Solzhenitsyn recently referred to Marxism as a Western idea. As Ionesco recently pointed out, Marxism is rooted in the Christian tradition. Solzhenitsyn's remarks can be interpreted as those of a Russian pagan getting back at the Church of Rome. . . . His (a 'black' social realist critic) calling it 'cute' was one of the events that convinced me that you can't apply the Marxist reading to what is happening here in this country. . . ." This text, "Ishmael Reed---Self Interview", is so fundamental to understanding Reed's political, intellectual and literary consciousness, that it will be necessary to return to it later in this sketch. Suffice to say for the moment, that Ionesco and Solzhenitsyn are hardly the authorities one can take intellectually serious on the matter of historical materialism, because of their rabid anti-Communism and deep hatred of Marxism as an intellectual tradition. What knowledge of Marxism, since it seems to come to him from third sources, yet his denunciation of this great intellectual tradition

is with the pretence of authoritativeness.

This deafness on the part of Reed concerning historical materialism leads him to commit a serious political mistake and unforgivable intellectual irresponsibility in dismissing Angela Davis and George Jackson as mere radical chic. This dismissal is simultaneous with the denigration of the 1960's decade, as the era in which the "field nigger" had his or her play. It would seem that the central aim of Reed's critical writings is to bring the "house nigger" into the center stage of African-American culture. In other words, the ideological mission of Reed's two books is to celebrate middle-class culture and values at the price of eliminating black American proletarian culture. It seems that Angela Davis is the demon tormenting against here in *SHROVETIDE IN OLD NEW ORLEANS*. What Reed fails fundamentally to understand is that Angela Davis, and one does not have to subscribe to all her political inclinations or tendencies, represents the best cumulative development of the 1960's generation: her choice of historical materialism above and against terrorism and anarchism. Presumably Reed would have been much happier if she had chosen the middle-class status quo. Also Ishmael Reed's under-estimation of the importance of George Jackson, betrays a serious absence of political and intellectual knowledge. C.L.R. James probably today (February 1989) the greatest Marxist writer alive anywhere in the world, has situated Jackson's *SOLEDAD BROTHER* in the high tradition of Leninism.

Reed's peremptory dismissal of Frantz Fanon is equally astonishing. He writes: "When Frantz Fanon (popular, presumably, because he was born, not in Detroit, but in Africa and spoke French) wrote, " Without oppression and without racism you have no blues ", the anti-exploiter was himself exploiting a great music by using it to promote one of the his pet theories." Again the question arises as to whether Reed's mission of mis-educating is a conscious and deliberate intention on his part, or whether it is a by-product of intellectual ignorance. The review, from which this quotation is excerpted, was published in the December (1972) issue of the *Black World* , probably then the most important literary and cultural review in African-American intellectual circles. The demise of the *Black World* during the course of the 1970's, could be seen as signalling the closing of the decade of the 1960's, which had historically brought into being the Civil Rights Movement, the Second Reconstruction and the Black Arts Movement, among many other political and intellectual ferments. Reed's hostility towards this magnificent decade is beyond rational comprehension. Jameson's essay on the 1960's, which by the way is deeply informed of Fanon's intellectual greatness, gives a brilliant panorama of the solid intellectual, political and cultural gains achieved in this decade. But to return to Reed's understanding and interpretation of Frantz Fanon. Reed's factual mistake that Fanon was born in Africa, rather than in Martinique, where in fact he was actually born in 1925, betrays a superficial acquaintance with the historical importance of Frantz Fanon.

Consequently, Reed is not in a position to make any evaluation and judgement of Fanon's work, his book, *THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH*, is one of the fundamental texts of our century, not only because it founded the emergence of African Marxism together with the work of Amilcar Cabral, but also because it has had a profound influence on outstanding intellectuals today: it suffices to name only Edward W. Said, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Roberto Fernandez Retamar, Fredric Jameson, and Salman Rushdie.

What is even more crucial is that the work of Frantz Fanon is a crucial component of black intellectual culture in the twentieth century. It has been usual to see Fanon as intellectually belonging wholly within European culture: the many references from Marx and Hegel through Freud and Jaspers to Sartre and Lacan, a seeming confirmation of this. There can be no doubt that Fanon's intellectual formation was European, profoundly French; yet there are deep intellectual affinities with African culture (in the broader sense of the word, embracing both Africa and the African Diaspora, including Brazil which the classical founders of Pan-Africanism inexplicably excluded or neglected). For instance, Fanon's political testament, the famous Conclusion to *THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH*, continues an intellectual tradition established by W.E.B. DuBois' essay of 1920, "The Souls of White Folk". Their extraordinary affinities between the two texts are very striking. And it should not be necessary here to rehearse the profound influence of Aime Cesaire's *DISCOURSE ON COLONIALISM* on Fanon's understanding of classical colonialism. What has been coming apparent recently is the unveiling of other serious African-American influences on Fanon: Richard Wright. Not only Frantz Fanon wrote a fan letter to Richard Wright, but also the former's *BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS* has a penetrative reading, philosophical and psychological, of the latter's *NATIVE SON*. While Richard Wright and Aime Cesaire were totally indifferent towards each other, in fact very hostile, consequently their intellectual clash in the 1956 Conference of Negro Writers and Artists in Paris was not accidental, a clash memorably captured by James Baldwin in one of his brilliant essays, it was in the historical figure of Frantz Fanon that there was an intellectual link between them. The whole intellectual arch from DuBois' essay of 1920 to Fanon's book of 1960, was one of extraordinary affiliations among black intellectuals, whether intentional or unintended. Reed's hostility towards Fanon is not based on a serious acquaintance with the latter's writing, but has more to do with Reed's hatred of the decade in which Fanon had extraordinary influence in certain African-American circles, especially among the Black Panthers. Consequently, Reed's dismissal of Frantz Fanon is historically, intellectually and culturally unfounded.

Clearly, when Fanon speaks of the blues as being a historical response to oppression and racism, he is merely attempting to formulate the historicity of an

artistic form . This is part of an attempt to understand the situationality of its historic emergence; and this is not an attempt to limit the functionality of the blues only within the horizon of oppression and racism. Though this was not Fanon's immediate concern, this is part of giving explanation of the historical differentiations of African culture in our time. Fanon was attempting to give definition to the constituent components of its formation. Surely enough, if oppression and racism was present in all corners of the black world in the nineteenth-century and in the twentieth-century, because of class and racial hegemony of Europeans (in the broader sense) over Africans (also in the broader sense), why did the blues specifically emerge in the plantations of the American South, and not in Brazil, or Cuba or Nigeria. Fanon's intuitions were correct in attempting to specify the singularity of this artistic form, and certainly should be used by Reed to lambast Fanon. In fact, the developing great critical work of Houston A. Baker and Henry Louis Gates on the inhering of blues in literary figurations, is part of an intellectual enterprise in which Fanon also is very astonishing indeed, and can only provoke one to be totally unbecoming in response to its grotesqueness. In fact, could we not see the blues as part of the historical response in cultural form to transformation of the American Negro plantation workers into Africa-American proletariat! The blues were the beckoning of the Harlem Renaissance.

Reed's hatred of the 1960's has another debilitating effect on his cultural and intellectual judgements and pronouncements. Take his interview with George S. Schuyler, which is astonishing beyond comprehension by any measure. It is a vortex of cultural and intellectual reactions by any standards, a tragic nadir of intellectual judgements. It is no wonder that Amiri Baraka, in his latest collection of essays DAGGERS AND JAVELINS, refers to it as a treasonable undertaking. There can be no doubt that Baraka is absolutely correct. In an essay, "Shrovetide in Old New Orleans", giving title to the collection of his essays and other texts, Reed writes: "There had been a lot of jargon, and political abstruseness about the political movement in the 1960's. I became cynical very early when I saw some of the militants picking up the habits of the oppressors. Like people who's participated in Freedom Rides criticized our magazine, *Yardbird* , for printing an interview with George Schuyler, a brilliant political satirist and thinker from the Harlem Renaissance, a high point in American Creativity. They wanted to suppress his free speech. They wanted to do to him what they accused white people of doing to them. The revolution had moved to the suburbs. The revolution had a carport." Two observations need to be made here. First, it is ridiculous of Reed and the three hundred years oppression of African-Americans. Since to Reed himself does not respond critically, or at least indicate his reservations on, some of the outrageous remarks made by Schuyler, especially concerning the Harlem Renaissance and Malcolm X, it was all the more understandable that there would be a serious outcry against the interview.

Secondly, the interview shows nothing of the supposed intellectual brilliance of Schuyler. In fact, Schuyler was a mediocre intellectual that Richard Wright succeeded in preventing him attending the Paris Conference of 1956, when the American authorities prevented W.E.B. DuBois from travelling to France. Here is a representative sample of Schuyler wisdom, which is supposed to be brilliant satire: "This 'Harlem Renaissance' is pretty much of a fraud. A lot of people connected with it were phonies, and there weren't many connected with it. . . . Who would ever think of Malcolm X as a leader. . . . This was a man who was so ignorant" Later in the interview, Schuyler proudly states his judgement that he does not consider Duke Ellington's music great art. Reed's response to all this nonsense is not strong enough; there is a half-hearted defense of the Harlem Renaissance. Because of the Haiti connection, Reed uncritically praises Zora Neale Hurston, who was indeed a great novelist, but yet ended her life arguing that her own people, the African-Americans should not be given the right to vote.

Concerning Haiti, Reed is disconcertingly uncritical. In his search for Haitian Vodoun (Voodoo) culture, he is not much concerned with Haiti as an exemplary historical experience for the black world, or for that matter, for the Third World. After all Haiti is the only successful slave revolt in all of human history. It was the defeat of Napoleon in Haiti which facilitated his subsequent expulsion from the continent of Europe. It could be argued, that the first mechanism of neocolonialism was first instituted in oblivious to this whole complex tragic history of Haiti. In concerting with the Haitian ruling classes, Reed is oblivious to the oppressed and dispossessed classes of Haiti, the very people who are the embodiment of Vodoun culture, which has such a compelling hold on Reed. Reed is capable of writing such nonsense as the following: "They talk about Haitian illiteracy, when at a major university located in California, 60 per cent of the entering freshman must take remedial or 'bonehead' English. . . . The Haitians are poor but it's their country. They live under a 'dictatorship', but as someone said, 'It's their dictatorship'." There is no way to respond to this intellectual rubbish, except that Reed should have familiarized himself with the writings and poetry of Jacques Roumain and Rene Depestre, among many others, before embarking on his sentimentally journey. Much more fundamentally, Reed should have familiarized with C.L.R. James' *THE BLACK JACOBINS*. This would have cured him of his fascinated horror for the Duvaliers. This is the real scandal of Reed concerning the Haitian matter, his constant references to the Duvaliers, even concealed admiration, without the slightest criticism of their brutal dictatorship and outrageous horrors. The importance of James for black culture and Marxist culture in the twentieth-century is becoming more and more acknowledged, as the two recent books by Manning Marable, *BLACK AMERICAN POLITICS* (1985) and *AFRICAN AND CARIBBEAN POLITICS* (1987), make clear. In fact these two books may shift the focus from Haiti and other parts of the black world to Brazil, a great nation been which has for too

long neglected.

Despite the severe shortcomings in Ishmael Reed's understanding of Haitian cultural politics, there are gains to be had from his encounter with the great Haitian culture. Such a fundamental text as "Ishmael Reed---Self Interview" makes clear, such a distinguished novel as MUMBO JUMBO would have been inconceivable had Reed not deeply immersed himself in Haitian Vodoun culture. Intuition, intellect, research and psychic processes went into the writing of the novel. The novel is a tour de force . It is a coalescing point of the best in African civilizations. In fact, its daring lies in its attempt to constitute itself as the synthesizing point of these civilizations. From this supposedly high plateau, Reed disdainfully looks down on James Baldwin to pass this judgement: "I think that within the framework of JudeoChristian culture James Baldwin is a great writer. What annoys me is the fact that he's a hustler who tries to come on like Job." This evaluation is neither here nor there, for in fact within the framework of 'Voodoo' culture, Ishmael Reed is a great writer, and what really annoys the Haitian people is that Reed is a hustler hobnobbing with their black oppressors and passing himself off as the Job of their great culture. One of the bitterest complaints that Baldwin made in his last interview, which appeared in the Village Voice immediately following his untimely and tragic death, was the cruelty of Ishmael Reed towards him. While Reed can be disdainful towards Baldwin, precisely because of his political activities in the 1960's Civil Rights Movement, he can be indulgent towards the unpalatable activities of Chester Himes while making extravagant claims on his behalf: "Not only is Himes a great writer but his story lines and plots are masterful too. . . . I believe that it will be left to a young generation of black and white critics to assess the importance of Chester Himes as a major twentieth-century writer. . . . Chester Himes is a great writer and a brave man." This too much insistence betrays a certain doubtful critical judgment. Frantz Fanon, whom Ishmael Reed is in the habit of sneering at, in BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS, had a better estimation of the importance of Himes based only on his first novel, IF HE HOLLERS LET HIM GO.

What is remarkable about Ishmael Reed is that his pan-human vision is not limited only within the black world, but rather, extends to embrace other minorities within the cauldron of America: the Asian Americans, the Native Americans, the Chicanos, American of Latin Extraction, the Sitka Tlingits and the Inuits (the so-called Eskimos). Reed's book, GOD MADE ALASKA FOR THE INDIANS: SELECTED ESSAYS, is a profound expression of this catholicity of vision. It is not entirely free of romantic tinges and sentimental strains. Nevertheless, it would seem that more than any African-American writer, or for that matter, more than any American writer, Reed has a deeper feeling or awareness for the necessary forms of this unity. In other words, Reed's cultural politics work on a horizontal plane and refuse to confront the complications so

characteristic of the vertical plane. It is not so much that Reed is not aware of the class as question, as much that he pretends this question has only to do with middle-class values, of whose bankruptcy he is unaware, the great thesis of abolishing all class distinctions, Reed wishes to assimilate the working class into the values and categories of the middle-class, as if that were historically possible. It is the contradiction emanating from this historical impossibility which is the combustion engine of Reed's reactionary politics.

The essay, "God Made Alaska for the Indians", which gives title to the second book of his essays and other texts, is among the most remarkable he has written, in that not only is it characterized by deep empathy for the great native cultures of Alaska, it is also a daring act cultural retrieval and historical reclamation. Reed's solidarity with Native Alaskans against the hegemony of North American corporations and multi-national corporations, is exemplary. From the moment of the publication of such a text, it has been difficult to pretend that Native Alaskans and Native Americans are not the central components of the American culture still to be. Without these great peoples being located at the center of American cultural and historical experience, there cannot be any possibility of American culture: this is the incontestable thesis presented by Ishmael Reed. His relationship with the Tlingit poet, Andy Hope, is fascinating. It recalls Reed's close relationships with Asian-Americans in North America. This essay is the companion piece to another essay, "American Poetry: Is there a Center", where there is a fine gradation of American poetic structure, ranging from Filipino-American poetry through African-American poetry to Euro-American poetry. This fine piece of writing is slightly marred by Reed's unnecessary dig at Amiri Baraka.

Shifting from a poetic plane to a political plane, in the essay "Race War in America?", Reed examines the impact on African-Americans should a racial war break-out in South Africa. The essay attempts to analyse the complex responses that such an eventuality would possibly elicit from African-Americans. It is a fine piece of writing so characteristic of the deep and intimate relations between South Africa and Black America: the visiting of Gospel and Spiritual choirs to South Africa in the late nineteenth-century, the exchange of intellectual and cultural perspectives between Booker T. Washington and John Dube in the early part of the twentieth-century, the exchange of letters between W.E.B. DuBois and Sol T. Plaatje in the 1920's, also the exchange of letters between Richard Wright and Peter Abrahams in the 1940's, the opening of the Harlem Renaissance to the Sophiatown Reinsurance in the 1950s through an essay by Ezekiel Mphahlele on Langston Hughes, the sharp critical eye of Amiri Baraka on Peter Abrahams and James Baldwin in the early 1960's, the celebration of Hugh Masekela in MUMBO JUMBO in the 1970's and the close proximity between Houston A. Baker and Ezekiel Mphahlele in that decade, and lastly but not least,

the invocation of Bishop Desmond Tutu by Miles Davis in the album Tutu and Amiri Baraka's celebration of the new South African theater of the 1980s. Ishmael represents a long and great tradition.

1. Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodern Debate" (1984), now assembled in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986*, vol. II: *Syntax of History*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988.

. Harold Bloom, "Interview" by Barry Schwabsky, *Flash Art*, no. 143, November/December 1988, pp. 65-67.

. See the essay, "The Passion of Literary Theory in Contemporary Black America: An African Perspective," to appear in the forthcoming issue of *Presence Africaine* (Paris).

. Ishmael Reed, "Image and Money," *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*, Doubleday and Company, New York, 1978, p. 58.

) Ishmael Reed, "Ishmael Reed---Self Interview", *ibid.*, p. 132, p. 130.

) Ishmael Reed, "Music: Black, White and Blue", *ibid.*, p. 100.

) Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 60's" (1984), in *op. cit.*

) The letter is cited by Michel Fabre, "Wright, Negritude and African Writing", *The World of Richard Wright*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 1985.

) Ishmael Reed, "Shrovetide in Old New Orleans", *op. cit.*, p. 17.

) Ishmael Reed, "George S. Schuyler, Writer", an Interview made together with Steve Cannon, *ibid.*, p. 203, p. 204.

) Ishmael Reed, "I Hear You, Doc", *ibid.*, p. 263, p. 278.

) Ishmael Reed, "Ishmael Reed---Self Interview", *ibid.*, p. 130.

) Ishmael Reed, *ibid.*, p. 135.

) Ishmael Reed, "Chester Himes: Writer", *ibid.*, p. 94, p. 96, p. 99.