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Uprising in Storyville: Conjuring Resistance in African-American Literature

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‘[Ishmael] Reed’s rhetorical strategy assumes the form of the relationship between the text and the criticism of that text, which serves as discourse upon the text’ (Gates 1988, p.112). So speaks Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his seminal text *The Signifying Monkey*, harnessing, he believes, Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of ‘inner dialogisation’ (1988, p.112), or polemic hidden in parody. He does this to argue the case for self-reflexivity as *Mumbo Jumbo*’s ‘form of signifyin(g)’ (Hurston 1990, cited in Gates 1988, p.113), the way in which Reed riffs on the codes fielded in his text. However, what Gates declines to explore are the discourses to which these codes pertain, discourses that Reed summons like a conjuror, then performs like a ventriloquist; the very social currents that lace his America and are re-laced in his text. To avoid the connotation of illusory, David Blaine-style conjuring, this essay will posit in its place the term conjure, as it relates to the conjure man, a pervasive archetype within African-American literature. He is both community organiser and a reality re-organiser, conjuring uprising from what already-exists, not out of the blue, and this conjure is present in the works of Ishmael Reed, Rudolph Fisher, and Randolph Kenan which this essay will examine.

Even after the sociality of conjure is returned, the radicalism and reach of this ‘form of signifyin(g)’ (Hurston 1990, cited in Gates 1988, p.113) is restricted by critics who file it away as Reed’s idiosyncrasy, such as James Lindroth’s *Images of Subversion* and Helen

Lock's *A Man's Story Is His Gris-gris* (Lindroth 1996; Lock 1993). In response, this essay will show that Reed's 'Neo-HooDoo, ...the Lost American Church' (2004b, p.2062), is part of a grander narrative of conjure within African-American literature. To this end, the essay will look at the generations prior and successive to Reed, in order to fashion a theory of conjure as a narrative adapted to the uprootedness of a people hauled across the Atlantic: 'we were dumped here on our own without the book to tell us who the Loas are, what we call spirits... [so] we made it all up on our own' (Reed 1996, p.130). African-American literature's interiority to America levies the commitment that is this essay's first theme: giving the individual no opt-out from the relationships of difference into which he is born, and giving Reed the belief that 'a black man is born with his guard up' (Reed 1990, epigraph). The second theme is parody itself, an act of doubling involved in what Bakhtin calls 'the reaccentuation of images and languages (forms) in the novel' (1981, p.59), essentially a storytelling technique by which the past can be played and replayed, memories conjured up to furnish the present, rather than one-way bombardment, or Proustian moments. The third aspect of conjure and the third theme of this essay is the act of occupying, as used by the Loop Garew Kid in Reed's *Yellow-Back Radio Broke Down*, when, 'by making figurines of his victims he entraps their spirits and is able to manipulate them' (2000, p.60). Each theme makes a point about decentredness, the relational subjectivity of those separated from their origins by the Atlantic. Each theme remarks that decentredness does not disable resistance but, rather, enables the double-voicing that can negotiate such a compromised position. This is what lets the conjuror stay focused behind enemy lines, behind the mask, as a storyteller trapped in his own story, with access to a host of ciphers for him to talk through, structures for him to ride on, and social

apparatus on which ‘to swing up on freedom’(Malcolm X 2004, track 21).

Firstly, then, the individual within the all-encompassing structure theorised by African-American postmodernism is the committed individual; that is to say, the individual who is socially or politically engaged. With no way of opting out and severing ties, he undergoes Houston A. Baker’s ‘transformation of my I into a juncture’ (2001, p.2240), putting him squarely at the crossroads of the discourses referenced by his every utterance, and committing him to their calling. This is the position of the conjure-man, ‘not a filled subject, but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole’ (Baker 2001, p.2231). Fisher’s Harlemithe conjuror, Frimbo, appears to match this description: ‘the figure seemed to fade away altogether and blend with the enveloping blackness’ (1992, p.67). However, whilst Fisher’s mystery tale genre ties this up in one character, Frimbo offers a picture of what Baker sees as a performable rite: the conjure-man put at the crosshairs of discourse by his speech acts, in which converge the axes of time and space, such that, according to Bakhtin, not just Frimbo, but ‘the image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic’ (1981, p. 85). The chronotope is Bakhtin’s name for the spatio-temporal matrix in which narrative is made, a stage where the speech act takes on a social element from the experience on which all acts derive social experience. By quoting Bakhtin’s ‘Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel’ (1996, p.276) in the epilogue of *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, Kenan also plays this conjuror, giving the novel’s magical themes (‘he come riding in on a great black bull...snorting flames’ (1996, p.331)) to the realising guarantee of social discourse: ‘the fantastic in folklore is the realistic fantastic’ (Bakhtin 1981, p.280). The discourses converging on Tim’s Creek, Kenan’s maroon Macondo, ensure the footnotes

which reference a critic with Kenan's initials are not just Nabokovian play, but bring to bear all the social commitment of reference to social discourse. The effect is to make 'the imagining of imagined communities' (Smith 2004, p.160) an assault on the fixity of society, conjuring the same economic and social norms into the text, but making them as malleable as story.

Philip Brian Harper believes that postmodern theories, spawned in response to the erosion of faith in an objective externality, are nothing more than the parameters within which marginalised cultures have always had to write: 'the postmodern era's preoccupation with fragmented subjectivity represents the recentring of the culture's focus on issues that have always concerned marginalised constituencies' (Gysin 2004, p.141). However, this overlooks difference in the field, homogenising literature that has spanned the same shifts as other movements. It is just such a paradigm shift that exists between Ishmael Reed and Ralph Ellison, captured in Reed's poem *Dualism*, subtitled 'in ralph ellison's invisible man' (Reed 2004a, p.2058): 'I am outside of / history, I wish I had some peanuts, it / looks hungry there in: / its cage' (ll. 1-5). Such wariness of the 'Invisible Man' symbol of modernist alienation forever underlines Reed's writing, and *Dualism's* volta represents the revolution brought by the post in his postmodern envelopment, after which the invisible man is the committed conjuror: 'I am inside of / history, its hungrier than I / thot' (ll. 6-9). Harper's view of black Americans' natural aptitude for postmodern discourse therefore ignores the conflict that runs through African-American literature, and of which these texts are the reverberations. The tendrils of discourse that hang from the committed individual are not a given. Rather, they are affixed by conjurors such as Reed, who draw them down and fasten them to

errants like Ellison, one of a previous, modernist generation of writers more concerned with alienation-from than commitment-to social pressures.

Gates would seem to share in this theory of the struggle to commit. By his account, African-American literature is not innately given to foregrounding decentredness, and he differentiates ‘the Black Arts movement’s grand gesture...to make of the trope of blackness a trope of presence’ (Gates 1988, p.223) from Reed’s writing, where ‘blackness exists, but only as a function of its signifiers’ (Gates 1988, p.227). Gates leaves one in no doubt that there is no universal blackness, let alone unity over an idea of blackness. The implication, however, is that there was a point when it was necessary for black intellectuals to play the invisible man and go outside of the host structure in order to create that presence, even if they have since returned. By giving props to this transcendental presence, as a stage in the long march towards his position, Gates reduces the Reed-Ellison antagonism to easily-smoothed aesthetic differences, as against a Bakhtinian genesis of Black Studies that ‘arose and developed not as the result of a narrowly literary struggle among tendencies, styles, abstract world views – but rather in a complex and centuries-long struggle of cultures and languages’ (Bakhtin 1981, p.83). Gates not only reduces the stakes for which such difference plays, but the idea of presentism politely giving way before difference ignores just how big and riling a presence Ellison is to Reed’s writing, as evidenced by Reed’s epilogue to *Yellow-Back Radio Broke Down* (2000, p.60):

America...is just like a turkey. It’s got white meat and it’s got dark meat. They is different, but they is both important to the turkey...I guess Hoo-Doo is a sort of nerve that runs mostly in the dark meat, but sometimes gets into the white meat, too... Anywhere they go my people know the signs.

This is difference as more than just formal raiment, a mere aesthetic turn from Ellison's modernist approach, but a proclamation of alterity as the structure by which society itself is organised. Reed might have been called a 'capitulationist' by Amiri Baraka (Baraka 1980, cited in Ebbesen 2006, p.35), but his writing loses none of its Hoo-Doo nerve by getting involved with the white meat. Hence it is not Gates but Baker who provides this access to the Bakhtinian Reed, who not only travels by discourse, but relies on its sociality to convey his chronotopic intervention to the whole system: 'blues instances are always intertextually related by the blues code as a whole...transforming experiences of a durative (unceasingly oppressive) landscape into the energies of rhythmic song' (2001, pp.2232-2233). Unlike Gates, Baker sees the full social implication of this theory. In doing so, he discerns and provides the critical language for the landscape painted by Ishmael Reed, a landscape where every utterance strikes up a relationship (of difference) with the society whose codes it touches.

The second aspect of conjure as a strategy for negotiating the postmodern state is parody, which thrives in the all-encompassing structure, just as this all-encompassing structure lends itself to parody. By Gates' definition of parody as 'repeating received tropes and narrative strategies with a difference' (1988, p.217), the figure of the zombie is the definitive parody. The dead who refuse to lie repeat their own life and therefore comprise that difference in themselves. Bakhtin calls this 'inner-dialogisation' (Bakhtin 1981, cited in Gates 1988, p.112), such that the zombie is in dialogue with the humanist gold standard, against which he stands as the grotesque repetition-with-difference. This parody effect threatens to arise in Zora Neale Hurston's study of voodoo and life in Haiti and Jamaica, *Tell My*

Horse: ‘it was concluded that it is not a case of awakening the dead, but a matter of the semblance of death’ (1990, p.196), but it never quite boils over into Reed’s purely functional, counter-revolutionary, signifying zombie, the Talking Android of *Mumbo Jumbo*. This figure only exists in relation to the Jes Grew uprising it imitates and subverts, making it a wholly leveraged, purely functional entity. Because it is so clearly only there in order to parody, as sheer effect, the signifying zombie frees the zombie from zombie-movie fetishisation, which subsequently appears like an over-indulged fear of occupied youth rising up, as in Reed’s Jes Grew generation: out after dark, heedless of curfew, in a protracted temporal space into which they are not permitted, ‘repeating...with a difference’ (Gates 1988, p.217) the life taught to them. Further, with its referent unbracketed, the signifying zombie refers to a current that runs throughout African-American literature, tracing figures such as Chester Himes’, ‘Coffin’ Ed Johnson and ‘Grave Digger’ Jones, and taking the trope of disinterring even closer to that of uprising, part of the struggle to tell America’s story, before returning to Reed’s postmodern battlefield, where zombies are ‘spokesm[e]n who would furtively work to prepare the New Negro to resist JG and not catch it’ (1996, p.190).

In the Baker-Reed, postmodern schema of identity, identity is made of relations with everyone else: it does not exist in its own right. Any flag-waving assertions of self-sufficiency thus end up as self-parody, with the flag-waver supplementing his identity into grotesquery in the effort to shore up its purity and squeeze out the other. This is the excess exposed in Reed’s fiction, where the authorities shed their subtlety and show what discourses they are moved by, mobilising the Contras to do their dirty work: ‘whenever sophistry and rhetoric fail they send in their poor white goons’

(1996, p.49). Reed reconnects this subcontracted violence by turning his characters into Southern grotesques, making figures like Drag in *Yellow-Back Radio Broke Down* lose the individuality of character and become discourse-laden masks, clusters of signifiers that refer back to the liberal normalcy they cease to conceal, and begin to parody. Inversely, liberal normalcy also performs a mask function: concealing a violent tendency that careful application of parody can call out. Loop carefully applies this to Drag, who cannot but admire: ‘spectacular entrance...riding my symbol, fancy black boots, silver spurs’ (Reed 2000, p.81), before trying to evict Loop’s parody from the selfsame mask by violently constructing him as other. The same otherising rhetoric appears in *Mumbo Jumbo*, where U.S. imperial ambitions in Haiti are masked by official rhetoric on cannibalism and voodoo. Like Loop before him, Reed adopts this mask and plays along with its talk of voodoo, but plays its signifiers out all the way back to the voodoo going on within America itself: ‘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’ (1996, p.77). Parody thereby turns America into the other of itself, making every attack on the other an attack on the self, whose codes he wears.

Baker’s *Betrayal* eschews such masking, dedicating a chapter called ‘Have Mask Will Travel’ to attacking ‘black centrist intellectuals...arch examples of the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar’s wearer’s of the “mask that grins and lies”, capable of endorsing any available position’ (Baker 2008, p.104). Yet his resistance to the centrists’ willingness to blame African-American children for their own underachievement, and the emphasis ‘not on blacks behaving badly (or badly performing), but on standardised testing – a structural issue’ (2008, p.101), is so oppositional a stance that it risks closing

down potential modes of resistance by theorising such all-consuming structures. However, the repetition-with-difference of parody can give agency to Baker's structurally delimited ghetto youth, oppressed by 'rote learning, the mainstay of Jim Crow schools before the Brown decision. [Where] creativity, curiosity, and critical thinking are stifled' (Baker 2008, p.101), turning them into Reed's young gunmen of *Yellow-Back*, chasing their teachers out of town: '[they] made us learn facts by rote. Lies really bent upon making us behave. We decided to create our own fictions' (Reed 2000, p.16). Recitation, like parody, is shown to contain enough difference to disturb the mimetic reinscription of the status quo. Kenan relates the same idea to the act of remembering. In *Tell Me, Tell Me*, white Ida has her black servant firmly placed in the scheme of things until one day 'suddenly Joe Abner reared up in her imagination as a grand and impenetrable mystery' (Kenan 1996, p.253), such that memory is conjured up and replayed differently, disturbing the twenty-five year reinscription of the economic relations between them. In no way underestimating the primacy of Baker's power structures, conjure simply elbow-room for manoeuvre, a post-structural double voice: 'now HooDoo is / back as Neo-HooDoo' (Reed 2004b, p. 2066).

The third aspect of this conjure strategy is the trope of occupying. Although Gates claims it is Reed's 'argu[ment] that the so-called black experience cannot be thought of as a fluid content to be poured into received and static containers' (1988, p.218), Reed is regularly to be read pouring his black insurgents into received and static host containers, a tactic lifted from Haitian voodoo and its theory of mischievous loa, or gods 'mounting a subject as a rider mounts a horse' (Hurston 1990, p.220). His *Yellow-Back Radio Broke Down* is essentially a treatise on this horse-riding, occupying tactic: 'if, according, to Afro-American folklore, spirits ride human hosts

and are referred to as horsemen, then I would naturally write a Western' (Reed 1990, p.137). Its hero is a black cowboy, and much as there were black cowboys in the Wild West, as a genre the Western is a tightly, whitely patrolled frontier. Here, therefore, is blackness poured into a received, given container, though the emphasis is on the pouring, on the act of occupying, not on any essential blackness as Gates means it. Moreover, as Michael Fabre points out, the hero's name, Loop Garew, means werewolf, from the French 'loup garou' (1999, p.18), again stressing the fact of the change, over any final signified blackness. The signifying, black, hoodoo cowboy Reed shocks into the signified Marlborough Man is a definite political act, and Gates misuses Reed's writing to turn its radicalism into a reduced plea of anti-essentialism. The inverse of Baker's oppositional over-reaction to Gates, which left the individual structurally over-determined, is Gates' over-wariness of essentialised blackness. He is so focused on making difference a technique for dodging structures that would speak for the African-American that he overlooks its radical potential, as an applied difference, or as a shifting occupant. Like the 'adepts' Hurston sees conjuring Guedé the horseman in Haiti (1990, p.220), Reed's adept occupation of the Western and the cowboy, amongst others, is a model for a middle path of radical alterity, and as such should be exported to the other texts in question.

The applied difference of a shift in occupants is a signal trope for Rudolph Fisher. In *The Conjure-Man Dies* it becomes a paradigm shift, with the site occupied by Fisher's murdered conjure-man, Frimbo, later reoccupied by Dart, the very detective trying to account for the murder, such that, to Bubber, who has sat before both, it appears as though 'the voice issued from a place where he had a short while ago looked with wild surmise upon a corpse'

(1992, p.46). The paradigmatic detective of Derridean fame, locked up in a close reading of the text and his own teleological Weltanschauung, thus finds himself occupying the form formerly held by Frimbo, Fisher's decidedly paradigmatic conjure-man: 'Frimbo inherits the bequest of a hundred centuries, handed from son to son through four-hundred unbroken generations of Buwongo kings' (1992, p.69). Thus Dart plays performative heir to Frimbo's line, and rather than revoking the conjure-man's legitimacy by orchestrating a detective fiction that proves its irrationality, as a physician like Fisher might be expected to do, the writer has his detective carry on from inside the same dark space, 'turnin' out all the lights and talkin' from where he was' (1992, p.125). The paradigms are left sitting heavily in the text, intense clusters of codes for Fisher's writing to strike a match against. The spark it conjures is Bakhtin's 'auto-criticism of discourse' (1981, p.259), and it puts Fisher in Reed's mould of making meaning, discourse sparked against the grain of alterity: 'an anti-plague...Jes Grew is seeking its words. Its text. For what good is a liturgy without a text?' (Reed 1996, p.6).

The occupation of the big house on the hill, by slaves born in a narrow room in its shadow, is just as paradigmatic an act of occupying, a journey from margins to centre aided and abetted by conjure, the insurgent tactic. Recalling Reed's Loop Garew Kid, and how 'he put something on her that had her squawking like a chicken' (2000, p.83), Pharaoh, in Kenan's *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, bewitches his slave owner 'and somehow or nother got closer and closer to the house' (1996, p.300). In conjure theory, therefore, the occupation of the seat of power is allied with taking possession of the powerful: 'I don't know what kind of hoodoo Pharaoh used on him, but he witched the sucker good-fashioned...he got such power

over Cross he could give orders to the white overseers' (Kenan 1996, p.300). The theory also fits African-American literature's interiority to the American canon, occasionally afforded room in the big house anthologies, but more commonly allocated a Cambridge Companion of its own, given the imprint and representatives such as Fritz Gysin, who can only understand black postmodern literature in so far as it matches or does not match his definition of classic postmodernism: 'most African-American postmodernist fiction blends, or oscillates between, approaches implied by those two theoretical positions' (2004, p.143). Gysin attentively qualifies anything that awkwardly refuses to fit the definition, specifics that 'may be due to the strongly ethical and political quality of most black writing, to specific kinds of thematic engagement, or to certain generic preoccupations' (2004, p.143). If he ventured to probe these particularities, rather than sanding them off, he too might see the conjuror's arsenal of commitment, parody, and occupying, a postmodernism made especially for America, and wholly African-American. With marginality afforded such a service, Kenan can be forgiven for keeping his eyes on the prize: 'so in Don Quixote fashion I attacked the ramparts of the publishing establishment' (Kenan 1995, cited in Hunt 1995, pp.411-421), a strategy that bore fruit in 2008 with the occupation of the big, White house.

In conclusion, therefore, conjure is credible as the politicised upgrade of Gates' theory in *The Signifying Monkey*, which had reduced its test case, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, to 'a novel about writing itself' (1988, p.220). Gates is right that 'Reed criticises the Afro-American idealism of a transcendent black subject' (1988, p.218), but with Reed and conjure theory dealing in codes pertinent to social discourse, he ought to follow his criticism to its own implications, and see conjure's particular pertinence to African-American

resistance discourse. In the words of Jeffrey E. Anderson, ‘conjure’s...transformation from African religion to American magic made it into a microcosm of the African American experience that combined elements of loss with a persistent drive to survive in the face of persecution’ (2005, p. 25). Gates might call Bakhtin as a witness in *The Signifying Monkey*, but the Russian does not, like Gates, step over the sociality of his theory. Rather, he is at pains to emphasise that the meaning that passes through the gates of the chronotope and ‘enter[s] our experience (...is social experience)’ (Bakhtin 1981, p.258). Nevertheless, Gates is astute in summoning Bakhtin, who proves himself a helpful invocation in theorising conjure, and Gates’ 1988 use of *The Dialogic Imagination* to critique Reed paves the way to this essay’s update. The essay’s tripartite theory of commitment, parody and occupying tactics shows conjure to be very much of its world, having been through the chronotopic mangle and picked up its social habits in the process. It is this that makes it so fit for purpose, fashioned on the wing, for the struggle.

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