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# Riffing on The Past: Jazz and Signifying in Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo

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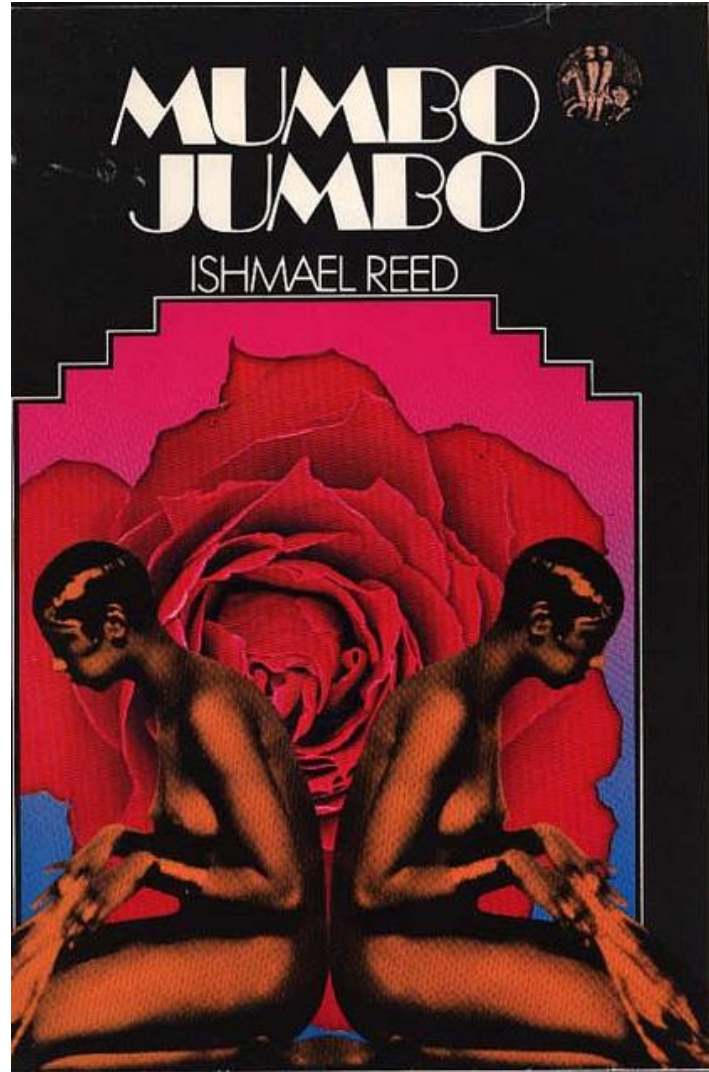
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*Riffing on The Past: Jazz and Signifying in Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo*

*Submitted for Honors in English*

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*May 2014*

*Abstract*

Jazz. A word that today signifies cool cats in dark sunglasses and black turtlenecks, a word that brings to mind the—predominantly white—big bands of World War yore, or that singular, immediately recognizable rasp of Louis Armstrong. It's a word that reminds one of names like Miles, Coltrane and Coleman. Maybe even a man whose last name, for most intents and purposes, is the letter G. Many, however, do not associate jazz with racism, repression, and, perhaps most surprising, a disease that renders its victims hysteric and prone to fits of dance. But if they were to read either Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, or a number of venomously racist articles, often run in ubiquitous publications, they would note that jazz was once indeed perceived in such a way—a way that dismisses jazz as a dangerous product of the jungle that will send Western civilization back at least 2,000 years. This is a fear that stems from a combination of racism and the jazzy tendency to threaten comfortable conventions. In *Mumbo Jumbo* Reed employs an aesthetic that is arguably “jazzy,” and this paper will attempt to define its origins and how it manifests in the novel

### *Acknowledgements*

The year has been rather long, difficult, confusing, and full of headaches, stiff legs, aching bloodshot eyes and long nights. (Actually, now that I think about it most years in recent memory have included these things...). I do not plan to utter the word *aesthetic* again for at least another two years. But even without the help of my advisor, Professor Derik Smith, this endeavor probably still would have gotten done, with lots of. It just would have been all kinds of awful without his help and reassurance. Thanks, Derik. This also goes out to my second reader, Professor Glyne Griffith, who also provided useful comments.

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## ***Introduction***

*“Compare me to someone like Mingus and Charlie Parker, musicians who have a fluidity with the chord structure just as we have with the syntax or the sentence which is our basic unit. We try to do the same thing. I try to do the same kind of thing from unit of sentence to paragraph to chapter where I get the same kind of shifts that you have going on in, for example, Charlie Parker.”* –Ishmael Reed, 1972.

What is jazz, and where can one find it? Well, there are the obvious places: spewing out of a saxophone—by way of a soul, an experience—on a stage somewhere; piping through some aficionado’s headphones or stereo system; or, a more recent development, in an elevator, likely by way of a man whose last name is a single letter. As previously stated, the overt nature of such observations is bound to provoke some questions: “So what?” being the most blunt. But what if I argue that the essence of jazz, with respect to both the musical tradition and the art-form, could be found in a novel? Yes, that is what I hope to accomplish to some degree in this paper, in examining Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*.

In fact, the comparison I will try to make in this essay is not as outlandish as it may seem. Think of the concept of punk rock and what it means to be “punk.” Punks, along with those alien to the group, are known to use “punk” as a label for anything from a song to a mere action, to a pink mohawk: “That’s so punk!” Well, I would like to do the same for jazz, because it lacks these colloquial analogs: “That’s so jazzy” or “That’s so jazz,” in reference to non-musical subjects, does not sound quite right—but I am trying to help change that. By the end of this paper I would love for readers to start using such lingo. Thus, in *Mumbo Jumbo* Ishmael Reed employs an aesthetic that is arguably “jazzy.” It is an aesthetic marked by juxtapositions of widely varying pictures, quotes, cultures, and even typeface (this is “syncretism and synchronism,” to put it in

Reed's words, or aspects we might find in a jazz composition) in order to assert an artistic standard that rejects past notions of Western artistic superiority and foreign "primitivism." In doing so, Reed embraces the qualities of jazz that help promote a multicultural aesthetic rooted in collective experience and cultural exchange.

In order to argue my thesis, I will lay out my work in three chapters. To begin, the first chapter will detail Henry Louis Gates' theory of Signifying and how it pertains to African-American music and African-American literature, creating a tradition that bridges both. Gates theorizes signifying as the key trait of both African and African-American art and literature that separates them from the oeuvre of other cultures; the signifying technique draws from aspects of past works in the same tradition, reconfiguring and reinterpreting them, while also altering the source material enough to create something utterly new. This method dates back to the ancient Yoruba culture of West Africa, thus establishing a tradition of Black arts and culture as storied and legitimate as what might be found in the West, which, for most of modernity, has been considered the apex to which all other schools and traditions should aspire. Usually, if a foreign form refused to conform to these boundaries, this standard, then it would likely be deemed primitive and quaint, or even dangerous, as we will see in my second chapter. Ishmael Reed explores this theme to a great extent in *Mumbo Jumbo*. In fact, Reed believes that jazz, voodoo, and other artistic forms all share the same lineage, no matter how different they might seem to an outsider. In addition, these cultural forms have essentially been at war with Western views of art and, arguably, way of life ever since Africans and Europeans met. Europeans, however, have always been the ones on the offensive, trying to squelch what they ostensibly viewed as base and threatening. This is what *Mumbo Jumbo* is about, with the "Jew Grew" disease symbolizing black culture, and the secret "Wallflower Order" society representing white aggression towards everything from jazz to

African-American literature. These representations are significations, or riffs, or appropriations of the past. And according to Gates, “there are so many examples of signifying in jazz that one could write a formal history of its development on this basis alone,” indicating a relationship between jazz and signifying that has been waiting to be expounded upon (Gates 63). Jazz and the signifying process are inseparable, and I, of course, will use *Mumbo Jumbo* as a jumping-off point in this endeavor.

In my first chapter I will further explore this connection by referring to scholars such as Keren Omry and Jurgen E. Grandt. In his book *Kinds of Blue: The Jazz Aesthetic in African American Narrative*, Grandt states that “The narrative’s jazz aesthetic probes and challenges the received binary pairs of the dominant culture, collapsing the absolute homogeneity of all concepts, categories, and frameworks” (Grandt 6). On the other hand, Keren Omry argues that “Free jazz reconfigures the relationship between the individual and the collective... (it) demands a temporally challenging but ongoing engagement with its own expression. The result of the violent manifestations of musical exploration... is a reconceptualization of the notion of history, of the past and its effects on the present” (Omry 130). In short, I will continue this discussion by illustrating the power of the signifying aspect in jazz to challenge, to reconceptualize, basic perceptions regarding the dominant culture, history, and, more simply, art. By signifying, or twisting, or changing the source material, we can learn something new about the nature of the piece along with what it has to say. To deepen the connection of jazz and signifying, we might call this practice “revision,” a term Gates uses explicitly: “The riff is a central component of jazz improvisation, and signifying serves as an especially appropriate synonym for troping and revision” (Gates 105). In *Mumbo Jumbo*, however, we see Reed riff off of many—many—prevalent cultural artifacts and practices, from art criticism, to the story of Moses, to the dualistic



nature of racism itself. Other source material that will serve to link signifying and jazz together will come from Amiri Baraka's extensive history on jazz and blues, *Blues People*. This will account for the wide variety of styles and sources Reed deploys in his novel, as jazz is a form born of many cultures, particularly French and, of course, African-American.

With jazz thus married, to some extent, with Gates' theory of Signifying, in Chapter Two I will move on to discuss the history, reception, and perception of African-American arts, mostly jazz—and thereby Signifying and other black arts—in order to further establish a background for what Reed does, Signifies, revises, riffs off of, in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Some primary sources will include articles that deal directly with the white reception of jazz during the early 1920s, to sections of the *New Negro* anthology of Harlem Renaissance philosophy and art, both of which Reed references to great effect, in order to render such views ridiculous and, arguably, even more “primitive” than the musicians and artists originally described in these aforementioned outlets. Reed effectively turns these writers on their heads, all by using an artistic means that borrows from jazz. Probably the most glaring example of this is how the entire concept of jazz, of artistic impulse—of black culture itself—is rendered as a disease throughout *Mumbo Jumbo*: Reed signifies and syncretizes upon many cultural standards, similar to how a jazz musician might draw from other areas of music and art, reinterpreting it, in order to pay homage or make fun of—or something completely different. Reed finds easy fodder for mockery in this conflation of jazz and disease, which was an attitude that actually pervaded the minds of many whites during the 1910s and early 20s, attitudes found in many popular publications that not only equated jazz and, essentially, black culture, to a kind of pandemic, but something altogether ugly and worthy of eradication by murder (Anderson 135). This will bring me to an examination of two articles from the early 1920s, written by whites, from *The Ladies Home Journal*. Both appear to treat jazz as an

encroaching enemy of Western culture, and they reach for arguments that now seem strange and paranoid, like equating the increasing popularity of jazz to a harbinger of the American family.

As for the *New Negro* anthology, in the essay “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” we find Alain Locke, editor of the *New Negro*, affecting a seemingly patronizing tone that resembles the qualitative judgment often reserved by white critics when describing African sculpture. For him, this art is unparalleled in its simplicity, and proceeds to compare it to various western artworks, whereas, in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed makes clear that he views such sculpture as far more complex than Locke would have: “These grotesque, laughable wooden ivory and bronze cartoons represent the genius of Afro satire” (Reed 97). Locke, on the other hand, holds that “the African art object is masterful over its material in a powerful simplicity of conception, design and effect” (Locke 258). Though Locke’s intentions were no doubt in the right place, by the end of his essay he ultimately tries to separate African from African-American. He feels that young black artists should instead look toward the West, toward Europe, for inspiration and guidance. For Reed, a proponent of multiculturalism, this view is false and dangerous. As stated above, Reed holds that the African tradition is one of enduring richness and complexity.

Finally, in Chapter Three, I will conduct a close reading of *Mumbo Jumbo*, highlighting and unpacking sections during which Reed utilizes any technique that we could now, having established a jazz aesthetic, discern as drawing from jazz. All of this exemplifies a jazz aesthetic in the effort to break culturally dictated standards of “what art should be,” while also perpetuating Reeds concept of a multi-culture (Reed 60). This “multi-culture” represents a sort of cultural exchange between people that will ultimately foster a richer artistic landscape. This, I believe, is why Reed samples, signifies upon, such a wide variety of sources, reflecting, among other things, the cultures of white America, black America, and their histories. For example, the texts that

discuss jazz and black arts to be discussed in Chapter Two mark a clear dichotomy of attitude between races, white and black, yet also display striking similarities between one another: on the one hand, there is a white perception, unabashedly racist in its attempt to debase jazz; on the other hand, there is a black perception, misguided in its attempt to elevate black arts because of adherence to White, i.e., Western cultural mores and expectations (judging by Reed's portrayals of "New Negroes" and black art critics in *Mumbo Jumbo*, of course); yet both perceptions are ultimately either ridiculous or deserving of a more Afro-centric revision and reinterpretation—a signification—that lends both some necessary contextualization and reconsideration. What's more, Reed is fully cognizant of the various time periods from which he culls material, because they are not only functioning in my proposed variation of the jazz aesthetic, due to their sheer variance and the syncretic nature with which they are employed, but Reed's own "Hoodoo aesthetic," which "reinterprets and reinvents; it uses time disjunctionally and synchronically to illustrate social truths by juxtaposition with their opposites and supposed origins" (Martin 83). In fact, the jazz aesthetic and the Hoodoo aesthetic might not be so different after all. The connections between jazz, signifying, and the NeoHoodoo aesthetic all facilitate a kind of creative environment in *Mumbo Jumbo* that allows readers to perceive history, racism—and whatever Ishmael Reed can think of—in a different, more radical way.

In writing this essay, I cannot help but feel that I am, in fact, doing the dirty work of Atonism, the great antagonistic force of *Mumbo Jumbo*, representing everything Reed seems to hate about Western culture, including tendencies toward greed, repression, paranoia, empiricism, control, and a desire to contain. I am mainly talking about the last two qualities, because, well, look at me: I am a white, 21-year-old English student, trying to fit a book written twenty years before I was born, by a black man, into a concept of jazz aesthetics I deployed after reading some books and

articles by critics. Not to mention, almost everything I know about less-ubiquitous jazz artists and jazz styles, e.g., guys like Ornette Coleman, Sonny Sharrock, so-called “Free jazz,” I have probably read about thanks in part to a critic of what Ishmael Reed would call the “Atonist creed,” or the embodiment of Western myopia, as Atonism was initially an ancient religion that worshiped the sun. Yet, at the same time, by questioning, virtually delegitimizing my own argument, I might also be thinking with the same notions of control and containment challenged by *Mumbo Jumbo* itself. By writing a novel that calls upon a jazz aesthetic, Reed invites “improvisation of thought,” so to speak—Reed did not write a contained novel, in any sense of what that might even mean, so surely he is not looking for criticism that “contains” and simplifies what he is doing. Rather, I simply offer a different way to look at Reed’s work, and by the time the project comes to a close, I hope I’ll have presented an inclusive aesthetic template that helps foster new approaches to music, literature, and history.

*Chapter One: A Bridge Between Jazz and the Signifyin(g) Tradition*

Jazz, today, is a genre of music that is arguably best known for always reinventing itself and freaking people out for how weird, jarring, “avant-garde,” or fresh the music can often sound. Though it wasn’t always that way—the process of signification plays a huge role in the progression of jazz, and could account for the change in the perception of the music from something of humble beginnings, something to dance to, to something, for many, more “intellectual” and esoteric. For example, it took a Louis Armstrong before a Miles Davis could take a guitar effects pedal and figure out how to use it with his trumpet. In fact, there wouldn’t *be* a Miles Davis without a Louis Armstrong, and there wouldn’t be a Louis Armstrong without a Jim Europe or a Scott Joplin, and I could keep this train of comparisons going all the way back to Africa. But I won’t. I’ll spare you. What I am driving at, however, is that jazz, as music, but more importantly as an aesthetic ideal, is part of an ancient tradition that is based upon taking influences and revising them to create something new. Often, we find that these revisions, or Significations, as Henry Louis Gates calls them, are humorous. But, as is in the case of jazz, they can also be used to push the boundaries of art and music, and perhaps even our perceptions of history, as scholar Keren Omry argues that free jazz is something that “reconfigures the relationship between the individual and the collective, and demands a temporally challenging but ongoing engagement with its own expression” the effects of which offer a “reconceptualization of history, of the past and its effects on the present” (Omry 130). This notion is especially potent with regard to literature, which often provides plots, characters, and themes that provoke thought about one’s period, yet also draws and refers to influences of a wide variety, often from a similar tradition. This is the essence of Henry Louis Gates’ notion of the Signifying difference found throughout African-American literature: “Rhetorical naming by indirection is central to our

notions of figuration, troping and the parody of forms, or pastiche, in evidence when one writer repeats another writer's structure by one or several means, including a fairly exact repetition of narrative or rhetorical structure" (Gates 103). There are many examples of this in jazz, from Miles Davis' covers of Chet Baker's "My Funny Valentine," to John Coltrane's rendition of Julie Andrew's "My Favorite Things." The latter even suggests a break from the tradition of jazz and into pop music, of which there more examples such as Miles Davis' wistful cover of Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time" and Michael Jackson's "Human Nature." These covers—and there are many more—are indicative of jazz's tendency to signify not only on itself, and the music that predates it, but across genres, to be inclusive in its source (signified) material. Of course, that jazz signifies upon itself is of great importance, too, because, without such propensity, jazz might not exist or develop in the same way I detail above—jazz could very well become what it borrows from: it would end up perpetuating these other art forms, while remaining rather stagnant, removed from the conception of being an authentic, African-American art form. What's more, that jazz signifies upon itself is a very African, very "black," tendency, which will be of importance later in chapter two, as I discuss Western vs. African standards of art, and how Reed deals with them in *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Ishmael Reed uses this jazz-centered technique to great extent in *Mumbo Jumbo*, signifying on and incorporating from, one might imagine, almost everything he has read (to be explored in-depth in the subsequent chapters). However, the nature of "rhetorical naming" in jazz is not limited to covers; it also comprises the improvisational techniques so prevalent in the genre. As scholar Jurgen E. Grandt states: "jazz musicians strive to develop a highly individual, recognizable voice—Louis Armstrong's trumpet, for instance, is immediately recognizable from, say Miles Davis'. At the same time, it is imperative that in performance, improvisers be aware of

the constantly moving, instantly changing musical environment and play with it rather than above it” (Grandt 14). We can read Grandt’s assertion in the literal sense of a musical environment that a live show might provide, but we can also read it in a sense of jazz as a genre that fosters its practitioners to be as unique as possible, while breaking the boundaries which were created by its progenitors—the creators of this established musical environment, which, in the jazz tradition, was initially created by, again, revision, so to speak. This especially rings true if we consider the nature of Signifying, which suggests that African-American artists work in a tradition that borrows from the past, revises that “material,” creating a parody or something altogether new. Gates again gives more examples pertaining to jazz, by discussing one of the premier jazz pianists of the 20s and 30s, Count Basie, whose composition, aptly titled “Signify” is “structured around the idea of formal revision and implication. When a musician ‘signifies’ a beat, he is playing the upbeat into the downbeat of the chorus, implying their formal relationship by merging the two structures... The downbeat, then, is rendered present by its absence. This is a revision of an aspect of the blues,” blues, being, of course, antecedent to jazz, and, through signifying, its creative provenance (Gates 123). Yet Basie did not only engage in the musical tradition through revising the old; he was actively engaged in “riffing” off of popular musical styles of his own period: “Throughout his piece, Basie alludes to styles of playing that predominated in black music between 1920 and 1940. These styles include ragtime, stride, barrel-house, etc... Through these allusions, Basie has created a composition characterized by pastiche” (Gates 124). This example of signification seems to be a precursor to the aforementioned significations of music well-within the realm of popular culture. Nonetheless, this is where Gates essentially ends his discussion of the signifying that pervades jazz, and where I would like to begin exploring the possibilities that signifying in jazz does more than simply riff off of and revise other works, but also has the

capability to do what signifying in literature does, and that is to “create a new narrative space for representing the current referent of African-American literature, the so-called black experience,” among other, less “musical” functions (Gates 111).

To begin unpacking that notion, we might take a look at how exactly cultural “experience” and history has shaped jazz, and then examine how jazz has shaped Reed’s ideas about aesthetics and, of course, *Mumbo Jumbo*. As such, jazz is a genre of music, an aesthetic ideal, characterized not only by its quintessential “riffing” off of a wide variety of sources, but also by the fact that it is something born of a rather “peculiar” cultural amalgamation. Amiri Baraka’s *Blues People* illustrates and investigates this connection with a generous amount of historical detail. As previously stated, the blues begat jazz, but it was not until the post-reconstruction era that African-Americans were able to get their hands on and master the European instruments we now consider emblematic of jazz: cornet, trumpet, clarinet, and, later, saxophone, and, perhaps less emblematic, the tuba and trombone. This development alone helps exemplify the diverse nature of jazz because of where it burgeoned, New Orleans: “Nowhere else in the United States is the French influence so apparent as in New Orleans; it was this predominantly French culture that set the tone for Europeanization of African slaves in the area” (Baraka 72). But French culture influenced New Orleans’ black musicians in more ways than just their choice of instrument, it provided them with new, European rhythms, predominantly French military rhythms (2/4 and 6/8 *quadrilles* and 4/4 military marching band rhythms, to be precise). Of course, considering the signifying nature of African culture, it is no wonder that Negro musicians began adapting the white European styles for their own unique purposes. “By the time the first non-marching, instrumental, blues-oriented groups started to appear...i.e., the ‘jass’ or ‘dirty’ bands, the instrumentation was a pastiche of the brass bands and lighter quadrille groups” (Baraka 75).



There is, however, a bit more to the provenance of jazz that deals not only with instruments and music, but parody, which thereby hearkens back to the humorous side of Signifying.

Another vital facet in the eventual emergence of jazz is the minstrel show. Minstrel shows began touring parts of the United States around the 1840s; the acts consisted of whites in blackface, poking fun at the lives and ways of blacks. Of course, these shows were extremely racist. However, considering this racism, it is an interesting historical development that African-American showmen eventually began forming minstrel companies, also going on tours, and to great success. Indeed, as Baraka points out, “it goes without saying that black minstrels were more authentic, and the black shows, although they did originate from white burlesques of Negro mores, were given a vitality and solid humor that the earlier shows never had” (Baraka 85). What’s more, we might consider these shows performed by Negroes a signification of white shows, which could possibly represent one of the first examples of signifying in the United States, one even extending to a world stage (Baraka 86). This is of great importance because the appropriation and parody of white appropriation and parody indicates an environment where Negroes felt less separated from American society: the alienation of American blacks that permeated the antebellum United States seemed to be eroding. A result of this change is what Baraka refers to as “classic blues”: “The emergence of classic blues indicated that many changes had taken place in the Negro. His sense of place, or status, within the American society had changed radically since he days of the field holler...The Negro felt he was a part of that superstructure” (Baraka 87). I would go as far to argue that this is also the exact kind of situation that allowed—and perhaps encouraged—African-Americans to pick up cornets and other European instruments to play the blues on, thus birthing a kind of “primitive jazz” along with a broadened proclivity to appropriate and syncretize various aspects of white American culture.

But another signification of white America that that developed through minstrelsy and bears mentioning is the development of the “cakewalk,” “one of the most famous dance steps to come out of minstrelsy...a take-off on the high manners of the white folks in the ‘big house’” (Baraka 86). This bears significance because the cakewalk is synonymous with jazz of a certain era—the “jazz age,” actually—thus allowing us to perceive jazz in a broader way—proving that “jazz” does not necessarily need to refer to only music, but dance. The fact that this iconic move is a product of cultural appropriation, again, only serves to bring jazz, signifying, and artistic syncretism closer together.

It is this encompassing, mixing hybridity, again, that Ishmael Reed champions in *Mumbo Jumbo*, which is perhaps the text most exemplary of his “Hoodoo aesthetic” next to the poem “Neo Hoodoo Manifesto,” which is essentially *Mumbo Jumbo* without any semblance of a plot. In this manifesto of sorts, Reed declares Neo-Hoodoo as a force that combats oppression and contradicts traditional Western mores; it “would rather ‘shake that thing’ than be stiff and erect”; Neo-Hoodoo “tells Christ to get lost (Judas Iscariot holds an honorary degree from Neo-Hoodoo)” (Reed 20, 22) But Reed also incorporates elements of pastiche—“jazzy” elements, if you will—in this assertion of aesthetic and, arguably, way of life and outlook: he inserts the first few paragraphs of a *New York Times* article into his poem: “The Vatican today barred jazz and popular music from masses in Italian churches and forbade young Roman Catholics to change prayers or readings used on Sundays and holy days.” This particular excerpt is noteworthy due to its evocation of Reed’s views on Christianity and Western monotheism. By taking this excerpt, a real-world example, he demonstrates how the Catholic Church is intolerant and exclusive, paranoid even. These feelings of negativity toward the oppressive tendencies of the Church are central to Reed’s concept of NeoHoodoo: “It (NeoHoodoo) is at odds with Christianity because of

the monolithic, myopic nature of a religion of a religion which condemns those who do not agree with its principles. Reed asserts that wherever oppression has grown, Christianity and other monolithic religions have been there” (Martin 82). Elsewhere, Reed draws from popular culture by referencing rock and roll, i.e., The Beatles, while drawing connections to Voodoo: “The Beatles failed to realize that they were conjuring the music and ritual (although imitation) of a forgotten faith, a traditional enemy of Christianity which Christianity the Cop Religion has had to drive underground each time they meet” (Reed 23). To this peculiar assertion, one might ask what the relationship between rock and roll, Voodoo, and jazz might be, yet it would seem that they are all products of cultural collision, “contaminated,” so to speak, in the eyes of entities such as the Church and White Supremacists, both of whom value purity. But perhaps even more important, though, on the fundamental level of words and sentences, we see Reed engaging in what a first-time reader might consider flagrant mistakes: Reed almost entirely foregoes commas (also refer to the previous quote from page 23, for example), and often misspells the names of those he “conjures.” Take the swing-era saxophonist Louis Jordan, for example, whose name Reed spells “Jordon,” not “Jordan.” Creedence Clearwater Revival, on the other hand, is rendered “*Creedance* Clearwater Revival” (Reed 22). On the surface, it seems as though Reed simply forgot to do some editing, but I would argue that these “errors” indicate the close nature of Neo-Hoodoo to jazz—Reed is improvising with his poetics, and thus signifying upon traditional literary standards by using jazz-like form.

Such a signification could work in a multifaceted fashion, in order to foreground Ishmael Reed’s concerns and personal beliefs regarding aesthetics and culture, i.e., the previously mentioned “multiculture” he endorses, which is “an amalgamation of perspectives, art forms, and lifestyles from different cultures, past and present” that also attempts to “bring different cultures

‘under one roof,’ but here his (Reed’s) cultural ‘house’ includes perspectives from ancient Egypt, Medieval Europe, Nineteenth century Haiti, and the American Old West, to name a few” (Jessee 5). This “amalgamation” is even more apparent in *Mumbo Jumbo*, due to its incessant borrowing and referencing of facts (and even some numerical figures) and historical figures and events, which will be explored to a greater extent in the third chapter. However, in “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto” Reed still takes the improvisational aspect of jazz and mixes it with his notion of a “multiculture” to dizzying effect. This is not only evident in the use of a *New York Times* article alongside references to Voodoo, ancient Egypt, and Christianity, but in a large paragraph that lists off a number of “Neo Hoodoos”: “John Lee Hooker Ma Rainey Dinah Washington the Temptations Ike and Tina Turner Aretha Franklin Muddy Waters Otis Redding Sly and the Family Stone B.B. King Junior Wells Bessie Smith Jelly Roll Morton Ray Charles Jimi Hendrix...and acolytes Creedance Clearwater Revival the Flaming Embers Procol Harum are all Neo Hoodoos” (Reed 22). The lack of punctuation and use of improvisation here helps solidify, or create a roof over, Reed’s conception of the “multiculture”—because what we have here is essentially one long name, drawn from vastly different time periods and existences, white and black, of the past and of modernity, which lends the poem, and the concept of Neo-HooDoo, great inclusivity. This range of artists is not only highly indicative of the syncretic nature of the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic, but also its improvisational qualities, which thus further liken it to jazz: because Reed aligns artists like Jelly Roll Morton and Ray Charles—artists that might seem almost irrelevant to each other aside from the probable influence of one on the other, plus the color of their skin—together, separated by one strike of the typewriter, he is drawing from jazz in that he synthesizes parts to create a heterogeneous, multicultural whole. The lack of commas, too, provides every prospective reader with the ability to read passages such as this as they please—

the rules established by Western standards and the pauses governed by punctuation have been done away with in “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto.” And as Ishmael Reed seems to randomly draw his Neo-HooDoos, in no particular order—improvising his list as perhaps a free jazz sax player, or perhaps as someone on the spot being asked for important black musicians—the reader, too, is welcomed to render “Jelly Roll Morton” as “Roll Morton Ray” and “Smith Jelly” (“Ray” as in Ray Charles, and “Smith” as in Bessie Smith, the artists who bookend Jelly Roll Morton). This, too, perhaps signifies a signification on the traditional form of poetry: Reed, working in a literary form given to him by Western society, lends his poem a jazzy fluidity by listing the names of white and black HooDoo artists without the aid of punctuation. The passage, in musical terms, could even resemble a long, unbroken note, asserting the multicultural nature of Neo-HooDoo, while linking black and white artists together.

However, the apparent invitation to improvisation that Reed seems to provide here is something that is arguably foreign in much poetry. Often, when a poem is read, the poet guides the reader how to read the poem with a certain cadence, or rhythm, through line breaks and, of course, various forms of punctuation. But that’s not to say there are no other poets who do exactly the same thing—I am sure they are plenty. Such poets, however, are not the object of Reed’s ire, nor do they have any say in what becomes an artistic standard. That is the job of the critics and popular media who praise one thing, likely something boring in the eyes of Reed, while debasing another—likely something by one of these experimental poets. Reed himself has noted time and time again in interviews—and even on his Facebook fan page—that critics are often taken aback by his work, condemning it in the process. As Reed points out in the “about” section of his Facebook page: he is “a writer who has been told by critics that he has a chip on his shoulders, has gone too far, and who is a crank and an old crank and involved in old fights.”mentally ill”

Sapphire, “stupid” Pat Holt, SF Chronicle” ([facebook.com/officialishmaelreed](https://www.facebook.com/officialishmaelreed)). In this interesting case, one possible only thanks to modern social networking technology, Reed is perhaps signifying on the place and expectations of authors in society, and perhaps how they are “supposed” to represent themselves. I looked over it many times, and that *is* actually how Reed filled out his “about me” section—with “that the” instead of “that he”; the lack of spaces when citing critic Pat Holt; and the somewhat awkward phrase “a crank and an old crank involved in old fights.” In comparison, to draw from a popular author who helps define what it means to be a writer today, in the public eye, Nail Gaiman’s fan page is pristinely written, with a full list of awards, and the contact information of his agents. The same is true for Stephen King, whose page is direct in showing that it is not actually run or accessed by Stephen King, but his website, thus perpetuating the veneer of bullshit that covers the social media outlets of celebrities. This marks a clear discrepancy, one that points out how Reed—even in his seemingly non-literary activities—is a perpetual proponent of Neo-HooDoo, because he is unconcerned with the way things *should* be, according to precedent, and is willing to exude his style, even if it blatantly contradicts what has already been established as “the norm.” Of course, when writing for respectable publications—*The New York Times*, for example—Reed does conform to standards of style, but, then again, in that case, he *needs to*, otherwise whatever message he wishes to convey would not reach would not reach the large but dwindling readership of *The Times*. In other contexts, however, like when the option to contradict is feasible, when Reed is more or less “in control,” Reed proceeds to do so. Again, we could attempt to connect this to a jazz aesthetic because jazz traditionally looks at the past, and the present, in order to foster new perspectives on the way things are. In this case, Reed demonstrates a willingness to call out those who have criticized him in demeaning ways, to forsake edits, all in the hopes to perhaps change the impression that writers and other famous (or

semi-famous, in Reed's case) give on social media, and thereby contradicting both the precedent and the norm. Indeed, jazz does this with music, and Reed does it in unexpected places. Reed fits Hoodoo—and jazz—into many aspects of his life.

Yet, in reading Neo-Hoodoo this way, we might also want to remember that jazz is, first and foremost, music, and music, for many, is considered one of life's principal pleasures, next to other enriching activities such as dancing, sex, and even eating. This aspect of jazz plays heavily in Reed's work and in Neo-Hoodoo, because, in fact, "Hoodoo as literary method is a way of doing things, with certain particular principles, which aligns its literary procedures and themes closely with a love of life, and the good things to be found in life. It absorbs anything which it can use to make life easier, more exciting" (Martin 82). In exemplifying this "love," Reed signifies upon literary tradition in another poem, defining Neo-Hoodoo to an even greater extent, titled "The Neo-Hoodoo Aesthetic." Quite simply, the poem is comprised of two gumbo recipes: "Gumbo Fevi: A whole chicken—if chicken cannot be had, veal will serve instead; a little ham; crabs, shrimp, or both, according to the taste of the consumer... Why do I call it 'The Neo-Hoodoo Aesthetic'? *The proportions of ingredients used depend upon the cook!*" (Reed 26). By suggesting that the Neo-Hoodoo aesthetic is like a gumbo, or stew, it becomes easier to link to jazz, because like gumbo, jazz is comprised of a number of "ingredients," i.e., influences. In the case of gumbo, such influences include African, French, Spanish, and even Native American. As such, gumbo is undoubtedly the ideal Hoodoo meal. Additionally, the process of making gumbo provides great freedom to the cook, as does the composition of jazz, and the creation of art within the Hoodoo aesthetic: they are all unbound by standards of what cooking, music, or art *should* be, according to Western ideals, or is, creating something entirely new, interesting, appealing, and revealing. In doing so, these creative activities borrow from, signify upon, methods of creation from the past,

while reinterpreting and reconsidering the ways of the past. For example, okra, a traditionally African food, found new usage among spices widely used by Native Americans, in a stew featuring a French thickening agent: the roux. In this example, Reed continues to signify on Western poetic tradition, because the poem, as previously stated, is exactly two different recipes, which could have been culled from an old cookbook, for all we know. But it works for Reed's goals, which include eschewing the standards he considers bogus, while asserting a notion of artistic freedom. And despite this seemingly simple utilization of gustatory text, we might also extend it to yet another example of a jazz-based aesthetic in Reed's work, because, as previously stated, he signifies not only to , but to change the overall notion of poetry. Of course, this is a kind of signifying we see in jazz, but it is also one we find throughout black music. For example, a critic might be disinclined to refer to "The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic" as "poetry," because, if we consider the fact that Reed often quotes from outside sources in his work, it was probably not written by Reed himself. The same issue was brought up in the late 80s and early 90s regarding sampling and hip-hop: the big question around this time (and it might still be a big question with the appearance and growing popularity of "mash-up" artists) was, "can we call this 'original' music, even though this beat was created by someone else?" A similar appeal was raised during the advent of jazz, though it is a simpler one, often fueled by racism: "Is this even music?" These are problems that appear time and time again throughout the history of African-American art, and they reach back to the original jazz/blues style of appropriation and signifying. But then, one might ask, why does it appear in later works by modern black artists?

The reason is that all forms of artistic expression aside from music are ultimately unsatisfactory to the African-American artist. According to African-American poet and music historian A.B. Spellman, "European art forms have afforded the black artist useful media of



expression, and all European forms, creative and performing, have been mastered to the point of excellence by at least a few black artists. However, all of the writings of Ellison, Jones, Baldwin, et al., all of the paintings by Lawrence, do not weigh as much as one John Coltrane solo in terms of the force of its thrust...and the originality of its form” (Spellman 164). With this quote, we can further explain the prevalence of the jazz aesthetic in Reed’s writings: he turns to music, specifically jazz—a part of a more African tradition—as an aesthetic foundation, because there is nothing else available in a strictly African sense. Music for African-Americans is essentially what painting or literature is to, say, France or Britain—it is the art form most central to their culture. The fact that music was essentially supplanted for many African-Americans as the great, black art, by Western forms poses a problem for Spellman, and likely for Reed too. This issue is one that divides the African-American community and reduces awareness of a universal cultural past: “The man standing in line for the Otis Redding show at the Apollo almost certainly never heard of tenor saxophonist Albert Ayler, and wouldn’t have the fuzziest idea of what he was doing if he did hear him. Yet the roots of Ayler’s music are largely the same as Otis Redding’s” (Spellman 167). Jazz was thought to be an important piece in the solution of this problem, due to the authority it provided for young, African-American artists over the society in which they live and perform: on bebop of the 1940s, Spellman writes, “here, for the first time, a black artistic vanguard assumed whole styles of comportment, attire and speech which were calculated to be the indicia of a group which felt that its own values were more sophisticated than, if not superior to, the mores of American society at large” (Spellman 166). This “sophisticated” attitude bears some similarity to what Reed works to do in his poetry and his novels. Reed draws from and signifies upon historical examples of a widely varying nature—a quality of jazz—in order to perhaps both educate and find a more acceptable means of writing literature for many African-

Americans. By marrying jazz with the novel is an example of Reed searching for—and creating, as I argue—a form which relates to his cultural heritage in a useful way. As such, “for the African-American music was a weapon of survival...music is rescue and release” (Spellman 165). This might be true, yet this is a weapon that was certainly used and perceived in different ways, especially around the advent of free-jazz (the 1960s). According to aesthetician Robert Kraut, that aforementioned, average Otis Redding fan might react with revulsion at Albert Ayler’s wonky honk sessions: “The work of Albert Ayler, for example, struck many jazz players as meaningless, inept gibberish, of the sort that inspired one critic to observe that ‘the *avant-garde* is the last refuge of the untalented’” (Kraut 7). Ayler, of course, being a jazz musician, works with signifying and improvisation, yet the above quote details a critical environment that is acerbic and demeaning to its subject. Reed takes issue with this in *Mumbo Jumbo*, which I will further detail and explain in the following chapter.

*Chapter Two: On The Reception of Jazz in America, or Sources of Signification*

Having just discussed and delineated the purpose and syncretic premise of a jazz aesthetic, I would like move on to discuss the early reception of jazz and other African-American arts, among both white and black audiences, from intellectuals to popular publications. I find that such a discussion would be useful to later describe the style Ishmael Reed deploys in *Mumbo Jumbo*, as it is a novel deeply rooted in history, with obscure historical references abounding on every page, and a lengthy bibliography at the end.

Although it might sound ridiculous to listeners and readers of today, jazz was once reviled as dangerous and detestable, a frightening cultural aberration. This truth is, of course, a product of the middle-Jim Crow era. Jazz was a musical style, an art form, altogether new, performed by and associated with a highly marginalized population—African-Americans—which made many feel uneasy. African-Americans were likely seen as lacking the proper mental and cultural faculties to produce art that was not only popular but of aesthetic merit fresher and more innovative than many other forms of popular art born of Western tradition. Yet jazz was catching on with younger, white audiences, and fast. In response, more conservative whites (i.e., much of the United States population) tried to beat back what they saw as an encroaching form of black culture the best way they knew how: through direct, critical attacks in the press. According to historian Maureen Anderson, “White critics often hid behind black stereotypes in order to explain the increased fascination the world had with jazz. Some, in utter contempt, wrote that jazz plagiarized and then mutilated the works of classical white composers. Still other critics maintained that jazz was dangerous, unhealthy, or, even worse, a form of bayou voodoo” (Anderson 135). A peculiar facet of such criticism, one that spans a variety of publications, was

the use of metaphor of disease, which Reed would later parody in *Mumbo Jumbo* 50 years later. Throughout the late 1910s and 20s Jazz was consistently compared to some kind of pandemic, as shown here, from a 1919 article titled “Delving into the Genealogy of Jazz”: “So far many parts of the East have been spared. Washington is almost free, New York is rent in spots. Boston is only slightly jazz. But the Middle West is in the throes—it may never return until consciousness returns” (Anderson 140). It is interesting to note that the unnamed author of this piece names cities with large black populations, a selection that is actually viciously prejudiced because it implies that black people and their culture are inherently bacterial (Anderson 140). “Bacterial,” in this case, means something communicable and infectious as much as it means something to be eradicated. This article did not only debase jazz and African-Americans with negative metaphor. No, the author presses on to paint a rather frightening scene that involves a Chicago jazz band inside a popcorn pot: “The wheezes of the scorching horns; the popping of the overheated drumheads; the groans and pleadings of the musicians, with now and then a pure silvery note from a piper who cared not a rap that he was to be roasted for his art; the ravings of the crowd looking on...That would be a Chicago jazz band” (Anderson 140). This excerpt would obviously strike most as violently racist—the poem paints a picture of a band being cooked alive—but we need to note the presence of the vengeful tone also present—it indicates that something else besides the mere existence of jazz had to be irking white writers (and likely a fair-share of the white population in general, as well) enough to write these excessively gruesome articles on the dangers of jazz and the need to eradicate it. In fact, if we examine other articles in a similar, anti-jazz—anti-black—vein, there is one discernible quality of jazz that might have gotten racist writers sufficiently riled—Jazz, what with its hot, improvised rhythms beckoning many to the dance floor, seemed to be eating away at the foundation of comfortable White Anglo-Saxon

Protestant life, or so it seemed. Extinction, errant mothers, and complete chaos were seen to be the eventual results of a “jazzed” society.

Yes, even if we were to simply look at the titles of these anti-jazz columns, we might think that the world were on the cusp of collapse, thanks to jazz. Titles like “The Jazz Path of Degradation,” “Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?” “Unspeakable Jazz Must Go,” “Students in Arms Against Jazz,” and “The Jazz Problem” all illustrate a decidedly paranoid sentiment toward jazz, one that is arguably reminiscent of both Red Scares and the Salem Witch Trials (Anderson 135). However, if we take a closer look at a few of these articles, we can ascertain, to some extent, why whites saw jazz as such a threat. For example, in “The Jazz Path of Degradation” the author, John R. McMahon, responds to a reader who rhetorically asks “Why attack the symptom or local outbreak instead of getting after the disease itself?” In response, McMahon offers that “jazz is the most widespread form of the social disease and therefore deserves most emphasis...It is hard to get people interested in germs as hygiene and duty. But they do take notice of fever and the shocking results shown to accrue from dance” (McMahon). Here we see the aforementioned, explicit allusions to disease. The most blatant symptom of “the jazz,” as it is referred to, seems to be social irresponsibility: “The jazz is lewd to the psychological limit. In many cases it leads to worse things, and in other cases it cannot lead to worse things—being a sufficiently evil end in itself. Take alcohol: Some get drunk, and others add murder to drunkenness. Those who only jazz, but thoroughly and habitually, are sex toppers. It is a path of degradation.” (McMahon). The argument here is simple; however, it also smacks of illogicality. The mention of murder with regard to alcohol is irrelevant, and the claim that those who dance are sex addicts seems a little hasty. Then again, this article was written for *The Ladies Home Journal*, which raises questions about McMahon’s sentiments about women’s ability to understand and argument. After all, the

climate for sexism was ripe, as women had just been granted the right to vote three years before this article was published. And the paragraph above seems rather slapdash—it's as if McMahon simply threw together some scary words—murder, drunkenness (this was the prohibition era), sex, evil, alcohol, degradation—and quickly linked them to jazz in order to “make” a point. It is as if he was not expecting any sort of critical inquiry into his logic. It is as if he expected the women who would read the article to accept and digest his anti-jazz diatribe, no questions asked. Furthermore, he appeals directly to the concerns of young women: “For the woman it may mean an impairment or defeat of motherhood. For the young man of marrying age it may spell postponement into the indefinite future of undertaking marital responsibilities” (McMahon). Here, McMahon is painting jazz as a force that undermines the linearity of American life (marry, work, have children, etc.) thereby throwing American society as it was known into a dire, unfamiliar situation. Consequently, McMahon then goes on to specifically discuss the state of marriage and family, and how having too much fun dancing could spell apathy toward family life, which would lower birthrates. The word “extinction” is dropped (McMahon). Of course, the connection between the extinction of the human race and jazz, more specifically jazz dance, is a stretch. But it is a stretch John McMahon makes wholeheartedly, which forces us to question whether or not McMahon is truly concerned with jazz as a threat to the human race, or if he is simply a racist who is afraid of jazz and the influence it and other African-American arts have on young whites. Such an influence, it appears, would impair the dominance of Western culture, which would usher in a new chapter of multicultural history. This is, of course, an unwanted chapter because we can see McMahon agonizing over the issue of jazz through not only his connections to the destruction of the American family, but references to nature—he is truly pulling out everything he can to subvert jazz, to construe it as dehumanizing: “A social scout reports that petting parties and

necking parties have now been added to the rites of jazz. It appears that necking is a development or evolution of cheek-to-cheek dancing and may traced farther back zoologically to the courtship methods of ostriches” (McMahon). Although the acrimony in this piece is palpable, it ostensibly makes sense in the context of American history, because anti-African-American sentiment pervaded popular culture around this time, and even coalesced into many outbreaks of violence: “With the Ku Klux Klan newly revived and racial hatred seething in all major cities, north and south, race riots erupted well into the winter months of 1919 in Washington, DC; Knoxville, Tennessee; Longview, Texas; Chicago; and Omaha” (Anderson 141). This spate of racial violence indicates severe, warlike, racial tension. The white population, with more in numbers and resources, had the upper-hand on this martial level, but it seems that, due to the spread of jazz, African-Americans were “winning” on a cultural level, hence the backlash found in writings such as “The Jazz Path of Degradation.”

As if the attacks on jazz did not seem multi-faceted enough from the widely-varying points of John McMahon, there is more racist rhetoric that needs further deliberation. And yes, it is found elsewhere in the publishing world of the early 1920s, but it manifests in ways slightly different from those of McMahon. For example, “Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?” aims to discredit jazz not by citing “science” while threatening the slow, sad demise of American society, but by appealing to different kinds of authority, a tendency that actually forms the basis of the so-called Atonists (described in my introduction) in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Furthermore, this article also comes from *The Ladies Home Journal*, but, unlike “Degradation,” it is written by a woman, Anne Shaw Faulkner. Faulkner uses a variety of means to defame jazz, though none of which are quite as outlandish as McMahon’s. Instead, she looks toward an ivory tower of the dance world: “The first great rebellion against jazz music and such dances as the ‘toddle’ and the ‘shimmy’ comes from

the dancing masters themselves... The National Dancing Masters Association, at their last session, adopted this rule: 'Don't permit vulgar, cheap jazz music to be played. Such music almost forces dancers to use jerky half-steps and invites immoral variations' (Faulkner). The problem with using such a source lies in the inherent inapplicability of jazz with regard to the NDMA. For one, the NDMA is evidently an elitist institution, deeming what is "right and wrong" in dance, while jazz really has nothing equivalent to the NDMA (at least not at that time)—it is an art unconcerned with what is "proper," as it is a largely improvisational music. Jazz wants to avoid and subvert "proper." What's more, the members of the NDMA are obviously applying their own ideas of what dance and music "should be," when the concepts of jazz and jazz dance are completely foreign to—not to mention at odds with—their own notions of art; i.e., Western music is not typically improvised but composed, and performed as such, with no variation. The concept of improvisation might have symbolized an even greater problem than the psychological discomfort that came with the popularization of an oppressed-peoples art—the art itself was enough to induce anxiety, because of its improvisational properties. Consequently, Faulkner reports: "It (jazz) is rather a method employed by the interpreter in playing the dance or song. Familiar hymn tunes can be jazzed until their original melodies are hardly recognizable" (Faulkner). This is a clear representation of the signifying technique of using something old to create something new and exciting, so it is likely that the art form and the ethnicity of the artists is what struck fear into these writers. Faulkner goes on to say that "Jazz disorganizes all regular laws and order; it stimulates to extreme deeds, to a breaking away of all rules and conventions; it is harmful and dangerous, and its influence is wholly bad" (Faulkner). In short, jazz scared people. But it might not have been just because African-Americans were making the music. The form, too, definitely exacerbated white fear. Ragtime, for example, Faulkner had no problem



with: “Like all great American phases of syncopation, ragtime quickens the pulse, it excites, it stimulates; but it does not destroy” (Faulkner). It is important to note here that ragtime is a written music—it is unlike jazz in this respect, which is often an improvised music. Although, as whites got more and more into performing jazz, the improvisational aspect was progressively phased-out by the popular swing bands of the 30s and 40s such as those of Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller: “Spontaneous impulse had been replaced by the arranger, and the human element of the music was confined to whatever difficulties individual performers might have reading a score” (Baraka 181). When looking at these documents and the corresponding music history of the 1920s, it appears that jazz functioned in a few different ways in society, as popular music, but also an aesthetic ideal that caused discomfort and a subsequent effort to contain it. The first point, that jazz was a popular form of music, is inherent in these publications—they would not exist if the writers did not see jazz as a threat sweeping the nation. The second point, that jazz aesthetics were perceived as threatening, is manifest in the improvisational qualities of jazz. For example, when a familiar tune is taken by a jazz band and warped, improvised upon, and even extended until the original song is unrecognizable, signification is at work, which erodes the familiar qualities of form. In this case, music is being broken down and transformed into new iterations of expression—which frightens people, because it is an unpredictable, anarchic practice. It is exactly what we see in Ishmael Reed’s poems, particularly in “Neo HooDoo Manifesto,” and, of course, in *Mumbo Jumbo*, in which articles like the ones just discussed are lampooned, using that jazzy improvisational style to do so. And although jazzy improvisation broke rules and conventions of music, similar to what other artists did with painting and performance, I doubt that Dada or other avant-garde forms of Modernistic art garnered the same kind of hatred that jazz did. Sure there were probably some poor reviews, but nothing to the extent of claiming that Dada was a harbinger

for the fall of American society. So, obviously there had to be a racial component to the anti-jazz smear campaign, as jazz was developed as an African-American art form, whereas whites dominated the avant-garde movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This smear campaign did not succeed at suppressing jazz, even though popular jazz forms of later years removed the key improvisational qualities. Still, jazz persevered, continuing the same cutting-edge artistic innovation it began with, but not without more subtle, ostensible hindrances, such as an association with the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negroes—a period characterized by not only by a flourishing of African-American arts, but the questionable scheming of certain figureheads in the movement, and the lucrative provenances of the art itself. Such an association could be seen as a “hindrance” because of some of the period’s strongest benefactors, like Alain Locke, were skeptical of jazz, deeming it base and “lowbrow,” unimportant to black arts. Obviously, Ishmael Reed takes issue with this in *Mumbo Jumbo*, which is why he skewers the New Negro movement and the malicious white writers of the time with the same satirical zest.

### This

Like all other life forms, artists need sustenance—need food in their belly, wherever that might come from. This fact holds true for the writers and actors and painters of the Harlem Renaissance as well. In fact, it is arguable that they were beholden to their patrons—white patrons. It is no coincidence, then, that Ishmael Reed uses the Harlem Renaissance as a backdrop for *Mumbo Jumbo*, a novel that examines the proliferation and perception of black arts. Reed is interested in how the figureheads of the period shaped its culture and its art, usually with a Eurocentric slant. This whiteness of the Harlem Renaissance manifests in a number of ways. First, there is the *New Negro* anthology of essays, plays, poetry, and various prose works compiled by prominent African-American scholar and philosopher, Alain Locke. Locke undertook this task because he

saw the African-American art at the time as representative of his race's "readiness" to become full, wholeheartedly accepted members of American society—of the world. Yet, in reality, "nothing could have seemed to most African Americans more extravagantly impractical as a means of improving racial standing than poetry or novels" (Lewis 90). What's more, Locke's idea of good art was more representative of Western standards, and not necessarily a reflection of African roots, which are steeped in music and the "folk." Put simply, the man was a Harvard highbrow, a Rhodes Scholar; he hated anything that could be deemed impure or "low." Locke wanted "highly polished stuff, preferably about polished people, but certainly untainted by racial stereotypes or embarrassing vulgarity. *Too much blackness*, too much streetgeist and folklore—nitty-gritty music, prose, and verse—were not welcome" (Lewis 95). Thus, the *New Negro* anthology is a compendium of Locke's Eurocentric biases: "Euocentric to the tip of his cane, Locke sought to graft abstractions from German, Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Slovakian nationalisms to Afro-America" (Lewis 117). So, when a Western-oriented book such as this is released and intended to represent an entire movement, the "best" artistic output of an entire race, problems arise, especially for Ishmael Reed, who sees the book as fodder for criticism, and uses a jazz-based aesthetic to reject and satirize its artistic discrimination and Eurocentrism. Consequently, Reed relies on the jazz aesthetic, using syncretism and signification of anything and everything, low and high, from classic songs, to the ideas of Locke and paranoid writers in popular publications (and more). Most importantly, however, both Reed and jazz draw their influences from a multicultural pool, in contrast to Alain Locke. This in itself is a rejection of Western ideals, which stress the predictable, the contained, and the culturally uniform.

However, Locke's views are not as one-dimensional as they seem when we begin to consider finances. After all, who helped pay Locke and other Harlem Renaissance artists as they ruminated

and wrote? The answer was often rich white patrons and, if you were a professor like Locke, Harvard. Normally, patronage is rather innocuous—a relationship between a wealthy admirer and the admired artist. But here, during the Harlem Renaissance, the motives of white patrons were often self-serving and, for the artists, creatively stifling: “white capital and influence were crucial, and the white presence, at least in the early years, hovered over the New Negro world of art and literature like a benevolent censor” (Lewis 98). Instances of patronage such as these find themselves under attack in *Mumbo Jumbo*. An example of one such benefactor is Charlotte Mason, a wealthy and elderly widow who doled out money to the likes of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Mason was a woman of many interests, and by the 1920s, African-Americans caught her eye, specifically “the primitive and therefore innocent elements (or so she judged them) in Afro-American arts and letters” (Kellner 96). However, with Mason, one had to either create art that appealed to her tastes, or relinquish the steady stream of cash she provided: “she broke off alliances when her charges proved disloyal by abandoning what she considered the purity in their work” (Kellner 97). Obviously, this is not the kind of relationship one would want for pure, organically-inspired and meaningful art. Therefore, it is a creative environment in which jazz could not thrive, because jazz is not “primitive”; it is the opposite, it is innovative—so much so that it scared white people. Yet in the *New Negro* anthology, the presence of “primitiveness” smacks readers in the face by the second essay.

The second essay of the *New Negro* doorstopper is perhaps the most unintentionally-hilarious section of the compilation. It is a short essay written by a white millionaire and art-collector named Albert C. Barnes, a “terrible tempered” man who saw himself “as one of the true few friends of African-Americans” (Kellner 94). Naturally, Barnes, like Charlotte Mason, helped finance various Harlem Renaissance endeavors while buddying-up with the likes of Locke—

hence his presence in the anthology. A man with dubious credentials, Barnes “extolled the aesthetics of African art, even though he could only define it in abstract terms, unable to get far beyond vague references to color, line, and space” (Kellner 94). Let us look at some of his observations on African art: “A primitive race, transported into an Anglo-Saxon environment and held in subjection to that fundamentally alien influence, was bound to undergo the soul-stirring experiences which always find their expression in great art” (Barnes 19). The condescension here is palpable. Barnes is implying that the “primitive” African race would never have been able to create great art, whether it is painting, literature, or music, without being transported to the West and subjected to slavery and the subsequent suffering of the Jim Crow era. Then again, this is a man entirely ignorant to the way art is often created in African cultures, i.e., the practice of signifying, improvisation, and may have even felt intimidated by it if informed. At the same time, this thinking undermines African art as legitimate and sophisticated—arguably more so than traditional Western art—because it discards the imagination of its creators, Africans. By deeming Africans a “primitive race,” he strips them of any agency or creative intuition: it was only because of the “alien influence” of whites that they were able to evolve, so to speak, and write books and poems that might provide enjoyment. For Barnes it seems that African and African-American art are mere sources of happiness, rather than pieces with any real emotional gravitas: “The cultured white race owes to the soul-expressions of its black brother too many moments of happiness not to acknowledge ungrudgingly the significant fact that what the negro has achieved is of tremendous civilizing value” (Barnes 24). Locke himself would have no problem with this, as he had little interest in Afrocentricity with regard to his grand goals: “This gentleman philosopher had come to see himself as one of the principal trustees of his people’s destiny... Locke was certain that, however deflected, different or delayed, the dialectic of cultural progress would

duplicate the European pattern” (Lewis 150). By placing Barnes at the fore of *New Negro*—right after the opening essay by himself—Locke is merely setting the stage for his idea of cultural legitimacy and advancement without any pesky questions about the abilities and intellect of Africans—that would not matter as long as a white man, with views contrary to those seen just a few years earlier, of course (like espoused in the *Ladies Home Journal*), could validate the work of Harlem Renaissance artists. This would be a decidedly Eurocentric affair, one that simply needed to start with a white man saying that “Negroes are creating ‘civilizing’ works.”

Locke’s opinions on African art are best represented in one of his own essays, “The Negro Digs up His past.” Right off the bat, Locke attempts to distance the work of African-Americans from the work of Africans: “There is little evidence of any direct connection of the American Negro with his ancestral arts...Characteristic African art expressions are rigid, controlled, disciplined, abstract, heavily conventionalized; those of the Aframerican—free, exuberant, sentimental and human” (Locke 254). Here, it is almost as if Locke is confusing African art with European art, deeming it “rigid” and “heavily conventionalized.” To imply that ancient African art, nay, ancient African intellect is fundamentally inferior and therefore different from that of the Aframerican is a ridiculous and politically-charged move. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, traditional African art is certainly not controlled nor heavily conventionalized—extensive signifying and improvisation attest to this. Ishmael Reed almost explicitly attacks Locke’s view in *Mumbo Jumbo*, with a passage that discusses African sculpture (but more on that later). “What we have thought primitive in the American Negro—his naivete, sentimentalism, his exuberance, and his improvising spontaneity are then neither characteristically African nor to be explained as an ancestral heritage” (Locke 254). This is simply false, because if not Africa, then where did these tendencies come from? Did they “just grow”? Reed answers this question in *Mumbo Jumbo* by

mixing historical references of varying time periods and cultures, bringing them together. What's more, Locke further tries to legitimize African-American art by citing white critics and mentioning the likes of Van Gogh, which reinforces his high-brow, Eurocentric point of view. And to top off his essay, Locke points young African-American artists to in fact view these European artists toward the west for inspiration: "The work of these European artists should even now be the inspiration and guide-posts of a younger school of American negro artists" (Locke 264). This is exactly the opposite of what Ishmael Reed would recommend, since his aim of a multiculturalism of shared knowledge, influence, and experiences. Of course, Reed would understand and expect Western culture to influence African-Americans, but to completely dismiss what happened on the continent as "rigid," which is a false assertion in itself, and reject the true African quality of African-American culture (e.g., humor, jazz, signifying) is completely contrary to Ishmael Reed's values. So, in order to challenge Locke's opinions, he creates a jazz text, a text rooted in African oral tradition.

### *Chapter Three: Mumbo Jumbo Examined*

Riddled with parallel narratives and pocked with pictures and illustrations, *Mumbo Jumbo* is not a typical novel. It is *sui-generis*. It is a novel imbued with the creative ebullience of jazz, and there are a number of ways in which it can be read to discern jazz-based aesthetic, from looking at signification and narrative flexibility, to syncretism of styles. Ishmael Reed writes using jazz as a model-of-sorts because it represents a means of creation that is authentically African and sophisticated. By writing this way, Reed rejects the notion held by Eurocentric individuals such as Alain Locke and his ilk that African-American art is completely unique from African art, and that it is simply a deviation, an offspring of Western styles. Additionally, the jazz template (or lack thereof) allows Reed to parody people whose views he finds ridiculous and dangerous, like those found in the *Ladies Home Journal*. But by using jazz specifically, Reed strives to link the artistic modes of the past with those of the present: “I think that avant-garde movements tend to take themselves too seriously and believe that they are originating forms which are, in fact, ancient” (Cowley 1237). He conveys this view in *Mumbo Jumbo* by retelling the tale of the Ancient Egyptian god Osiris with a twist. This also means that, for Reed, the creative ethos of jazz has also existed for thousands of years. However, it had not until relatively recent years that the Western world was exposed to new art forms, jazz in particular. As discussed in the previous chapter, many writers during the 1910s and 1920s struggled with the appearance and growing popularity of jazz, and reacted to it in ways that Ishmael Reed found unsatisfactory or hindering real cultural advancement—which is what *Mumbo Jumbo* is about, though it is not limited to jazz. In the novel, the proliferation of black arts is characterized by “Jes Grew,” a pervasive and contagious disease. “Jes Grew” represents the principal parody in *Mumbo Jumbo*. It lampoons the



general acrimony toward jazz—and other forms of African-American art that do not conform to certain standards—found in both white and black perceptions.

The most jarring manifestations of Jes Grew come in the form of “Situation Reports” that appear at seemingly random sections of *Mumbo Jumbo*. These read like urgent radio bulletins, written entirely in capital letters, and their haphazard placement also conveys an improvisational style. Like in jazz, there is little linearity or predictability, but that is also true for the various story lines that appear in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Although some of these reports might seem like humorous asides, jabs at the blandness of white America—“Jes Grew onflying giving America rise in the town of Muncie Indiana where it is engendering more excitement than the last dental inspection”—many can be read for meaning that pertains to Reed’s conception of multi-cultural art: “In Haiti it was Papa Loa, in New Orleans it was Papa Labas, in Chicago it was Papa Joe. The location may shift but the function remains the same. Creole bands conceal Jes Grew from Chicago’s Psychic Department of Public Health” (Reed 32, 77). By using a Creole name, a French name, and an African-American name, Reed implies that the provenance of African-American culture is universal, unlike what the likes of Alain Locke would have the world believe. In other words, the “function” of, say, voodoo or jazz remains the same—to appropriate, improvise, etc.—yet the location shifts—from Haiti, to New Orleans to Chicago—and whatever is practiced by members of the African diaspora is continually suppressed. I claim that Reed makes such an assertion in this and other instances because the nature of jazz and Voodoo religion are not dissimilar. “Yoruba, as it existed before the exportation of slaves to the Caribbean, was even then a syncretic religion, absorbing all that it considered useful from other West African religious practices” (Martin 5). Indeed the Yourba religion of West Africa eventually became Voodoo, thanks to the influence of Christianity: “Although given Christian principles in skeletal form, the

slaves appropriated, or syncretized, many aspects of Christianity, including icons as well as Catholic practices” (Martin 5). But we do not need to necessarily use these labels. For Reed, it seems that they blend; he calls his aesthetic “Neo-HooDoo,” yet it shares similar aspects with jazz and ancient African culture. Each belief system or cultural fixture, whether it is West African religion, Voodoo, or even jazz, is beholden by the same provenance and the same sensibilities. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed refers to Charlie Parker as “the houngan (a word derived from *n’gana n’gana*) for whom there was no master adept enough to award him the Asson,” a ritual instrument (Reed 16). Charlie Parker was, of course, a revolutionary jazz saxophonist, and the fact that he is referred to as a “houngan,” or voodoo magic-man, supports the notion that jazz and voodoo have much in common, at least for Ishmael Reed. The conflation, too, of a jazzman with voodoo terms also represents a jazz-influenced blend of ideas.

Theoretically, jazz is only slightly different from Voodoo and, to a slightly greater extent, Yoruban religion. “Voodoo...thrives because of its syncretic flexibility; its ability to take even negative influences, and transfigure them into that which helps the horse. It is bound by certain dogma or rites, but such rules are easily changed when they become oppressive, myopic, or no longer useful to current situations” (Martin 5). Reed applies these traits in *Mumbo Jumbo*, but I deem them more jazz-based (as opposed to “Voodoo-based,” not that the distinction is great) because of the moment he writes in: Unlike his predecessors, slaves in Haiti and in the United States, along with Africans in West Africa, Reed uses a foreign technology and form, the novel, to express himself. Previous individuals either used traditional forms (e.g., song, spiritual), or adopted new ones, such as Catholicism in the case of Voodoo. Reed rejects Western monotheism, yet he also syncretizes and signifies, thereby adhering to old, African sensibilities. In this way, I believe that Reed is more akin to those individuals who picked up horns and woodwind

instruments—in other words, jazz musicians. He uses a form that is more-or-less a foreign medium for African-Americans, the written word, and adheres to older, more musical, more traditionally African styles while using it: He appropriates, parodies, incorporates a number of literary styles (detective story, love story, satire, historical fiction) and uses deviating parallel narratives. By the same token, early jazz musicians incorporated elements from both French and Creole culture, while often using Western instruments.

In using these jazzy methods similar to those who adopted them musically, Reed strives to engage the reader, for “to provide for and elicit emotive response from the listener is of greatest importance to the Afro-American imparter of a narrative. This method springs not only from the African oral culture background of black Americans, but also from the degrading status they have been forced to occupy in American society” (Martin 6). This manifests itself more obviously in jazz, as it can induce dance. But what of the novel?

With its five-page bibliography and continual references to historical events (e.g., U.S. war bomb tonnage of 20<sup>th</sup> century provided in the midst of a retelling of the story of Osiris), a first-time reader of *Mumbo Jumbo* might be inclined to hit the history books (Reed 163). But, more importantly, he is required to *think* if he wants to make much sense of Reed’s story, which is why Reed often mixes in a kind of didacticism along with his appropriation and syncretism. For example, Reed specifically refers to the point of view found in the *New Negro* regarding African art. First, though, he characterizes New Negroes as a group out-of-touch with lower-class African-Americans yet keen on posturing as if they were. Reed describes a party held by New Negroes: “The party is at a Townhouse in Harlem. It was lent to the revelers by a wealthy patron. It isn’t an authentic chitterling switch but an imitation 1. It is what some of the New Negroes

would imagine to be a rent party given, to meet the 1<sup>st</sup> of the month... In fact there is nowhere in evidence a delegate from the ‘brother-on-the-street’” (Reed 30). It is ironic that a rent party would be held in a townhouse, especially one owned by wealthy white patrons, and attended by Upon walking into the office of recently-dead Black Muslim militant figure, the hero of *Mumbo Jumbo*, Papa LaBas, examines some of the artistic fixtures left behind:

Ornamenting the desk are amusing lampoons carved in wood, ivory and cast in bronze by African sculptors. They depict whites who went into Africa seeking skins, ivory, spices, feathers and furs. The subjects are represented drinking gin, leading manacled slaves, wearing curious, outlandish hats and holding umbrellas. Their chalk-faces appear silly, ridiculous. Outstanding in the collection is the figure of a monkey-like Portuguese explorer, carved by an Angolan. He is obviously juiced and is sitting on a barrel. What side-splitting, bellyaching satirical ways these ancient craftsman brought to their art! The African race really had a sense of humor (Reed 96).

This section refers to and challenges the position held by Locke and others in the *New Negro* tome that African culture is inherently inferior to that of African-Americans and Europeans. Barnes, for example, felt that it was only on account of the “soul-stirring” experience of slavery that primitive Africans were able to eventually create great poetry and literature and painting. Locke maintained that young African-American artists should look to the West for inspiration, and that humor, parody, should have no place in the art of the modern negro. But for Reed, as seen here, such beliefs are bogus: He interprets the sculpture as containing the one of the central

qualities of African art, parody and signification. In this case, the Angolan artist had the creative acumen to see how ridiculous and barbaric the European slavers were, what with their drunkenness and their umbrellas. The Portuguese “did not realize that the joke was on them” because “after all, how could a primitive people possess wit?” (Reed 97). This passage is interesting because not only does it undermine only Locke’s opinion, but it does so directly, as if the reader is having something explained to him about the creativity of Africans, a topic misunderstood and distorted by Alain Locke. Yet Locke is not the only one being objected to; many Americans, racists especially, view Africa as a large mass of violence, poverty, black people, and elephants—a place to send money in order feel good. Oftentimes, Africa is never actually referred to as anything but “Africa,” as opposed to, say, the country one would like to speak of (e.g., “Were having a clothing drive for Africa”). (Imagine referring to Europe or Asia as one homogenous blob—it would sound ridiculous). So, the passage is virtually a moment in which Reed steps in and speaks his mind about the ignorant views that whites and even African-Americans—and even the most educated African-Americans such as Alain Locke—can often hold about the nature of African culture: Namely that it is rather simple and unsophisticated. The above passage also marks a breaking away from the narrative, which was just then involved with the investigation of a murder. This happens often in *Mumbo Jumbo* because it “takes the narrative out of the routine, the linear, the dull. And dullness, again, is what Reed is writing rhetorically against” (Martin 8). True, Reed is trying to eschew conventional narrative, as jazz often eschews conventional music, but it is important to note how he tests the viewpoint—one shared by both whites and influential African-Americans (expressed subtly by Locke; expressed blatantly by racists)—that African culture is shallow and to be ignored. The fact that Reed signifies upon both helps sustain and promote his conception of cultural exchange. Such

exchange would bolster “collective consciousness to be created through cultural exchanges between individuals and groups which will revitalize not only their individual experiences but their culture as well” (Jessee 5). In this case, along with the case to be explored in the next paragraph, Reed opens up a dialogue between very different histories—one black and misguided, the other white and outright racist. Yet the dialogue here is discontinuous, staccato, and improvisational. This too refers back to jazz, because “jazz furnishes a model for Reed in its improvisatory logic and in its multiple voicing” (Cowley 1242).

Reed, of course, does not only send-up the New Negro movement—he goes after the white press, too, the likes of Elizabeth Faulkner and John R. McMahon in the *Ladies Home Journal*. These writers are personified en masse by a secret society called The Wallflower Order, which is determined to squash Jes Grew. The Wallflower Order ultimately signifies death, dullness, and sterility. Their headquarters is described as such: “You have nothing real up here. Everything is polyurethane, Polystyrene, Lucite, Plexiglas, acrylate, Mylar, Teflon, phenolic, polycarbonate. A gallimaufry of synthetic materials. Wood you hate. Nothing to remind you of the Human Seed. The aesthetic is thin flat turgid dull grey bland like a yawn” (Reed 62). This is unsurprising because “dullness, again, is one of the things Reed’s writing is rhetorically against” (Martin 8). This anti-blandness is not simply manifest only in Reed’s lack of commas and playful pokes at WASP America, but throughout the discontinuous quality of the novel itself, which is, of course, another quality of jazz. As scholar Max Cowley notes, “Max Harrison has remarked of Charlie Parker’s playing: ‘discontinuity was a positive feature of some of his solos, and in such recordings as *Klactoveedstene* he demonstrated his ability to impart shape and coherence to improvisations made up of short, apparently unrelated snippets’” (Cowley 1242). This discontinuity manifests itself throughout *Mumbo Jumbo*, where pictures, situation reports, and

drawings abound. Many of them help to promote the multicultural quality of *Mumbo Jumbo*. Often Reed cites white scholars in a discontinuous fashion. For example, there is a reference to Jung right before the description of the Wallflower Order's headquarters: "Christianity has never been worldly nor has it ever looked with favor on good food and wine, and it is more than doubtful whether the introduction of jazz into the cult would be a particular asset" (Reed 62).

In another situation report, absurd connections to jazz-dance and science are brought up in a similar fashion to McMahon's article: "The Wallflower Order induces its running dog medical societies and its jackanape punk Freudians to issue a report which 'scientifically' proves that Jes Grew is hard on the appendix...The shimmy, that descendant of the Nigerian Shika dance, is outlawed" (Reed 115). The notion that jazz-dance hurts the appendix, a useless organ, invokes the sort of desperate rhetoric used to subvert jazz in the early 1910s and 1920s. And it is humorous, as it is presented in the urgent manner of the situation report. The idea that jazz itself (jazz-dance, in this case) is a descendent of African civilization is also apparent here. But Reed does not simply lambast the petty, racist attempts to subdue jazz through these attacks. He mixes and synchronizes. As Reed refers to Charlie Parker as a houngan, he also establishes the Wallflower Order as a central facet of something called the Atonist Creed, which is actually an ancient religion that worships the sun. He uses this religion to embody Western empiricism, objectivity, and nearsightedness. And by bringing these two seemingly contextually irrelevant groups together, Reed provides a way of looking at history that differs from what many might already perceive. Like what he does with jazz and voodoo, Reed does the same for this white disdain for differences. By referring to the Wallflower Order and individuals who hate jazz as "Atonists," he is like the jazz musician who engages in a "re-telling of the original melody and underlying chord

structure,” except Reed is doing this to expose the deep-seated prejudicial worldview historically held by Europeans.



### *Final Thoughts*

The aesthetic of jazz, by now, after having slaved for months over it, even tiring myself of the very word “aesthetic,” seems to be far simpler than I imagined during my first reading of *Mumbo Jumbo*. The dichotomy between jazz and anti-jazz, or “Jes Grew” and the Wallflower Order, appears not to not have anything to do with things like signification, appropriation, and people like Charlie Parker... Well, jazz obviously does have to do with those things, but those things are really just the products of an open-minded love or curiosity about all cultures of the world. Coltrane probably loved “My Favorite Things,” and I could see Miles getting into some Cyndi Lauper. This is the kind of appreciation and appropriation that advances culture and, perhaps, *the human race*.

As for Ishmael Reed, he has not written a particularly avant-garde or obviously jazzy novel since the 1970s. Ever since the early 1980s, Reed’s novels have been rather ordinary, though he certainly espouses in them concerns similar to those found in *Mumbo Jumbo*. This begs the question: Has the Wallflower Order won, what with the chief houngan of the literary world writing novels that are easily digestible with virtually no discernable elements of jazz in the narrative? I would answer no to that. Authors tend to lighten-up as they age, and jazz, voodoo, and hoodoo all exist in various forms today as they did forty years ago and thousands of years ago. Whatever form jazz finds itself in can, however, change with the times. Hip-hop, for example, shares many aspects of jazz, including appropriation, signification, and improvisation. Still, what is more disconcerting is that fact that Hip-hop, especially in its early years, has been derided as a cacophonous fad, dangerous and “not real music.” Sounds, familiar, no?

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