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RETHINKING ISHMAEL REED'S *MUMBO JUMBO*:
NEO-HOODOO WOMANIST TEXT?

BY KAMEELAH MARTIN SAMUEL

African American novelist Ishmael Reed theorized a new literary discourse with which to interpret, criticize, and compose an emerging genre of African American writing. Neo-Hoodoo, as Reed calls it, seeks to dismantle the Western hegemonic rule over literary production by subverting language, mythology, and religion, thereby demonstrating that literature produced according to Western standards is not necessarily superior to that allied with other cultures. This hegemony also encompasses representations of gender, a topic thought unlikely to develop positively within Reed's repertoire according to his female critics. Neo-Hoodooism, however, deals with gender and femininity in a way that challenges the long-standing notion of Reed as a misogynist. Reed's Neo-Hoodoo describes both a literary method and, arguably, a literary genre based upon the cultural practices of Voodoo. Reginald Martin describes Neo-Hoodoo as a "literary method [that] reinterprets and reinvents; it uses time disjunctively and synchronically to illustrate social truths by juxtaposition with their opposites and their supposed origins" (83).

Reed's ideology challenges popular beliefs, assumptions, and definitions, calling into question how and why the reader comes to rely on a particular way of knowing, but the primary function of Neo-Hoodoo is to disrupt "Western tradition and the oppressive and stress-filled Western/European/Christian way of doing things" (63). Reed, who has been infamously accused of misogyny by Barbara Smith and Michele Wallace,¹ ironically employs a female character in the arsenal he uses to underscore his Neo-Hoodoo stance.

The appearance and placement of Erzulie² in Reed's 1972 novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*, signifies something more than an enthusiasm for gender equality, however. Rather, Reed's use of the Haitian icon begs the question of black women's representation in a white, Eurocentric, patriarchal society, a point which brings Reed's text awfully close to having *womanist* inclinations—two years prior to Alice Walker's articulation of the term, I might add. Walker, who coined the term in her collection *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (1974), helped to revolutionize the ways in which women of color expressed their relationship to the world and to feminism in particular. Rather than viewing Reed as antagonistic toward black women, as Smith and Wallace suggest, I am proposing a new reading of his text which exhibits a commitment to [the] survival and wholeness of [an] entire people, male *and* female" (Walker xi).

The degree to which Erzulie is nuanced in Reed's novel suggests that the author is putting serious questions to and challenging representations of Africana womanhood, much in the same vein as Patricia Hill Collins, Valerie Smith, and other prominent black feminist critics. While the cloud of misogyny may continue to hang over Reed's literary career, I offer one interpretation that reconsiders his "female troubles," the implication being that Reed does have a certain appreciation for "women's culture, women's emotional flexibility, and women's strength" (Walker xi).

In light of Walker's definition, this essay examines *Mumbo Jumbo* as a Neo-Hoodoo *Womanist* text, one that complicates Western ideas of womanhood and redefines it outside the limitation of Eurocentric thinking—a new reading for old critics to ponder.

Inherent in Reed's articulation and literary production of Neo-Hoodoo is the inverse and indirect nature of, Elegba,³ the divine trickster. Harold Courlander's *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes* (1973) describes him as "the orisha of chance, accident and unpredictability. . . Eshu is responsible for carrying messages and sacrifices from humans to the Sky God. [He is] also known for his phallic powers and exploits. Eshu is said to lurk at gateways, on the highways and at the crossroads, where he introduces chance and accident into the lives of humans" (10-11). The crossroads, the point where the visible and invisible worlds meet, is a magical netherworld full of ambiguity and duality. Reed's work is also situated at a metaphorical crossroads. Building on W. E. B. Du Bois' notion of double-consciousness, Reed (as evidenced in his writing) does not reconcile "his two-ness—an American, a Negro . . . two warring ideas in one dark body," but rather occupies the liminal space between the two—neither writing fully in terms of Western tradition nor accepting the formula prescribed by such Black Aesthetic critics as Addison Gayle, Jr., and Houston Baker (3).

The Black Aesthetic critics of the sixties and seventies dictated that literature produced by African Americans conform to specific criteria that granted primacy to an Afrocentric way of knowing and discussed the social and political climate critically. Gayle and Baker, in particular, found fault in Reed's satirical banter and how his fiction makes jest of social issues rather than confronting them in serious prose. Baker even went so far as to accuse Reed of "betraying the very moment [the Black Aesthetic] which had brought attention to [his] work" (qtd. in Martin 46). He labeled Reed a surrealist whose textual structure was

incomprehensible and inaccessible, arguing that readers could not "find a common experience to which to relate" (42). Reed, however, continued to write according to his own aesthetic. Baker also denigrated Reed's use of African spirituality in his work, to which Reed responded, "I dare Mr. Baker to . . . dismiss Yeats' mystical theories as 'spurious'" (as Baker had called Reed's notion of using aspects of Voodoo as part of a literary method [47]).

Like Eleggba at the crossroads, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* occupies a space prone to trickery and allusion; a place where the pieces may not always add up to the reader's expectations. Through his manipulation of language and reliance on an African-based epistemology, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* not only challenges the supremacy of Western culture, religion, and literary tradition, but also opposes the one-dimensional view of women developing out of such tradition. Set as one of the many subtexts of the novel, a dialectic which compares Erzulie and the Virgin Mary, two venerated female, spiritual icons within their respective social orders, emerges from the text. The Virgin Mary represents the chaste, asexual, submissive, idealized womanhood ever connected to the Judeo-Christian doctrine, while Erzulie—the Voodoo deity of love, sexuality, and feminine energy—has no static depiction; she is an ever evolving, fluid sign with countless manifestations that literally change according to her mood. Reed plays a very curious game with these two ultra-feminine characters, a game unobserved by some of his most staunch critics.

Reed has garnered considerable criticism for his alleged misogynist attitude from the likes of Edmund White, Barbara Smith, and Michele Wallace. Smith has criticized Reed for his particular depictions of black female characters and his reliance on "the tired stereotype of feminists as man-hating dykes" (54) in later fiction such as *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974), *Flight to Canada* (1976), and *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986). Wallace has similarly written about his "female troubles," raising the point that

Reed's Neo-Hoodoo ideology challenges Western thought in many areas except the most obvious: "Neo-Hoodoo, as it occurs in Reed's poetry, fiction, and essays, rejects the stifling duality and reification of Western rationalism in order to question the automatic devaluation of black and other nonwhite males. But it does not confront the pre-eminent social instance of binary opposition: gender roles" (146). Wallace's point that Reed insufficiently challenges gender binaries is well taken, yet one must consider the reality that the problem with gender roles, and ultimately patriarchy, is certainly not confined to the Western world, which may shed some light on Reed's treatment of it. Let me preface my next statement by saying that I argue neither in support of nor negating Reed's misogyny, but rather offer a comparison of Erzulie and the Virgin Mary as but one case in point of Reed engaging rather than ignoring the woman question. While *Mumbo Jumbo* does not necessarily address Wallace's concern regarding gender roles, it does confront the problem of black women's image and representation by displacing Christianity as the dominant paradigm for interpreting the text.

Rather than relying upon Christian ideology, Reed privileges the Haitian Voodoo tradition in his text. Voodoo is an African-based spiritual system that adheres to "highly structured cosmologies, concepts of a diffused monotheism, rituals of sacred meditation, an emphasis on devotions to ancestors and the dead, and the use of spiritually efficacious objects" (Chireau 37). The presence of opposing African and European spiritual systems in Haiti during the bedlam of slavery and colonization resulted in the merging of West African spiritual systems, mainly derived from the Fon, Yoruba, and Dahomey people, and Catholicism; which evolved into Vodou, or Voodoo.⁴ The enslaved Africans transformed the Catholic saints into European counterparts to the Voodoo *loas*, or spirits. Voodoo practitioners appropriated the saints and invested them with their own catechism as a means to inconspicuously maintain their

cultural heritage and spiritual beliefs, a result of what Bernard W. Bell refers to as "socialized ambivalence."

Using Melville Herskovits' theory on the process of African cultural retentions, Bell builds on the idea that socialized ambivalence manifested itself through "working over . . . revamping and recombining" a variety of cultural elements from Europe, Africa, and the Indigenous inhabitants of the Americas to create a syncretic tradition with identifiable variations on the original strands which then laid the groundwork for the formation of an African diasporic cultural tradition (10). It would be erroneous, however, to consider the loas as completely synonymous with the saints. Whereas the saints are virtuous, pious, and . . . well, *saintly*, the loas are known to be mischievous, jealous, sympathetic, compassionate, and/or deadly according to their own prerogatives. Unlike the Christian tradition, the concept of good and evil does not exist in Voodoo. As Sheldon Williams notes, "in an animistic society where the ruling spirits are outside morality, such terms [as good and evil] mean nothing because they have no backing in upbringing or tradition" (20).

The loas cannot be conceptualized in terms of Western dichotomies of good and evil or love and hate, a point that is most attractive to Reed, who seeks to dismantle the superiority of said tradition. A common saying among Haitians reflects the infinite possibilities of their voodoo deities: "There are no good and bad spirits in Voodoo—only powerful spirits" (4). W. Lawrence Hogue also addresses the duplicitous nature of the loas to further argue the relevance of Neo-Hoodoo texts in bringing a polycentric, opposed to a Eurocentric, approach to literature and history. Hogue notes that "whereas European logocentrism defines meaning in terms of binaries such as good and evil, Voodoo believes that good and evil are but two sides of the same coin. Given this salient feature, along with the fact that Voodoo advocates heterogeneity and diversity, it would be very difficult . . . to incorporate that cul-

ture/religion into the . . . Christian, logocentric, middle-class values and definitions of the dominant American society" (55). Reed's desire to write outside of the prescribed cultural and literary norms of the dominant culture is only complemented by his invocation of the Voodoo tradition.

The language, rituals, and iconography of African-based religions are supplanted in the novel as signifiers, metaphors, and other literary devices. Voodoo is used in *Mumbo Jumbo* much in the way theology is used in Phillis Wheatley's poetry to invoke very specific images. In "On Being Brought from African to America" Wheatley signifies on the biblical lore which maintains that Cain, and later Ham, are marked with blackness for committing acts against God: "Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain* / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train." (171). In a similar vein, Gloria Naylor uses eschatology in *Linden Hills* and relies on women's biblical narratives to construct the stories in *Bailey's Café*. Hal Bennett uses Christian symbolism and ideology in his 1970 novel *Lord of Dark Places*, a novel whose opening chapters expose a corrupt proselytizer's exploitation of his son. Titus, the would-be preacher, proclaims that his son Joe is the Messiah returned who must sacrifice his body for the sexual betterment of women and men throughout the southern United States. Bennett incorporates a great deal of theological language that is germane to one of the primary subtexts of the narrative:

As he saw himself through their eyes, he looked completely ridiculous. As Jesus Christ must have looked to the Roman soldiers who came to arrest him. . . . Titus thought he would die of fear. *He was the sacrifice, not Joe. . . . He was the Lamb of God, betrayed by the Judas of his country and his generation, tolerated inside a system of segregation where a man could be God if he wanted to, or mad if he wanted to, nobody cared what went on inside the isolation of the black community.* (55-56)

Just as knowledge of Christian lore is required to understand and digest Wheatley, Naylor, and Bennett's use

of it, so too is a familiarity with Voodoo necessary to piece together *Mumbo Jumbo*. Reed's text is a detective novel that recounts the mystery of the feverish epidemic "Jes Grew" that is affecting the United States. Papa LaBas, a Neo-Hoodoo priest, is on the case to track down the origins of the sacred text that Jes Grew is seeking and quell the epidemic. The storyline is infused with Voodoo referents. The description following Jes Grew's attack on New Orleans alludes to the lull after a lengthy and vigorous Voodoo ceremony: "The city's head was once more calm. Normal. It sleeps after the night of howling, speaking-in-tongues, dancing to drums; watching strange lights streak across the sky" (Reed 17). Reed also makes reference to the *asson*, "a sacred instrument of divine power" used to confer the title of hougan, or priest, on practitioners worthy of such authority (Deren 81). Papa LaBas is understood as the High Priest of the "Work" as he "awarded himself the *asson*," signifying that he is indeed the master of ceremony, whether he realizes it himself, or not (Reed 53). For Papa LaBas and his daughter Earline, the power of the loa is embedded even in their names. The closeness in spelling and pronunciation of these characters' names to Papa Legba (Elegba) and Erzulie is calculated and purposeful on the part of the author.

In keeping with Voodoo as the primary lens through which to view *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed would be remiss not to include an inference of the loa "mounting" his horse. In Haitian Voodoo the phenomenon of spirit possession, or the descent of the loa into the physical body of the devotee, is often correlated with the act of a rider mounting his horse as noted in the title and text of Zora Neale Hurston's ethnography, *Tell My Horse* (1938). Reed makes a more specific reference to the phenomenon of spirit possession and other ceremonial rites of the religion, which is also the point at which Erzulie enters the text. Reed foreshadows the descent of the most celebrated female loa in the Haitian pantheon early in the novel: "Earline looks at her fea-

tures in the mirror. Something has come over her. She finds it necessary to go through the most elaborate toilet rituals these days, using some very expensive imported soaps, embroidered towels, and she has taken a fancy to buying cakes even though she never before possessed a sweet tooth" (28). Upon mounting a devotee, Erzulie's "first act is to perform an elaborate toilette," and "above all, she favors desserts, decorated cakes and confections of all kinds" (Deren 139-40). As if the previous passage is not enough to make clear what is being signified, Reed drops other hints that the divine mistress is lurking in the shadows: "[Earline] has bought this marvelous scarf which bears a design of a stylized heart pierced by a dagger" (53). For Erzulie "a heart is, indeed, her symbol, most often the pierced heart identified with Mary" (141).

Reed privileges knowledge of African-based, syncretized religion in the text to forestall a Christian reading. While the narrative may still be interpreted fairly well without undertaking serious study in African-based religious practices, such awareness allows for a potentially more adept synthesis of Reed's meaning. Applying a Christian view of the world to *Mumbo Jumbo* in this case hinders the ability to comprehend the subtexts of the novel. Christian doctrine neither allows for intermediaries (such as the loa) to mingle in the business of the high God and humanity, nor for the phenomenon of spirit possession except in the case of the Holy Ghost. This alone eradicates the possibility of Erzulie taking possession of Earline's physical body and acting through her in a way that affirms the experiences of the African Diaspora. Reed is not advocating the replacement of one dominant paradigm with another, however; while Christianity is displaced as the dominant culture imposed on the reader, it is far from being absent or rendered invisible. Reed makes several references to Christian theology, most notably in the conversation between Abdul Hamid, Black Herman, and Papa LaBas. Reed's references continue to display his discontent with

assuming Christianity and Western culture as the dominant modes of interpreting the world. One of the more subtle critiques Reed offers against Western ideology and the binary which positions all things African American "as victim, as inferior, as devalued other [. . .] or the same as white" focuses on two more obscure figures in the text (Hogue 1). The author makes a highly transparent comparison between the Virgin Mary and Erzulie—exalted in their respective traditions for the concept of womanhood that each personifies, although each embodies two very *different* ideas of womanhood.

In terms of Reed's use of the icon, the Virgin Mary represents the idealized image of femininity in the Western world. She is considered "the single most significant female religious figure in western civilization," according to Maurice Hamington (1). The Virgin Mary "represents the pinnacle of womanhood in Catholic representations of female behavior and her virginity is also representative of the most sacred form of human sexuality" (54). Mary is venerated most often for her "humility, her lowliness in the sight of God and her lack of sexuality," not to mention the role she played in birthing the Christ child. A number of feminist critics have taken issue with such associations on the premise of the Virgin's "traditional portrayal perpetuating feminine stereotypes that fuel oppression" (2). Mary thus represents a single view of womanhood that has been imposed on various groups of women. For Reed she symbolizes yet another tool that Western civilization employs in maintaining cultural domination, especially over women. Those women who actively engage in their sexuality are vilified, stigmatized, and punished; such a reaction to tarnished innocence, however, began as a Christian phenomenon, according to Hamington: "Despite virgin goddesses [found in other cultures] virginity was not given the religious valorization or reification found in Christianity. It was the Judeo-Christian tradition that transformed the concept of virginity from an economic

consideration to a sacred religious consideration in western culture" (55). Reed responds to this monopolization of ideal womanhood by allowing an image that speaks to the historical experience of women of African descent and, arguably, other colonized groups of women, to take center stage in his text—Erzulie.

Erzulie is the most recognized female loa in the Voodoo ranks and an analogue to the Virgin Mary. Joan Dayan positions Erzulie as a loa "born on the soil of Haiti" as she has "no precedent in Yoruba or Dahomey," the regions which have been identified as the place of origin for many African-based religions (40). Dayan argues that in her various manifestations, Erzulie "bears the extremes of colonial history. Whether the pale and elegant Erzulie-Freda or the cold-hearted, savage Erzulie-gé-Rouge, she dramatizes a specific historiography of women's experiences in Haiti and throughout the Caribbean" (42). Erzulie is often discussed by ethnographers in terms of the Western binary tradition that both Reed and Hogue argue against: pure/impure, malevolent/godly, and innocent/devilish. Her position as a loa, however, defies such categorizing: "Whereas western religions depend on dualisms such as matter and spirit, body and soul, for their perpetuation and power, [Voodoo] unsettles and subverts such apparent oppositions" (42). Like African women displaced in the Americas and subjected to the unprovoked sexual advances of the planter class—thus becoming guilty *and* innocent of promiscuity—Erzulie is both concubine and virgin. Dayan states, "Gods were born in the memories of those who served," and such is the apotheosis of Erzulie (42).

The divine mistress can manifest herself as the extreme glorification of femininity. She is refined and wears the finest silk, the sweetest perfume and speaks in a delicate voice.⁵ She is associated with the Virgin, which apparently contradicts the fact that men are her passion: "She treats men with such affection that it might seem, at times, em-

barrassing" (Deren 141). Depending on which aspect she is in, Rada or Petro,⁶ Erzulie can take any number of forms. Erzulie is often depicted as being so full of emotion that it overwhelms her; she is known quite well for releasing an uncontrollable flow of tears. Her emotional plentitude can also take the form of extreme rage. In this Petro aspect she is portrayed as having tightly shut eyes filled with tears, trembling lips, and fists clenched so tightly that her fingernails draw blood.⁷ Deren describes the loa in this form as "the cosmic tantrum," not that of "a spoiled child, but of some cosmic innocence which cannot understand—and *will* not understand—why accident should ever befall what is cherished or why death should ever come to the beloved" (143). While these descriptions have not even begun to exhaust the various manifestations of Erzulie, they are the most documented in ethnographic works. The loa that possesses Earline, incidentally at the time of her lover's murder and after the reader learns that she has neglected to feed the loas, represents a montage of the aspects mentioned rather than an essentialized view of the loa.

Erzulie is the quintessential paradox. She is virgin and whore, male and female, life and death, creation and destruction all at once. Such contradictions within her presence, however, are of no consequence to the goddess. Erzulie exists within the sacred and profane worlds simultaneously. Her devotees include prostitutes, homosexual men, and virgins alike. Deren adds, "It is possible, even that there is no conflict between these several truths, for the concept of Erzulie as virgin is not intended as a physical analysis. To call her virgin is to say that she is of another world, another reality, and that her heart, like the secret heart of Mary Magdalene, is innocent of the flesh, is inaccessible to its delights and its corruptions" (144). As such an indefinable persona, Erzulie becomes the perfect character to symbolize the disdain for hegemony in Reed's novel. Within the text, Erzulie is positioned not as a

variation of the Virgin Mary, but instead as a counter image to the mother of Jesus. Reed once more disputes the perceived superiority of Western culture, but more specifically, the limited view of Africana womanhood through his employment of Erzulie.

Not until late in the novel does the narrator reveal the juxtaposition between Erzulie and the Virgin Mary. As LaBas begins the historiography of Jes Grew, he makes it a point to position Erzulie as a descendant of Isis: "[Set] was also jealous that Osiris was to marry their sister Isis. Fine as she could be. Firm breasts, eloquence, all of those qualities that are later to show up in her spiritual descendant Erzulie (love of mirrors, plumes, combs, an elaborate toilet) whom we in the United States call the girl with the red dress on" (Reed 162). Later in the same chapter, LaBas describes how the Atonists appropriated the image of Isis: "[. . .] but they kept on Isis as Virgin Mary. In fact, in many African locales the passion for Isis was transferred to the Atonists' Mary" (170). Hamington also points to the historical replacement of Isis with Mary: "The image of Isis with Horus, the infant God-King on her lap was replaced by the Madonna imagery in artistic representations" (12).

Reed demonstrates further the correlation and contrast between the images of women generated by "the self" and "the Other." Mary and Erzulie are said to have descended from the same ancient tradition but developed in two very distinct directions. Using the description of Isis that Reed provides, it appears that the Virgin Mary has strayed farthest away from her progenitor: "At about 2 A.M. he awoke to someone running her hands through his hair and kissing him. It was Isis in the Petro aspect of herself. She was dressed in a scarlet see-through gauzy gown and covered with the odor of a strange perfume" (180). This is certainly not the image of the Virgin, past or present. The image ascribed to the mother of Christ is discredited as it has erased the view of womanhood with which it was ini-

tially associated. Reed succeeds in "othering" the Virgin Mary here. She is no longer the standard by which women should be measured, as her credibility has been compromised. In Reed's conflation of word and image, Erzulie emerges as the more authentic version of woman.

Erzulie, as one of the only loa in the text that mounts a devotee, challenges the idea of the essentialized feminine image even further. While this may seem an insignificant point, I argue the contrary by recalling Hamington's point about Mary being the single most important woman in the Christian tradition. Erzulie assumes a similar position within the text via the singularity of her appearance, which indicates the importance of the role she plays in the novel and to Reed's critique. This critique is seen in no uncertain terms as Papa LaBas responds to Abdul Hamid's question, "Christianity? What has that to do with me?" (35). LaBas condemns Abdul's one-dimensional view of the world and women in particular—which is not far removed from the Christian worldview according to LaBas: "They [Islam and Christianity] agree on the ultimate wickedness of woman, even using feminine genders to describe disasters that beset mankind. . . . The Virgin Mary figures in the Koran as well as in the Bible. In fact, 1 [one] night you were reading a poem to the Black woman. It occurred to me that though your imagery was with the sister, the heart of your work was with the Virgin" (35). LaBas implies that while Abdul tries to separate himself from Western ideals, his stance remains problematic in the way that he conceptualizes women, African American women in particular, in a paradigm that defames and discredits them.

The image of the Virgin Mary perpetuates a view of women that erases their sexuality. By upholding this image in a religious context, women have historically been devalued, disgraced, silenced, exploited, rejected, subjected, and violated because of their sexuality more than they have been celebrated. The iconic Virgin Mary has

influenced the separation of divinity and sexuality when, arguably, such a connection could not be more enforced through her narrative. The act of conception, by man or God, is in itself a sensual exchange from any angle. Yet, the Virgin Mary symbolizes sexual repression whereas Erzulie negates the repression of any emotion, sensuality being at the top of her list. Erzulie, being the Sacred Harlot, disrupts the concept of sexuality existing outside of spirituality/divinity not only through her persona but also in the way that she manifests herself to the devotee: "No matter how we look at it, the business of possession, initiation, and service is suffused with sex, or more precisely, with the ideal of submission" (Dayan 59).

Reed is not simply arguing for the supremacy of the Voodoo tradition or Erzulie; rather, he is arguing *against* the supremacy of one-dimensional, hegemonic thought, Western or otherwise. While this argument is sustained through other subplots and issues within *Mumbo Jumbo*, the text's implicit contrast of the Virgin Mary and Erzulie is one that has been generally overlooked. It is more feasible to imagine the loa as a reflection of both Marys of Christian tradition, the Virgin Mary and (the whore) Mary Magdalene, another point that the text subtly implies: "A Black Mary Magdalene and Jesus. The 1st thing you see is the woman's effulgent rump covered by a lime dress. She wears pearls, a string around her neck and her hair is tied in a bun. She is watching a procession, some Haitians following Christ . . . Christ has eyes for her. He has stopped and is staring at her as she leans over the banister of her porch" (Reed 34). There are several indicators that the divine concubine is being invoked in this image, a 1969 painting by Haitian primitive artist Jean-Baptist Bottex. The woman, Mary Magdalene, is wearing a string of pearls which are always brought to Erzulie by her devotees upon her entrance; "she is brought not one necklace, but several, of gold and pearls" (Deren 139). Mary Magdalene wears a skintight dress that emphasizes the curve

and width of her hips, very characteristic of Erzulie's alluring sexuality. The loa is obviously enticing to men as demonstrated by the trolley car driver when she assumes Earline's body: "She gave him a look the nature of which would force a man to divorce his wife, sell his home, hang around the blood bank, offer his skin for grafting, donate his eyes to an alligator, hit the banker on the head to give her what she wanted" (Reed 120). Erzulie's irresistibility is invoked in the painting if she is not wholly present; even Christ himself is unable to deny the sexual energy emitted by Mary Magdalene—a fitting representative.

Erzulie cannot be defined in terms of binaries, opposites, or dichotomies. She embodies the contradictions and balances of femininity and offers an alternate view of womanhood to the Western, patriarchal world. She disrupts the Christian idea of womanhood through nurturing the sacred, the profane, and everything that falls in between in one body: "This goddess who oscillates between the extremes of grace and brutality is thus no mere perpetuation of Christian notions of Virgin or Temptress, nor of masculine projections of Venus or hag, but more exactly a dramatization of how the black woman saw, reacted to, and survived the experience of slavery and realities of colonialism" (Dayan 52). Erzulie, like Reed and Elegba, chooses to exist in between worlds—having her hand in all the honey pots. She undermines the dichotomy of virgin/whore, specifically for Africana women who have often had to negotiate within those representations, making her the ideal personality to assist in articulating Reed's commentary on images and values imposed on the world by Western society—a commentary that inadvertently adheres to the dictates of Walker's elusive womanist stance in the process.

With Erzulie, Ishmael Reed engages the problematic of black women being confined to the Eurocentric limitations on femaleness—indeed, exploding some of the suffocating images to which black women have been relegated.

Erzulie encompasses chastity, nymphomania, murder, life, seduction, violence, power, divinity, love, gentility, and depression concurrently with absolutely no apology or explanation offered. She simply is. She is undoubtedly "universalist" and "traditionally capable;" and, among many other admirations, she "loves struggle, loves the Folk," and certainly "loves herself" (Walker xii). Her nature is the very embodiment of Alice Walker's revolutionary ideology of what it means to be a woman of color. The cameo Erzulie plays in *Mumbo Jumbo* and the credence Reed grants this particular icon arguably imply that his Neo-Hoodoo detective novel has very strong womanist undertones before womanist was even invented. Reed neither excludes black women nor the importance of their body politics, representation, and agency in the very serious work of subversion and entertainment in which he engages with *Mumbo Jumbo*. The dialectic he sets up between these two religious icons is, in fact, tantamount to his formula of hegemonic disruption; the use of Erzulie is as valuable to Reed's literary politics as his unconventional grammar and punctuation, multiculturalism, and personal aesthetics.

While a closer look at how Erzulie functions in the text may inspire critics to rethink Reed's position on women (and maybe not), the novel still appears to be somewhat problematic. Is Reed imposing his Neo-Hoodooism on the literary world? In repositioning Voodoo as the aesthetic with which his novel should be interpreted, one must question whether Reed is truly being subversive in his writing or merely replacing one dominant discourse with another. Lawrence Hogue argues:

The Black Aesthetic critics intend to disrupt the white/black binary of signification by challenging the representation of the African American as inferior, as victim. But in their desire for closure, mastery, and totality, they end up reproducing a canon of African American literature that is as exclusionary and as

hierarchical as the canons designed by mainstream American critics. (46)

Does *Mumbo Jumbo* fit into such a narrow space in the African American literary continuum? While on the surface level, *Mumbo Jumbo* may appear to fall into this category, it is important to look past simplistic interpretations of the novel. A closer look at Hogue's thesis will vindicate Reed's text from the accusations of the cursory reader. In his discussion about the African American traditions of literature and history and the collapsing of binary opposites, Hogue argues that "the most potent weapon in disrupting the white/black binary" is for writers to halt in the repression of the differences between African Americans (41). He cites "existential, blues and urban subaltern" and "experimental/post-modern" texts as being regularly excluded from the African American literary canon, as well as texts that invoke the Voodoo tradition: "[T]he history of the lives and struggles of those African Americans who live by the tenets of Voodoo is also excluded and repressed" (54). The African American literary canon expands and writers reinvent it as the lives of African Americans push forward through the decades, but as Hogue suggests, "while the canon grows, what it says does not change" (41). He insists that in a great deal of canonized literature "there is no evidence that they construct an image of the African American that is anything but Other or the Same as the normative white society" (49).

By considering *Mumbo Jumbo* within the context of Western literary production, the engaged reader can easily conclude that Reed's text serves as one of the many answers to the problem of cultural hegemony. The use of Voodoo and African epistemology as one of the primary motifs in the novel offers a new view of the many strands of the African American experience that is not heavily informed by the dominant culture. Reed's characters, especially Erzulie, neither serve the function of the other nor

do they desire to be the same as white. Their goal, Reed asserts, is to "humble the Judeo-Christian culture" (*Shrovetide* 133). Even Nathan Brown, whom Hinckle Von Vampton suspects will be the exemplary Uncle Tom figure, shows himself to be a more complex character when he, too, "got that strange sensation at the nape of his neck" (*Mumbo Jumbo* 153). Reed's novel articulates a very different message from that of his African American literary predecessors. *Mumbo Jumbo* does not single-handedly resolve the issue of cultural supremacy and thinking outside of prescribed norms, but it does offer and acknowledge an alternative to literature and images that adheres only to Western ideologies. *Mumbo Jumbo* stresses the importance of implementing change in a monotonous tradition, which, in a so carefully constructed convention, may well be described as subversive, particularly for women of color. Perhaps a closer look at how Erzulie functions in *Mumbo Jumbo* may inspire critics to rethink Reed's position on women, situating the novel as a Neo-Hoodoo *Womanist* text and discharging a one-dimensional view of his work.

Notes

¹ I return to this point later in the essay, citing Smith and Wallace's response to Reed's fiction and criticism. For a full discussion, see Smith's review of *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* and Wallace's chapter, entitled "Ishmael Reed's Female Troubles," documented in works cited.

² Erzulie is one of the most recognized female loas (or lwas) associated with the Voodoo tradition of Haiti. A full explanation of her character traits and position in Voodoo is provided later in the essay.

³ Elegba (also known as Eshu-Elegbara) is the Yoruba orisha, or deity associated with the crossroads. He is also associated with childlike mischief and trickery. See Courlander for a more detailed description.

⁴ The "vodou" spelling variation usually references the specifically Haitian practice, while the more Americanized spelling "voodoo" is more common and refers to the embodiment of the religion within the continental United States. Vodún is a third variation most often used to refer to the most African version of the religion, prior to syncretization. I will use the "voodoo" variant interchangeably here as it is the spelling Reed uses in his novel.

⁶ Maya Deren provides a very detailed description of Erzulie, her most common rites, accoutrements, and other paraphernalia associated with the loa. See Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (Kingston, NY: McPherson, 1970) 139-40.

⁶ The Rada spirits are cool-headed, calm, and gentle in their interactions with human devotees. Their element is air. The Rada spirits, however, can be provoked to harshness and even malicious action. The Petro spirits are associated with fire and possess a very violent disposition. They are aggressive, war-minded, and hardly gentle. Devotees must be particularly devout in their service to the Petro spirits lest they inflict their wrath upon themselves due to neglect and unfaithfulness.

⁷ For an explanation of this particular depiction of Erzulie in Petro form, see Deren 143.

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