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The "Blackness of Blackness": A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

"Signification is the nigger's occupation."

—TRADITIONAL[1]

"Be careful what you do,
Or Mumbo-Jumbo, God of the Congo,
And all of the other
Gods of the Congo,
Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you,
Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you,
Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you."

—VACHEL LINDSAY, "The Congo"

I need not trace here the history of the concept of signification. Since Ferdinand de Saussure, at least, signification has become a crucial aspect of contemporary theory. It is curious to me that this neologism in the Western tradition is a homonym of a term in the black vernacular tradition that is approximately two centuries old. Tales of the Signifying Monkey had their origins in slavery; hundreds of these tales have been recorded since the nineteenth century. In black music, Jazz Gillum, Count Basie, Oscar Peterson, Oscar Brown, Jr., Little Willie Dixon, Nat King Cole, Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, and Johnny Otis—among others—have recorded songs called either "The Signifying Monkey" or, simply,"Signifyin(g)." My theory of interpretation, arrived at from within the black cultural matrix, is a theory of formal revision; it is

1. Quoted in Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle . . . : Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Chicago, 1970), p. 53.

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tropological; it is often characterized by pastiche; and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures, and their difference. Signification is a theory of reading that arises from Afro-American culture; learning how "to signify" is often part of our adolescent education. I had to step outside my culture, had to defamiliarize the concept by translating it into a new mode of discourse, before I could see its potential in critical theory.[2]

1. Signifyin(g): Definitions

Perhaps only Tar Baby is as enigmatic and compelling a figure from Afro-American mythic discourse as is that oxymoron, the Signifying Monkey.[3] The ironic reversal of a received racist image of the black as simianlike, the Signifying Monkey—he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language—is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed, is our trope of chiasmus itself, repeating and simultaneously reversing in one deft, discursive act. If Vico and Burke, or Nietzsche, Paul de Man, and Harold Bloom, are correct in identifying "master tropes," then we might think of these as the "master's tropes," and of *signifying* as the slave's trope, the trope of tropes, as Bloom characterizes metalepsis, "a trope-reversing trope, a figure of a figure." Signifying is a trope that subsumes other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the "master" tropes), and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis (Bloom's supplement to Burke). To this list, we could easily add

2. The present essay is extracted from my larger work *The Signifying Monkey: Towards a Theory of Literary History,* forthcoming.

3. On Tar Baby, see Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Man and Complex Fate: A Writer's Experience in the United States," *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1964), p. 147, and Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York, 1981). On the black as quasi-simian, see Jean Bodin, *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History,* trans. Beatrice Reynolds (1945; New York, 1966), p. 105; Aristotle *Historia Animalium* 606b; Thomas Herbert, *Some Years Travels* (London, 1677), pp. 16–17; and John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* 8th ed., 2 vols. (London, 1721), 2:53.

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aporia, chiasmus, and catachresis, all of which are used in the ritual of signifying.

The black tradition has its own subdivisions of signifying, which we could readily identify with the typology of figures received from classical and medieval rhetoric, as Bloom has done with his "map of misprision." In black discourse "signifying" means modes of figuration itself. When one signifies, as Kimberly W. Benston puns, one "tropes-a-dope." The black rhetorical tropes subsumed under signifying would include "marking," "loud-talking," "specifying," "testifying," "calling out" (of one's name), "sounding," "rapping," and "playing the dozens."[4]

Let us consider received definitions of the act of signifying and of black mythology's archetypal signifier, the Signifying Monkey. The Signifying Monkey is a trickster figure, of the order of the trickster figure of Yoruba mythology, Èṣù-Ẹlẹ́gbára in Nigeria, and Legba among the Fon in Dahomey, whose New World figurations—Exú in Brazil, Echu-Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba in the pantheon of the *loa* of *Vaudou* in Haiti, and Papa La Bas in the *loa* of Hoodoo in the United States—speak eloquently of the unbroken arc of metaphysical presuppositions and patterns of figuration shared through space and time among black cultures in West Africa, South America, the Caribbean, and the United States. These trickster figures, aspects of Èṣù, are primarily *mediators:* as tricksters they are mediators and their mediations are tricks.[5]

The versions of Èṣù are all messengers of the gods: he interprets the will of the gods to man; he carries the desires of man to the gods. He is known as the divine linguist, the keeper of *àṣẹ* ("logos") with which Olódùmarè created the universe. Èṣù is guardian of the crossroads, master of style and the stylus, phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of the mystical barrier that separates the divine from the profane world. In Yoruba mythology, Èṣù always limps, because his legs are of different lengths: one is anchored in the realm of the gods, the other rests in the human world. The closest Western relative of Èṣù is Hermes, of course; and, just as Hermes' role as interpreter lent his name readily

4. Geneva Smitherman defines these and other black tropes and then traces their use in several black texts. Smitherman's work, like that of Claudia Mitchell-Kernan and Abrahams, is especially significant for literary theory. See Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Boston, 1977), pp. 101–66. See also nn. 13 and 14 below.

5. On versions of Èṣù, see Robert Farris Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings,* (1971; Bloomington, Ind., 1976), chap. 4, pp. 1–12, and *Flash of the Spirit* (New York, 1983); Pierre Verger, *Notes sur le culte des Orisa et Vodun* (Dakar, 1957); Joan Westcott, "The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegba, The Yoruba Trickster," *Africa* 32 (Oct. 1962): 336–54; Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa,* 2 vols. (London, 1913); Melville J. and Frances Herskovits, *Dahomean Narrative* (Evanston, Ill., 1958); Wande Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa* (New York, 1975); William R. Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington, Ind., 1969); Ayodele Ogundipe, "Esu Elegbara: The Yoruba God of Chance and Uncertainty," 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., Indiana Univ., 1978); E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè, God in Yoruba Belief* (London, 1962), pp. 80–85; and Robert Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa* (Los Angeles, 1980).

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to "hermeneutics," the study of the process of interpretation, so too the figure of Èṣù can stand, for the critic of comparative black literature, as our metaphor for the act of interpretation itself. In African and Latin American mythologies, Èṣù is said to have taught Ifa how to read the signs formed by the sixteen sacred palm nuts which, when manipulated, configure into "the signature of an Odù," 256 of which comprise the corpus of *Ifá* divination. The *Ọpọ́n Ifá,* the carved wooden divination tray used in the art of interpretation, is said to contain at the center of its upper perimeter a carved image of Èṣù, meant to signify his relation to the act of interpretation, which we can translate either as *ìtúmọ̀* ("to untie or unknot knowledge") or as *yípadà* ("to turn around" or "to translate"). That which we call "close reading," the Yoruba call *Ọ̀dá fá* ("reading the signs"). Above all else, Èṣù is the Black Interpreter, the Yoruba god of indeterminacy, the sheer plurality of meaning, or *àriyèmuyè* ("that which no sooner is held than slips through one's fingers"). As Hermes is to hermeneutics, Èṣù is to *Èṣù- 'túfunààlò* ("bringing out the interstices of the riddle").[6]

The Èṣù figures, among the Yoruba systems of thought in Dahomey and Nigeria, in Brazil and in Cuba, in Haiti and in New Orleans are divine: they are gods who function in sacred myths as do characters in a narrative. Èṣù's functional equivalent in Afro-American profane discourse is the Signifying Monkey, a figure who seems to be distinctly Afro-American, probably derived from Cuban mythology which generally depicts Echu-Elegua with a monkey at his side.[7] Unlike his Pan-African Èṣù cousins, the Signifying Monkey exists in the discourse of mythology not primarily as a character in a narrative but rather as a vehicle for narration itself. It is from this corpus of mythological narratives that signifying derives. The Afro-American rhetorical strategy of signifying is a rhetorical practice unengaged in information giving. Signifying turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendent signified. Alan Dundes suggests that the origins of

6. On Èṣù and indeterminacy, see Robert Plant Armstrong, *The Powers of Presence: Consciousness, Myth, and Affecting Presence* (Philadelphia, 1981), p. 4. See ibid., p. 43, for a drawing of the *Ọpọ́n Ifá,* and Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings,* chap. 5.

7. On Èṣù and the Monkey, see Lydia Cabrerra, *El Monte: Notes sobre las religiones, la magia, las supersticiones y el folklore de los negros criollos y el pueblo de Cuba* (Miami, 1975), p. 84, and Alberto de Pozo, *Oricha* (Miami, 1982), p. 1. On the Signifying Monkey, see Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle,* pp. 51–53, 66, 113–19, 142–47, 153–56, and esp. 264; Bruce Jackson, comp., *"Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me": Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), pp. 161–80; Daryl Cumber Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans* (Bloomington, Ind., 1978), pp. 197–99; Dennis Wepman, Ronald B. Newman, and Murray B. Binderman, comps., *The Life: The Lore and Folk Poetry of the Black Hustler* (Philadelphia, 1976), pp. 21–29; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977), pp. 346, 378–80, 438; and Richard M. Dorson, comp., *American Negro Folktales* (New York, 1967), pp. 98–99.

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signifying could "lie in African rhetoric." As anthropologists demonstrate, the Signifying Monkey is often called "the signifier," he who wreaks havoc upon "the signified." One is "signified upon" by the signifier. The Signifying Monkey is indeed the "signifier as such," in Julia Kristeva's phrase, "a presence that precedes the signification of object or emotion."[8]

Scholars have for some time commented upon the peculiar use of the word "signifying" in black discourse. Though sharing some connotations with the standard English-language word, "signifying" has its own definitions in black discourse. Roger D. Abrahams defines it this way:

> Signifying seems to be a Negro term, in use if not in origin. It can mean any of a number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation. Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. Thus it is signifying to stir up a fight between neighbors by telling stories; it is signifying to make fun of a policeman by parodying his motions behind his back; it is signifying to ask for a piece of cake by saying, "My brother needs a piece of cake."[9]

Essentially, Abrahams concludes, signifying is a "*technique* of indirect argument or persuasion," "a language of implication," "to imply, goad, beg, boast, by *indirect* verbal or gestural means." "The name 'signifying,' " he concludes, "shows the monkey to be a trickster, signifying being the language of trickery, that set of words or gestures achieving Hamlet's 'direction through indirection.' " The Monkey, in short, is not only "a master of technique," as Abrahams concludes, he *is* technique, or style, or the *literariness* of literary language; he is the great Signifier. In this sense, one does not signify something; rather, one signifies in *some way*.[10]

8. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art,* ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Roudiez (New York, 1980), p. 31.

9. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle,* pp. 51–52. See also Abrahams, " 'Playing the Dozens,' " *Journal of American Folklore* 75 (July–Sept. 1962): 209–20; "The Changing Concept of the Negro Hero," in *The Golden Log,* ed. Mody C. Boatright, Wilson M. Hudson, and Allen Maxwell, Publications of the Texas Folklore Society, no. 31 (Dallas, 1962), pp. 125–34; and *Talking Black* (Rowley, Mass., 1976).

10. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle,* pp. 52, 264, 66, 67; emphasis mine. Abrahams' awareness of the need to define uniquely black significations is exemplary; as early as 1964, when he published the first edition of *Deep Down in the Jungle,* he saw fit to add a glossary, as an appendix of "Unusual Terms and Expressions," a title which unfortunately suggests the social scientist's apologia.

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There are thousands of "toasts" of the Signifying Monkey, most of which commence with a variant of the following formulaic lines:

> Deep down in the jungle so they say
> There's a signifying monkey down the way.
> There hadn't been no disturbin' in the jungle for quite a bit,
> For up jumped the monkey in the tree one day and laughed,
> "I guess I'll start some shit."[11]

Endings, too, tend toward the formulaic, as in:

> Monkey, said the Lion,
> Beat to his unbooted knees,
> You and all your signifying children
> Better stay up in them trees.
> Which is why today
> Monkey does his signifying
> *A-way-up* out of the way.[12]

In the narrative poems, the Signifying Monkey invariably "repeats" to his friend, the Lion, some insult purportedly generated by their mutual friend, the Elephant. The Lion, indignant and outraged, demands an apology from the Elephant, who refuses and then trounces the Lion. The Lion, realizing that his mistake was to take the Monkey literally, returns to trounce the Monkey. Although anthropologists and sociolinguists have succeeded in establishing a fair sample of texts featuring the Signifying Monkey, they have been less successful at establishing a consensus of definitions of black "signifying."

In addition to Abrahams' definitions of "signifying," those by Thomas Kochman, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Geneva Smitherman, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ralph Ellison are of particular interest here for what they reveal about the nature of Afro-American narrative parody.[13]

11. Ibid., p. 113. In the second line of the stanza, "motherfucker" is often substituted for "monkey."

12. "The Signifying Monkey," in *The Book of Negro Folklore,* ed. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (New York, 1958), pp. 365–66.

13. On signifying as a rhetorical trope, see Thomas Kockman, ed., *Rappin' and Stylin' Out: Communication in Urban Black America* (Urbana, Ill., 1972), and " 'Rappin' in the Black Ghetto," *Trans-action* 6 (Feb. 1969): 32; Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin,* pp. 101–67; Alan Dundes, ed., *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1973), p. 310; and Ethel M. Albert, " 'Rhetoric,' 'Logic,' and 'Poetics' in Burundi: Culture Patterning of Speech Behavior," in *The Ethnography of Communication,* ed. John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes, *American Anthropologist* 66, pt. 2 (Dec. 1964): 35–54. One example of signifying can be gleaned from an anecdote: While writing this essay, I asked a colleague, Dwight Andrews, if as a child he had heard of the Signifying Monkey. "Why, no," he replied intently, "I never heard of the Signifying Monkey until I came to Yale and read about him in a book." I had been signified upon. If I had responded to Mr. Andrews, "I know what you mean; your Momma read to me from that same book the last time I was in Detroit," I would have signified upon him in return.

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I shall attempt to explicate Afro-American narrative parody and then to employ it in reading Ishmael Reed's third novel, *Mumbo Jumbo,* as a signifying pastiche of the Afro-American narrative tradition itself. Kochman argues that signifying depends upon the signifier *repeating* what someone else has said about a third person in order to *reverse* the status of a relationship heretofore harmonious; signifying can also be employed to *reverse* or *undermine* pretense or even one's opinion about one's own status. This use of repetition and reversal (chiasmus) constitutes an implicit parody of a subject's own complicity in illusion. Mitchell-Kernan, in perhaps the most thorough study of the concept, compares the etymology of "signifying" in black usage with usages from standard English: "What is unique in Black English usage is the way in which signifying is extended to cover a range of meanings and events which are not covered in its Standard English usage. In the Black community it is possible to say, 'He is signifying' and 'Stop signifying'—sentences which would be anomalous elsewhere."[14] Mitchell-Kernan points to the ironic, or dialectic, relation between "identical" terms in standard and black English which have vastly different meanings:

> The Black concept of *signifying* incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations. Complimentary remarks may be delivered in a left-handed fashion. A particular utterance may be an insult in one context and not another. What pretends to be informative may intend to be persuasive. The hearer is thus constrained to attend to all potential meaning carrying symbolic systems in speech events—the total universe of discourse. ["Sig," p. 314]

This is an excellent instance of the nature of signifying. Mitchell-Kernan refines these definitions somewhat by suggesting that the Signifying Monkey is able to signify upon the Lion only because the Lion does not understand the nature of the Monkey's discourse: "There seems something of symbolic relevance from the perspective of language in this poem. The monkey and the lion do not speak the same language; the lion is not able to interpret the monkey's use of language" ("Sig," p. 323). The Monkey speaks *figuratively,* in a symbolic code; the Lion interprets or "reads" *literally* and suffers the consequences of his folly, which is a reversal of his status as King of the Jungle. The Monkey rarely acts in these narrative poems; he simply speaks. As the signifier, he determines the actions of the signified—the hapless Lion and the puzzled Elephant.

As Mitchell-Kernan and Hurston attest, signifying is not a gender-

14. Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying," in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel,* p. 313; all further references to this work, abbreviated "Sig," will be included parenthetically in the text. See also her "Signifying, Loud-talking, and Marking," in *Rappin' and Stylin' Out,* pp. 315–35.

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specific rhetorical game, despite the frequent use, in the "masculine" versions, of expletives that connote intimate relations with one's mother. Hurston, in *Mules and Men* (1935), and Mitchell-Kernan, in her perceptive "Signifying, Loud-talking, and Marking," are the first scholars to record and explicate female signifying rituals. Hurston is the first author of the tradition to represent signifying itself as a vehicle of liberation for an oppressed woman, and as a rhetorical strategy in the narration of fiction.[15]

Hurston, whose definitions of the term in *Mules and Men* is one of the earliest in the linguistic literature, has made *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) into a paradigmatic signifying text, for this novel resolves that implicit tension between the literal and the figurative contained in standard English usages of the term "signifying." *Their Eyes* represents the black trope of signifying both as thematic matter and as a rhetorical strategy of the novel itself. Janie, the protagonist, gains her voice, as it were, in her husband's store not only by engaging with the assembled men in the ritual of signifying (which her husband had expressly forbidden her to do) but also by openly *signifying upon* her husband's impotency. His image wounded fatally, he soon dies of a displaced "kidney" failure. Janie "kills" her husband, rhetorically. Moreover, Hurston's masterful use of free indirect discourse (*style indirect libre*) allows her to signify upon the tension between the two voices of Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) by adding to direct and indirect speech a strategy through which she can privilege the black oral tradition, which Toomer had found to be problematic, and dying. The text of *Their Eyes,* therefore, is itself a signifying structure, a structure of intertextual revision, because it revises key tropes and rhetorical strategies received from such precursory texts as Toomer's *Cane* and W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911).

Afro-American literary history is characterized by such *tertiary* formal revision, by which I mean its authors seem to revise at least two antecedent texts, often taken from different generations or periods within the tradition. Hurston's opening of *Their Eyes* is a masterful revision of *Narrative* (1845), Frederick Douglass' apostrophe to the ships at Chesapeake Bay; *Their Eyes* also revises the trope of the swamp in Du Bois' *Quest,* as well as the relation of character to setting in Toomer's *Cane.* The example of Ellison is even richer: *Invisible Man* (1952) revises Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945), along with Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and Toomer's *Cane* (but it also revises Melville's *Confidence-Man* and Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* among others). Reed, in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), revises Hurston, Wright,

15. See Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying, Loud-talking, and Marking," pp. 315–35. For Zora Neale Hurston's definition of "signifying," see *Mules and Men: Negro Folktales and Voodoo Practices in the South* (1935; New York, 1970), p. 161.

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and Ellison.[16] It is clear that black writers read and critique other black texts as an act of rhetorical self-definition. Our literary tradition exists because of these precisely chartable formal literary relationships, relationships of signifying.

The key aspect of signifying for Mitchell-Kernan is "its indirect intent or metaphorical reference," a rhetorical indirection which she says is "almost purely stylistic": its art characteristics remain foregrounded. By "indirection," Mitchell-Kernan means that

> the correct semantic (referential interpretation) or signification of the utterance cannot be arrived at by a consideration of the dictionary meaning of the lexical items involved and the syntactic rules for their combination alone. The apparent significance of the message differs from its real significance. The apparent meaning of the sentence signifies its actual meaning. ["Sig," p. 325]

This rhetorical naming by indirection is, of course, central to our notions of figuration, troping, and parody. This parody of forms, or pastiche, is in evidence when one writer repeats another's structure by one of several means, including a fairly exact repetition of a given narrative or rhetorical structure, filled incongruously with a ludicrous or incongruent content. T. Thomas Fortune's "The Black Man's Burden" is an excellent example of this form of pastiche, signifying as it does upon Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden":

> What is the Black Man's Burden,
> Ye hypocrites and vile,
> Ye whited sepulchres
> From th' Amazon to the Nile?
> What is the Black Man's Burden,
> Ye Gentile parasites,
> Who crush and rob your brother
> Of his manhood and his rights?

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Uncle Ned," a dialect verse parody of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* provides a second example:

> Him tale dribble on and on widout a break,
> Till you hab no eyes for to see;
> When I reach Chapter 4 I had got a headache;
> So I had to let Chapter 4 be.

Another kind of formal parody suggests a given structure precisely by failing to coincide with it—that is, suggests it by dissemblance. Repeating

16. For a definitive study of revision and its relation to ideas of modernism, see Kimberly W. Benston, *Afro-American Modernism,* forthcoming. Benston's reading of Hurston's revision of Frederick Douglass has heavily informed my own.

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a form and then inverting it through a process of variation is central to jazz—a stellar example is John Coltrane's rendition of "My Favorite Things," compared to Julie Andrews' vapid version. Resemblance, thus, can be evoked cleverly by dissemblance. Aristophanes' *Frogs,* which parodies the styles of both Aeschylus and Euripides; Cervantes' relationship to the fiction of knight-errantry; Fielding's parody, in *Joseph Andrews,* of the Richardsonian novel of sentiment; and Lewis Carroll's double parody in "Hiawatha's Photographing," which draws upon Longfellow's rhythms to parody the convention of the family photograph, all come readily to mind.

Ellison defines the parody aspect of signifying in several ways which I will bring to bear on my discussion below of the formal parody strategies at work in Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo.* In his complex short story "And Hickman Arrives" (1960), Ellison's narrator defines "signifying":

> And the two men [Daddy Hickman and Deacon Wilhite] standing side by side, the one large and dark, the other slim and light brown; the other reverends rowed behind them, their faces staring grim with engrossed attention to the reading of the Word; like judges in their carved, high-backed chairs. And the two voices beginning their call and countercall as Daddy Hickman began spelling out the text which Deacon Wilhite read, playing variations on the verses just as he did with his trombone when he really felt like signifying on a tune the choir was singing.[17]

Following this introduction, the two ministers demonstrate this "signifying," which in turn signifies upon the antiphonal structure of the Afro-American sermon. Ellison's parody of form here is of the same order as Richard Pryor's parody of that sermonic structure *and* Stevie Wonder's "Living for the City," which he effects by speaking the lyrics of Wonder's song in the form of and with the intonation peculiar to the Afro-American sermon in his "reading" of "The Book of Wonder." Pryor's parody is a signification of the second order, revealing simultaneously the received structure of the sermon (by its presence, demystified here by its incongruous content), the structure of Wonder's music (by the absence of its form and the presence of its lyrics), and the complex, yet direct, formal relationship between both the black sermon and Wonder's music specifically, and black sacred and secular narrative forms generally.

Ellison defines "signifying" in other ways as well. In his essay on Charlie Parker, "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz" (1962), Ellison defines the satirical aspect of signifying as one aspect of riffing in jazz.

17. Ellison, "And Hickman Arrives," in *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology,* ed. Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon (New York, 1972), p. 704.

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> But what kind of bird was Parker? Back during the thirties members of the old Blue Devils Orchestra celebrated a certain robin by playing a lugubrious little tune called "They Picked Poor Robin." It was a jazz community joke, musically an extended "signifying riff" or melodic naming of a recurrent human situation, and was played to satirize some betrayal of faith or loss of love observed from the bandstand.[18]

Here, again, the parody is twofold, involving a formal parody of the melody of "They Picked Poor Robin" as well as a ritual naming, and therefore a troping, of an action "observed from the bandstand."

Ellison, of course, is our Great Signifier, naming things by indirection and troping throughout his works. In his well-known review of LeRoi Jones' *Blues People,* Ellison defines "signifying" in yet a third sense, then signifies upon Jones' reading of Afro-American cultural history, which he argues is misdirected and wrongheaded: "The tremendous burden of sociology which Jones would place upon this body of music," writes Ellison, "is enough to give even the blues the blues." Ellison writes that Lydia Maria Child's title, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans,*

> sounds like a fine bit of contemporary ironic *signifying*—"signifying" here meaning, in the unwritten dictionary of American Negro usage, "rhetorical understatements." It tells us much of the thinking of her opposition, and it reminds us that as late as the 1890s, a time when Negro composers, singers, dancers and comedians dominated the American musical stage, popular Negro songs (including James Weldon Johnson's "Under the Bamboo Tree," now immortalized by T. S. Eliot) were commonly referred to as "Ethiopian Airs."[19]

Ellison's stress upon "the unwritten dictionary of American Negro usage" reminds us of the problem of definitions, of signification itself, when one is translating between two languages. The Signifying Monkey, perhaps appropriately, seems to dwell in this space between two linguistic domains. One wonders, incidentally, about this Afro-American figure and a possible French connection between *signe* ("sign") and *singe* ("monkey").

Ellison's definition of the relation that his works bear to those of Wright constitutes a definition of "narrative signification," "pastiche," or "critical parody," although Ellison employs none of these terms. His explanation of what might be called "implicit formal criticism," however,

18. Ellison, "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz," *Shadow and Act,* p. 231.
19. Ellison, "Blues People," *Shadow and Act,* pp. 249–50.

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comprises what is sometimes called "troping" and offers a profound definition of "critical signification" itself.

> I felt no need [writes Ellison] to attack what I considered the limitations of [Wright's] vision because I was quite impressed by what he had achieved. And in this, although I saw with the black vision of Ham, I was, I suppose, as pious as Shem and Japheth. Still I would write my own books and they would be in themselves, implicitly, criticisms of Wright's; just as all novels of a given historical moment form an argument over the nature of reality and are, to an extent, criticisms each of the other.[20]

Ellison in his fictions signifies upon Wright by parodying Wright's literary structures through repetition and difference. The complexities of the parodying I can readily suggest. The play of language, the signifying, starts with the titles: Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy,* titles connoting race, self, and presence, Ellison tropes with *Invisible Man,* invisibility an ironic response, of absence, to the would-be presence of "blacks" and "natives," while "man" suggests a more mature and stronger status than either "son" or "boy." Wright's distinctive version of naturalism Ellison signifies upon with a complex rendering of modernism; Wright's reacting protagonist, voiceless to the last, Ellison signifies upon with a nameless protagonist. Ellison's protagonist is nothing but voice, since it is he who shapes, edits, and narrates his own tale, thereby combining action with the representation of action to define "reality" by its representation. This unity of presence and representation is perhaps Ellison's most subtle reversal of Wright's theory of the novel as exemplified in *Native Son.* Bigger's voicelessness and powerlessness to act (as opposed to react) signify an absence, despite the metaphor of presence found in the novel's title; the reverse obtains in *Invisible Man,* where the absence implied by invisibility is undermined by the presence of the narrator as the narrator of his own text.

There are other aspects of critical parody at play here, too, one of the funniest being Jack's glass eye plopping into his water glass before him. This is functionally equivalent to the action of Wright's protagonist in "The Man Who Lived Underground" as he stumbles over the body of a dead baby, deep down in the sewer. It is precisely at this point in the narrative that we know Fred Daniels to be "dead, baby," in the heavy-handed way that Wright's naturalism was self-consciously "symbolic." If Daniels' fate is signified by the objects over which he stumbles in the darkness of the sewer, Ellison signifies upon Wright's novella by repeating this underground scene of discovery, but having his protagonist burn the bits of paper through which he had allowed himself to be

20. Ellison, "The World and the Jug," *Shadow and Act,* p. 117.

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defined by others. By explicitly repeating and reversing key figures of Wright's fictions, and by implicitly defining in the process of narration a sophisticated form more akin to Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Ellison exposed naturalism as merely a hardened conventional representation of "the Negro problem," and perhaps part of "the Negro problem" itself. I cannot emphasize enough the major import of this narrative gesture to the subsequent development of black narrative forms. Ellison recorded a new way of seeing and defined both a new manner of representation and its relation to the concept of presence.

The formal relationship that Ellison bears to Wright, Reed bears to both, though principally to Ellison. Not surprisingly, Ellison has formulated this type of complex and inherently polemical intertextual relationship of formal signifying. In a refutation of Irving Howe's critique of his work Ellison states: "I agree with Howe that protest is an element of all art, though it does not necessarily take the form of speaking for a political or social program. It might appear in a novel as a *technical assault against the styles* which have gone before."[21] This form of critical parody, of repetition and inversion, is what I define to be "critical signification," or "formal signifying," and is my metaphor for literary history.

I intend here to elicit the tertiary relationship in *Mumbo Jumbo* of Reed's signifying post-modernism to Wright's naturalism and Ellison's modernism. The set of intertextual relations that I chart through formal signification is related to what Mikhail Bakhtin labels "double-voiced" discourse, which he subdivides into parodic narration and the hidden or internal polemic. These two types of double-voiced discourse can merge, as they do in *Mumbo Jumbo.* In hidden polemic

> the other speech act remains outside the bounds of the author's speech, but is implied or alluded to in that speech. The other speech act is not reproduced with a new intention, but shapes the author's speech while remaining outside its boundaries. Such is the nature of discourse in hidden polemic. . . .
>
> In hidden polemic the author's discourse is oriented toward its referential object, as is any other discourse, but at the same time each assertion about that object is constructed in such a way that, besides its referential meaning, the author's discourse brings a polemical attack to bear against another speech act, another assertion, on the same topic. Here one utterance focused on its referential object clashes with another utterance on the grounds of the referent itself. That other utterance is not reproduced; it is understood only in its import.[22]

21. Ibid., p. 137; emphasis mine.

22. Mixhail Baxtin [Mikhail Bakhtin], "Discourse Typology in Prose," in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views,* ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 187; see also pp. 176–96.

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Ellison's definition of the formal relationship his works bear to Wright's is a salient example of the hidden polemic: Ellison's texts clash with Wright's "on the grounds of the referent itself." "As a result," Bakhtin continues, "the latter begins to influence the author's speech from within." In this double-voiced relationship, one speech act determines the internal structure of another, the second effecting the "voice" of the first by absence, by difference.

Much of the Afro-American literary tradition can, in a real sense, be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representing the recurring referent of Afro-American literature—the so-called black experience. Certainly, this is the way we read the relation of Sterling Brown's regionalism to Toomer's lyricism, Hurston's lyricism to Wright's naturalism, and, equally, Ellison's modernism to Wright's naturalism. This set of relationships can be illustrated by the schematic representation on page 699, which I intend only to be suggestive.[23]

These relationships are reciprocal because we are free to read in critical time machines, to read backwards. The direct relation most important to my own theory of reading is that solid black line connecting Reed with Hurston. While Reed and Hurston seem to relish the play of the tradition, Reed's work seems to be a magnificently conceived play *on* the tradition. Both Hurston and Reed have written myths of Moses, both draw upon black sacred and secular mythic discourse as metaphorical and metaphysical systems, both write self-reflexive texts which comment upon the nature of writing itself, both make use of the frame to bracket their narratives-within-a-narrative, and both are authors of fictions which I characterize as "speakerly texts." Speakerly texts privilege the representation of the speaking black voice, of what the Russian Formalists called *skaz* and which Hurston and Reed have called "an oral

23. The use of interlocking triangles as a metaphor for the intertextual relationships of the tradition is not meant to suggest any form of concrete, inflexible reality. On the contrary, it is a systematic metaphor, as René Girard puts it, "systematically pursued":

> The triangle is no *Gestalt.* The real structures are intersubjective. They cannot be localized anywhere; *the triangle has no reality whatever; it is a systematic metaphor, systematically pursued.* Because changes in size and shape do not destroy the identity of this figure, as we will see later, the diversity as well as the unity of the works can be simultaneously illustrated. The purpose and limitations of this structural geometry may become clearer through a reference to "structural models." The triangle is a model of a sort, or rather a whole family of models. But these models are not "mechanical" like those of Claude Lévi-Strauss. They always allude to the mystery, transparent yet opaque, of human relations. All types of structural thinking assume that human reality is intelligible; it is a *logos* and, as such, *it is an incipient logic, or it degrades itself into a logic.* It can thus be systematized, at least up to a point, however unsystematic, irrational, and chaotic it may appear even to those, or rather especially to those who operate the system. [René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure,* trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, 1965), pp. 2–3; emphasis mine]

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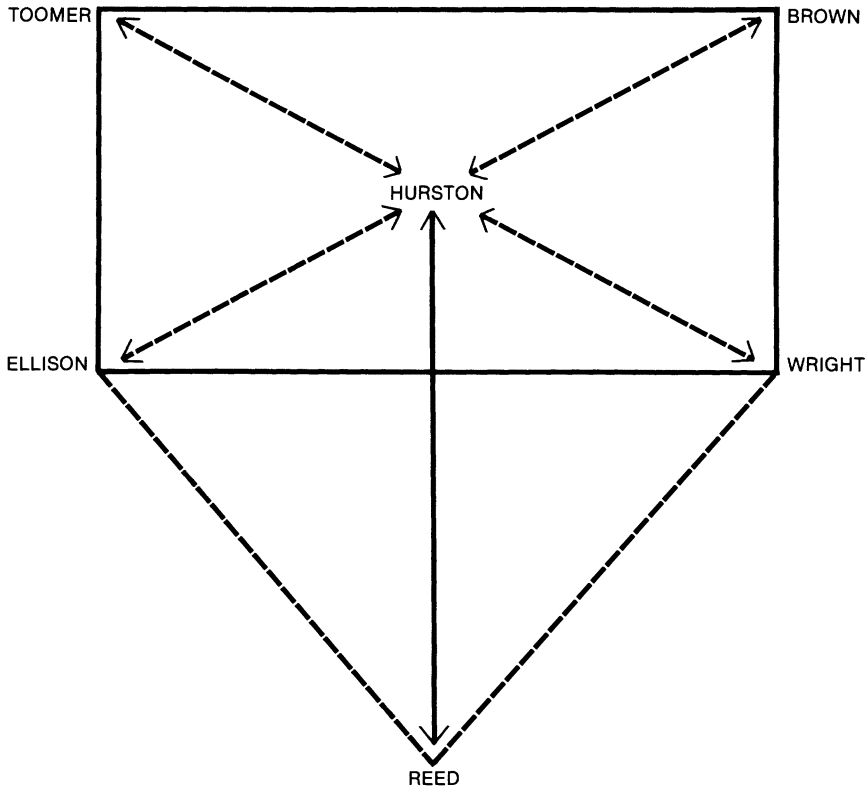

book, a talking book" (a figure which occurs, remarkably enough, in five of the first six slave narratives in the black tradition).[24]

Reed's relation to these authors in the tradition is double-voiced at all points, since he seems to be especially concerned with employing satire to utilize literature in what Northrop Frye calls "a special function of analysis, of breaking up the lumber of stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatisms, oppressive fashions, and all other things that impede the free movement . . . of society."[25] Reed, of course, seems to be most concerned with the "free movement" of writing itself. In his work, parody and hidden polemic

24. For Ishmael Reed on "a talking book," see "Ishmael Reed: A Self Interview," *Black World* 23 (June 1974): 25. For the slave narratives in which this figure appears, see James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars of the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince* (Bath, 1770); John Marrant, *Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black* (London, 1785); Ottabah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (London, 1787); Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African. Written by Himself* (London, 1789); and John Jea, *The Life and Sufferings of John Jea, An African Preacher* (Swansea, 1806).

25. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, N.J., 1957), p. 233.

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overlap, in a process Bakhtin describes as follows: "When parody becomes aware of substantial resistance, a certain forcefulness and profundity in the speech act it parodies, it takes on a new dimension of complexity via the tones of the hidden polemic. . . . A process of inner dialogization takes place within the parodic speech act."[26]

This "inner dialogization" can have curious implications, the most interesting, perhaps, being what Bakhtin describes as "the splitting of double-voiced discourse into two speech acts, into the two entirely separate and autonomous voices." The clearest evidence that Reed is signifying in *Mumbo Jumbo* through parody-as-hidden-polemic is his use of these two autonomous narrative voices. Reed employs these two voices in the manner of, and renders them through, foregrounding, to parody the two simultaneous stories of detective narration (that of the present and that of the past) in a narrative flow that moves hurriedly from cause to effect. In *Mumbo Jumbo,* however, the narrative of the past bears an ironic relation to the narrative of the present, because it comments not only upon the other narrative but upon the nature of *its writing itself.* Frye describes this, in another context, as "the constant tendency to self-parody in satiric rhetoric which prevents even the process of writing itself from becoming an oversimplified convention or ideal."[27] Reed's rhetorical strategy assumes the form of the relation between the text and the criticism of that text, which serves as discourse upon that text.

2. *Talking Texts: Signifying Revisions*

Consult the text!
—RALPH ELLISON, *Shadow and Act*[28]

With these definitions of narrative parody and critical signification as a frame, let me turn directly to Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo.* A close reading of Reed's works suggests strongly his concerns with the received form of the novel, with the precise rhetorical shape of the Afro-American literary tradition, and with the relation that the Afro-American tradition bears to the Western tradition.[29] Reed's concerns, as exemplified in his narrative forms, seem to be twofold: (1) the relation his own art bears to his black literary precursors, including Hurston, Wright, Ellison, and James Baldwin; and (2) the process of willing-into-being a rhetorical

26. Baxtin [Bakhtin], "Discourse Typology in Prose," p. 190.
27. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism,* p. 234.
28. Ellison, "The World and the Jug," p. 140.
29. See Reed, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (Garden City, N.Y., 1967), *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (Garden City, N.Y., 1969), *Mumbo Jumbo* (Garden City, N.Y., 1972), *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (New York, 1974), *Flight to Canada* (New York, 1976), and *The Terrible Twos* (New York, 1982).

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structure, a literary language, replete with its own figures and tropes, but one that allows the black writer to posit a structure of feeling that simultaneously critiques both the metaphysical presuppositions inherent in Western ideas and forms of writing and the metaphorical system in which the "blackness" of the writer and his experience have been valorized as a "natural" absence. In six demanding novels, Reed has criticized, through signifying, what he perceives to be the conventional structures of feeling that he has received from the Afro-American tradition. He has proceeded almost as if the sheer process of the analysis can clear a narrative space for the next generation of writers as decidedly as Ellison's narrative response to Wright and naturalism cleared a space for Leon Forrest, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, James Alan McPherson, and especially for Reed himself.

By undertaking the difficult and subtle art of pastiche, Reed criticizes the Afro-American idealism of a transcendent black subject, integral and whole, self-sufficient, and plentiful, the "always already" black signified, available for literary representation in received Western forms as would be the water dippered from a deep and dark well. Water can be poured into glasses or cups or canisters, but it remains water just the same. Put simply, Reed's fictions argue that the so-called black experience cannot be thought of as a fluid content to be poured into received and static containers. For Reed, it is the signifier that both shapes and defines any discrete signified—and it is the signifiers of the Afro-American tradition with whom Reed is concerned.

Reed's first novel lends credence to this sort of reading and also serves to create a set of generic expectations for reading the rest of his works. *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* is, above all else, a parody of the confessional mode which is the fundamental, undergirding convention of Afro-American narrative, received, elaborated upon, and transmitted in a chartable heritage from Briton Hammon's captivity narrative of 1760, through the antebellum slave narratives, to black autobiography, and into black fiction, especially the fictions of Hurston, Wright, Baldwin, and Ellison.[30] The narrative of Reed's Bukka Doopeyduk is a pastiche of the classic black narrative of the questing protagonist's "journey into the heart of whiteness"; but it parodies that narrative form by turning it inside out, exposing the character of the originals and thereby defining their formulaic closures and disclosures. Doopeyduk's tale ends with his own crucifixion; as the narrator of his own story, therefore, Doopeyduk articulates, literally, from among the dead, an irony implicit in all confessional and autobiographical modes, in which any author is forced by definition to imagine him or herself to be dead. More specifically, Reed

30. See Neil Schmitz, "Neo-HooDoo: The Experimental Fiction of Ishmael Reed," *Twentieth Century Literature* 20 (Apr. 1974): 126–28. Schmitz's splendid reading is, I believe, the first to discuss this salient aspect of Reed's rhetorical strategy. This paragraph is heavily indebted to Schmitz's essay.

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signifies upon *Black Boy* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in a foregrounded critique which can be read as an epigraph to the novel: "read growing up in soulsville first of three installments—or what it means to be a backstage darky."[31] Reed foregrounds the "scat-singing voice" that introduces the novel against the "other" voice of Doopeyduk, whose "second" voice narrates the novel's plot. Here, Reed parodies both Hurston's use of free indirect discourse in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Ellison's use in *Invisible Man* of the foregrounded voice in the prologue and epilogue that frame his nameless protagonist's picaresque account of his own narrative. In his second novel, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down,* Reed more fully, and successfully, critiques both realism and modernism. The exchange between Bo Shmo and the Loop Garoo Kid is telling:

> It was Bo Shmo and the neo-social realist gang. They rode to this spot from their hideout in the hills. Bo Shmo leaned in his saddle and scowled at Loop, whom he considered a deliberate attempt to be obscure. A buffoon an outsider and frequenter of sideshows. . . .
>
> The trouble with you Loop is that you're too abstract, the part time autocrat monarchist and guru finally said. Crazy dada nigger that's what you are. You are given to fantasy and are off in matters of detail. Far out esoteric bullshit is where you're at. Why in those suffering books that I write about my old neighborhood and how hard it was every gumdrop machine is in place while your work is a blur and a doodle. I'll bet you can't create the difference between a German and a redskin.
>
> What's your beef with me Bo Shmo, what if I write circuses? No one says a novel has to be one thing. It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o'clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons.
>
> All art must be for the end of liberating the masses. A landscape is only good when it shows the oppressor hanging from a tree.
>
> Right on! Right on, Bo, the henchmen chorused.
>
> Did you receive that in a vision or was it revealed to you?[32]

At several points in his first two novels, then, Reed deliberately reflects upon the history of the black tradition's debate over the nature and purpose of art.

Reed's third novel, *Mumbo Jumbo,* is a novel about writing itself—not only in the figurative sense of the post-modern, self-reflexive text but

31. Reed, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers,* p. 107.

32. Reed, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down,* pp. 34–36. For an excellent close reading of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down,* see Michel Fabre, "Postmodern Rhetoric in Ishmael Reed's *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down,*" in *The Afro-American Novel since 1960,* ed. Peter Bruck and Wolfgand Karrer (Amsterdam, 1982), pp. 167–88.

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also in a literal sense: "So Jes Grew is seeking its words. Its text. For what good is a liturgy without a text?"[33] *Mumbo Jumbo* is both a book about texts and a book of texts, a composite narrative composed of sub-texts, pre-texts, post-texts, and narratives-within-narratives. It is both a definition of Afro-American culture and its deflation. "The Big Lie concerning Afro-American culture," *Mumbo Jumbo*'s dust jacket states, "is that it lacks a tradition." The "Big Truth" of the novel, on the other hand, is that this very tradition is as rife with hardened convention and presupposition as is the rest of the Western tradition. Even this cryptic riddle of Jes Grew and its Text parodies Ellison: *Invisible Man*'s plot is set in motion with a riddle, while the themes of the relation between words and texts echo a key passage from Ellison's short story "And Hickman Arrives": "Good. Don't talk like I talk; talk like I *say* talk. Words are your business, boy. Not just *the* Word. Words are everything. The key to the Rock, the answer to the Question."[34]

Reed's signifying on tradition begins with his book's title. "Mumbo jumbo" is the received and ethnocentric Western designation for the rituals of black religions as well as for all black languages themselves. A vulgarized Western "translation" of a Swahili phrase, *mambo, jambo,* "mumbo jumbo," according to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary,* connotes "language that is unnecessarily involved and difficult to understand: GIBBERISH." The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites its etymology as "of unknown origin," implicitly serving here as the signified on which Reed's title signifies, recalling the myth of Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* who, with no antecedents, "jes' grew"—a phrase with which James Weldon Johnson characterizes the creative process of black sacred music. *Mumbo Jumbo,* then, signifies upon Western etymology, abusive Western practices of deflation through misnaming, and Johnson's specious, albeit persistent, designation of black creativity as anonymous.

But there is even more parody in this title. Whereas Ellison tropes the myth of presence in Wright's titles of *Native Son* and *Black Boy* through his title of *Invisible Man,* Reed parodies all three titles by employing as his title the English-language parody of *black language itself.* Although the etymology of "mumbo jumbo" has been problematic for Western lexicographers, any Swahili speaker knows that the phrase derives from the common greeting *jambo* and its plural, *mambo,* which loosely translated mean "What's happening?" Reed is also echoing, and signifying upon, Vachel Lindsay's ironic poem, "The Congo," which so (fatally) influenced the Harlem Renaissance poets, as Charles T. Davis has shown.[35] From its title on, *Mumbo Jumbo* serves as a critique of black

33. Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo,* p. 6; all further references to this work, abbreviated *MJ,* will be included parenthetically in the text.

34. Ellison, "And Hickman Arrives," p. 701.

35. See Charles T. Davis, *Black is the Color of the Cosmos: Essays on Black Literature and Culture, 1942–1981,* ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York, 1982), pp. 167–233.

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and Western literary forms and conventions, and of the complex relations between the two.

On the book's cover, which Reed designed (with Allen Weinberg), repeated and reversed images of a crouching, sensuous Josephine Baker are superimposed upon a rose.[36] Counterposed to this image is a medallion depicting a horse with two riders. These signs, the rose and the medallion, adumbrate the two central oppositions of the novel's complicated plot. The rose and the double image of Baker together form a cryptic *vé vé.* A *vé vé* is a key sign in Haitian *Vaudou,* a sign drawn on the ground with sand, cornmeal, flour, and coffee to represent the *loas*. The *loas* are the deities comprising the pantheon of *Vaudou* gods. The rose is a sign of Erzulie, goddess of love, as are the images of Baker, who became the French goddess of love in the late 1920s, in the Parisian version of the Jazz Age. The doubled image, as if mirrored, is meant to suggest the divine crossroads, where human beings meet their fate. At its center presides the *loa* Legba (Èṣù), guardian of the divine crossroads, messenger of the gods, the figure representing the interpreter and interpretation itself, the muse or *loa* of the critic. Legba is master of that mystical barrier separating the divine from the profane world. This complex yet cryptic *vé vé* is meant both to placate Legba himself and to summon his attention and integrity in a double act of criticism and interpretation: that of Reed in the process of his representation of the tradition, to be found between the covers of the book, and of the critic's interpretation of Reed's figured interpretation.

Located outside of the *vé vé,* as counterpoint, placed almost off the cover itself, is the medallion, the sign of the Knights Templar, representing the heart of the Western tradition. The opposition between the *vé vé* and the medallion represents two distinct warring forces, two mutually exclusive modes of reading. Already we are in the realm of doubles, but not the binary realm; rather, we are in the realm of doubled doubles. ("Doubled doubles" are central figures in Yoruba mythology, as is Èṣù.) Not only are two distinct and conflicting metaphysical systems here represented and invoked, but Reed's cover also serves as an overture to the critique of dualism and binary opposition which gives a major thrust to the text of *Mumbo Jumbo.* Reed parodies this dualism, which he thinks is exemplified in Ellison's *Invisible Man,* not just in *Mumbo Jumbo* but also in another text, in his poem "Dualism: in ralph ellison's invisible man."

This critique of dualism is implicit in *Mumbo Jumbo*'s central *speaking* character, PaPa LaBas. I emphasize "speaking" here because the novel's central character, of course, is Jes Grew itself, which never speaks and is never seen in its "abstract essence," only in discrete manifestations, or

36. My reading of the imagery on Reed's cover was inspired by a conversation with Thompson.

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"outbreaks." Jes Grew is the supraforce which sets the text of *Mumbo Jumbo* in motion, as Jes Grew and Reed seek their texts, as all characters and events define themselves against this omnipresent, compelling force. Jes Grew, here, is a clever and subtle parody of similar forces invoked in the black novel of naturalism, most notably in Wright's *Native Son.*

Unlike Jes Grew, PaPa LaBas does indeed speak. He is the chief detective in hard-and-fast pursuit of both Jes Grew and its Text. PaPa LaBas' name is a conflation of two of the several names of Èṣù, the Pan-African trickster. Called "Papa Legba" as his Haitian honorific and invoked through the phrase "eh là-bas" in New Orleans jazz recordings of the 1920s and 1930s, PaPa LaBas is the Afro-American trickster figure from black sacred tradition. His surname, of course, is French for "over there," and his presence unites "over there" (Africa) with "right here." He is indeed the messenger of the gods, the divine Pan-African interpreter, pursuing, in the language of the text, "The Work," which is not only *Vaudou* but also the very work (and play) of art itself. PaPa LaBas is the figure of the critic, in search of the text, decoding its telltale signs in the process. Even the four syllables of his name recall *Mumbo Jumbo*'s play of doubles. Chief sign reader, LaBas also in a sense is a sign himself. Indeed, PaPa LaBas' incessant and ingenious search for the Text of Jes Grew, culminating as it does in his recitation and revision of the myth of Thoth's gift of writing to civilization, constitutes an argument against the privileging in black discourse of what Reed elsewhere terms "the so-called oral tradition" in favor of the primacy and priority of the written text. It is a brief for the permanence of the written text, for the need of criticism, for which LaBas' myth of origins also accounts ("Guides were initiated into the Book of Thoth, the 1st anthology written by the 1st choreographer" [*MJ,* p. 164]).

Let us examine the text of *Mumbo Jumbo* as a text-book, complete with illustrations, footnotes, and a bibliography. A prologue, an epilogue, and an appended "Partial Bibliography" frame the text-proper, again in a parody of Ellison's framing devices in *Invisible Man.* (Reed supplements Ellison's epilogue with the bibliography, parodying the device both by its repeated presence and by the subsequent asymmetry of *Mumbo Jumbo.*) This documentary scheme of notes, illustrations, and bibliography parodies the documentary conventions of black realism and naturalism, as does Reed's recurrent use of lists and catalogs. These "separate" items Reed fails to separate with any sort of punctuation, thereby directing attention to their presence as literary conventions rather than as sources of information, particularly about the "black experience." Reed's text also includes dictionary definitions, epigraphs, epigrams, anagrams, photoduplicated type from other texts, newspaper clips and headlines, signs (such as those that hang on doors), invitations to parties, telegrams, "Situation Reports" (which come "from the 8-tubed Radio" [*MJ,* p. 32]), yin-yang symbols, quotations from other texts,

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poems, cartoons, drawings of mythic beasts, handbills, photographs, book jacket copy, charts and graphs, playing cards, a representation of a Greek vase, and a four-page handwritten letter, among even other items. Just as our word "satire" derives from *satura,* "hash," so Reed's form of satire is a version of "gumbo," a parody of form itself.[37]

Reed here parodies and underscores our notions of intertextuality, present in all texts. *Mumbo Jumbo* is the great black inter-text, replete with intra-texts referring to one another within the text of *Mumbo Jumbo* and also referring outside of themselves to all those other named texts, as well as to those texts unnamed but invoked through concealed reference, repetition, and reversal. The "Partial Bibliography" is Reed's most brilliant stroke, since its unconcealed presence (along with the text's other undigested texts) parodies both the scholar's appeal to authority and all studied attempts to conceal literary antecedents and influence. All texts, claims *Mumbo Jumbo,* are inter-texts, full of intra-texts. Our notions of originality, Reed's critique suggests, are more related to convention and material relationships than to some supposedly transcendent truth. Reed lays bare that mode of concealment and the illusion of unity which characterize modernist texts. Coming as it does after the epilogue, Reed's "Partial Bibliography" is an implicit parody of Ellison's ideas of craft and technique in the novel and suggests an image of Ellison's nameless protagonist, buried in his well-lighted hole, eating vanilla ice cream smothered by sloe gin, making annotations for his sequel to *Invisible Man.* The device, moreover, mimics the fictions of documentation and history which claim to order the ways societies live. The presence of the bibliography also recalls Ellison's remarks about the complex relationship between the "writer's experience" and the writer's experiences with books.

Reed's parodic use of intertextuality demonstrates that *Mumbo Jumbo* is a post-modern text. But what is its parody of the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance about, and for whom do the characters stand? Reed's novel is situated in the 1920s because, as the text explains, the Harlem Renaissance was the first full-scale, patronized attempt to capture the essence of Jes Grew in discrete *literary* texts. Jes Grew had made its first appearance in the 1890s, when "the Dance" swept the country. Indeed, James Weldon Johnson appropriated the phrase "jes' grew" to refer to the composition of the musical texts of Ragtime, which depended upon signifying riffs to transform black secular, and often vulgar, songs into formal, repeatable compositions. Ellison makes essentially the same statement about the 1890s by suggesting that signifying is implicit in the common designation of this music as "Ethiopian Airs." Ellison's pun could well serve as still another signified upon which *Mumbo Jumbo* signifies. The power of Jes Grew was allowed to peter out

37. On Reed's definition of "gombo" (gumbo), see his "The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic," *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963–1970* (Amherst, Mass., 1972), p. 26.

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in the 1890s, Reed argues, because it found no literary texts to contain, define, interpret, and thereby will it to subsequent black cultures.

Although the Harlem Renaissance did succeed in the creation of numerous texts of art and criticism, most critics agree that it failed to find its voice, which lay muffled beneath the deadweight of Romantic convention, which most black writers seemed not to question but to adopt eagerly. This is essentially the same critique rendered by Wallace Thurman in his *Infants of the Spring* (1932), a satirical novel about the Harlem Renaissance, written by one of its most thoughtful literary critics. Few of Reed's characters stand for historical personages; most are figures for types. Hinckle Von Vampton, however, suggests Carl Van Vechten, but his first name, from the German *hinken* ("to limp"), could suggest the German engraver Hermann Knackfuss, whose name translates as "a person with a clubfoot."[38] Abdul Sufi Hamid recalls a host of Black Muslims, most notably Duse Mohamed Ali, editor of the *African Times and Orient Review,* as well as Elijah Muhammad's shadowy mentor, W. D. Fard. The key figures in the action of the plot, however, are the Atonist Path and its military wing, the Wallflower Order, on one hand, and the Neo-HooDoo detectives, headed by PaPa LaBas, and its "military" wing, the *Mu'tafikah,* on the other. "Wallflower Order" is a two-term pun on "Ivy League," while *Mu'tafikah* puns on a twelve-letter word which signifies chaos. Also, "mu" is the twelfth letter of the Greek alphabet, suggesting "the dozens," which forms a subdivision of the black ritual of signifying; the *Mu'tafikah* play the dozens on Western art museums. The painter Knackfuss created a heliogravure from Wilhelm II's allegorical drawing of the European authority to go to war against the Chinese. This heliogravure, *Völker Europas, wahrt eure heiligsten Güter* (People of Europe, protect that which is most holy to you), was completed in 1895. It appears in *Mumbo Jumbo* as part of a chapter in which members of the Wallflower Order plot against the *Mu'tafikah* (see *MJ,* p. 155). The pun on "Knackfuss" and *hinken* is wonderfully consistent with Reed's multiple puns on the "Wallflower Order" and "Atonist."

"Atonist" signifies multiply here. "One who atones" is an Atonist; a follower of Aton, Pharoah Akhnaton's Supreme Being who "reappears" as Jehovah, is an Atonist; but also one who lacks physiological tone, especially of a contractile organ, is an Atonist. On a wall at Atonist headquarters are the Order's symbols:

> the Flaming Disc, the #1 and the creed—
>
> *Look at them! Just look at them! throwing their hips this way, that way* while I, my muscles, stone, the marrow of my spine, plaster, *my back supported by decorated paper, stand here as goofy as a Dumb Dora. Lord, if I can't dance, no one shall* [*MJ,* p. 65; original in italics, emphasis mine]

38. This clever observation is James A. Snead's, for whose Yale seminar on parody I wrote the first draft of this essay.

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The Atonists and the Jes Grew Carriers ("J.G.C.s") reenact allegorically a primal, recurring battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, between forces of the Left Hand and forces of the Right Hand, between the descendants of Set and the descendants of Osiris, all symbolized in Knackfuss' heliogravure.

We learn of this war in *Mumbo Jumbo*'s marvelous parody of the scene of recognition so fundamental to the structure of detective fiction, which occurs in the library of a black-owned villa at Irvington-on-Hudson, called Villa Lewaro, "an anagram," the text tells us, "upon the Hostess' name, by famed tenor Enrico Caruso" (*MJ,* p. 156). Actually, "Lewaro" is an anagram for "we oral." This recognition scene in which PaPa LaBas and his sidekick, Black Herman, arrest Hinckle Von Vampton and his sidekick, Hubert "Safecracker" Gould, parodies its counterpart in the detective novel by its exaggerated frame. When forced to explain the charges against Von Vampton and Gould, LaBas replies, "Well if you must know, it all began 1000s of years ago in Egypt, according to a high up member in the Haitian aristocracy" (*MJ,* p. 160). He then proceeds to narrate, before an assembled company of hundreds, the myth of Set and Osiris and its key subtext, the myth of the introduction of writing in Egypt by the god Thoth. The parody involved here is the length of the recapitulation of facts—of the decoded signs—which LaBas narrates in a thirty-one-page chapter, the longest in the book (see *MJ,* pp. 161–91). The myth, of course, recapitulates the action of the novel up to this point of the narrative, but by an *allegorical* representation through mythic discourse. By fits and turns, we realize that Von Vampton and the Wallflower Order are the descendants of Set, by way of the story of Moses and Jethro and the birth of the Knights Templar in A.D. 1118. Von Vampton, we learn, was the Templar librarian, who found the sacred Book of Thoth, "the 1st anthology written by the 1st choreographer," which is Jes Grew's sacred Text (*MJ,* p. 164). In the twentieth century, Von Vampton subdivided the Book of Thoth into fourteen sections, just as Set had dismembered his brother Osiris' body into fourteen segments. The fourteen sections of the anthology he mailed anonymously to fourteen black people, who are manipulated into mailing its parts to each other in a repeating circle, in the manner of a "chain book" (*MJ,* p. 69). Abdul Sufi Hamid, one of these fourteen who, we learn, are unwitting Jes Grew Carriers, calls in the other thirteen chapters of the anthology, reassembles the Text, and even translates the Book of Thoth from the hieroglyphics. Sensing its restored Text, Jes Grew surfaces in New Orleans, as it had in the 1890s with the birth of Ragtime, and heads toward New York. Ignorant of the existence or nature of Jes Grew and of the true nature of the sacred Text, Abdul destroys the Book, and then, when he refuses to reveal its location, is murdered by the Wallflower Order. LaBas, Von Vampton's arch foe, master of HooDoo, devout follower of Jes Grew ("PaPa LaBas carries Jes

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Grew in him like most other folk carry genes" [*MJ,* p. 23]), chief decoder of signs, recapitulates this complex story, in elaborate detail, to the assembled guests at Villa Lewaro, thereby repeating, through the recited myth, the figures of *Mumbo Jumbo*'s own plot, functioning as what Reed calls "the shimmering Etheric Double of the 1920s. The thing that gives it its summary" (*MJ,* p. 20). Despite numerous murders and even the arrests of Von Vampton and Gould and their repatriation to Haiti for trial by the *loas* of *Vaudou,* neither the mystery of the nature of Jes Grew nor the identity of its Text is ever resolved. The epilogue presents PaPa LaBas in the 1960s, delivering his annual lecture to a college audience on the Harlem Renaissance and its unconsummated Jes Grew passion.

But just as we can define orders of multiple substitution and signification for Reed's types and caricatures, as is true of allegory generally (e.g., Von Vampton/Van Vechten, *hinken*/Knackfuss), so too we can find many levels of meaning which could provide a closure to the text. The first decade of readers of *Mumbo Jumbo* have attempted, with great energy, to find one-to-one correlations, decoding its allegorical structure by finding analogues between, for example, the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. As interesting as such parallel universes are, however, I am more concerned here with *Mumbo Jumbo*'s status as a rhetorical structure, as a mode of narration, and with relating this mode of narration to a critique of traditional notions of closure in interpretation. Reed's most subtle achievement in *Mumbo Jumbo* is to parody, to signify upon, the notions of closure implicit in the key texts of the Afro-American canon. *Mumbo Jumbo,* in contrast to that canon, is a novel that figures and glorifies *indeterminacy.* In this sense, *Mumbo Jumbo* stands as a profound critique and elaboration upon the convention of closure, and its metaphysical implications, in the black novel. In its stead, Reed posits the notion of aesthetic *play:* the play of the tradition, the play on the tradition, the sheer play of indeterminacy itself.

3. *Indeterminacy and the Text of Blackness*

The text of *Mumbo Jumbo* is framed by devices characteristic of film narration. The prologue, situated in New Orleans, functions as a "false start" of the action: five pages of narration are followed by a second title page, a second copyright and acknowledgment page, and a second set of epigraphs, the first of which concludes the prologue. This prologue functions like the prologue of a film, with the title and credits appearing next, before the action continues. The novel's final words are "Freeze frame" (*MJ,* p. 218). The relative fluidity of the narrative structure of film, compared with that of conventional prose narrative, announces here an emphasis upon figural multiplicity rather than singular referential correspondence, an emphasis that Reed recapitulates through-

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out the text by an imaginative play of doubles. The play of doubles extends from the title and the double-Erzulie image of Baker on the novel's cover ("Erzulie" means "love of mirrors" [*MJ,* p. 162]) to the double beginning implicit in every prologue, through all sorts of double images scattered in the text (such as the "two heads" of PaPa LaBas [see *MJ,* pp. 25, 45] and the frequently repeated arabic numerals 4 and 22), all the way to the double ending of the novel implied by its epilogue and "Partial Bibliography." The double beginning and double ending frame the text of *Mumbo Jumbo,* a book of doubles, from its title on.

These thematic aspects of doubleness represent only its most obvious form of doubling; the novel's narrative structure, a brilliant elaboration upon that of the detective novel, is itself a rather complex doubling. Reed refers to this principle of "structuration" as "a doubleness, not just of language, but the idea of a double-image on form. A mystery-mystery, *Erzulie-Erzulie*."[39] In *Mumbo Jumbo,* form and content, theme and structure, all are ordered upon this figure of the double; doubling is Reed's "figure in the carpet." The form the narration takes in *Mumbo Jumbo* replicates the tension of the two stories which grounds the form of the detective novel, defined by Tzvetan Todorov as "the missing story of the crime, and the presented story of the investigation, the role justification of which is to make us discover the first story." Todorov describes three forms of detective fiction—the whodunit, the *série noire* (the thriller, exemplified by Chester Himes' *For Love of Imabelle*), and the suspense novel, which combines the narrative features of the first two.[40] Let us consider Todorov's typology in relation to the narrative structure of *Mumbo Jumbo.*

The whodunit comprises two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. The first story, that of the crime, has ended by the time the second story, that of the investigation of the crime, begins. In the story of the investigation, the characters "do not act, they learn." The whodunit's structure, as in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express,* is often framed by a prologue and an epilogue, "that is, the discovery of the crime and the discovery of the killer" (*PP,* p. 45). The second story functions as an explanation not just of the investigation but also of how the book came to be written; indeed, "it is precisely the story of that very book" (*PP,* p. 45). As Todorov concludes, these two stories are the same as those which the Russian Formalists isolated in every narrative, that of the *fable* (story) and that of the *subject* (or plot): "The story is what has happened in life, the plot is the way the author presents

39. Reed, interview by Calvin Curtis, 29 Jan. 1979.

40. Tzvetan Todorov, "The Two Principles of Narrative," trans. Philip E. Lewis, *Diacritics* 1 (Fall 1971): 41. See his *The Poetics of Prose,* trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, N.Y., 1977), pp. 42–52; all further references to this work, abbreviated *PP,* will be included parenthetically in the text.

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it to us" (*PP,* p. 45). "Story," here, describes the reality represented, while "plot" describes the mode of narration, the literary convention and devices, used to represent. A detective novel merely renders these two principles of narrative *present* simultaneously. The story of the crime is a story of an absence since the crime of the whodunit has occurred before the narrative begins; the second story, therefore, "serves only as mediator between the reader and the story of the crime" (*PP,* p. 46). This second story, the plot, generally depends upon temporal inversions and subjective, shifting points of view. These two conventions figure prominently in the narrative structure of *Mumbo Jumbo.*

Todorov's second type of detective fiction, the *série noire,* or thriller, combines the two stories into one, suppressing the first and vitalizing the second. Whereas the whodunit proceeds from effect to cause, the thriller proceeds from cause to effect: the novel reveals at its outset the causes of the crime, the *données* (in *Mumbo Jumbo,* the Wallflower Order, the dialogue of whose members occupies 60 percent of the prologue), and the narration sustains itself through sheer suspense, through the reader's expectation of what will happen next. Although *Mumbo Jumbo*'s narrative strategy proceeds through the use of suspense, its two stories, as it were, are not fused; accordingly, neither of these categories fully describe it.

Mumbo Jumbo imitates and signifies upon the narrative strategy of the third type of detective novel, the suspense novel. According to Todorov, its defining principles are these: "it keeps the mystery of the whodunit and also the two stories, that of the past and that of the present; but it refuses to reduce the second to a simple detection of the truth" (*PP,* p. 50). What *has* happened is only just as important to sustaining interest as what *shall* happen; the second story, then, the story of the present, is the focus of interest. Reed draws upon this type of narrative as his rhetorical structure in *Mumbo Jumbo,* with one important exception. We do find the two-stories structure intact. What's more, the mystery presented at the outset of the text, the double mystery of the suppression of both Jes Grew *and* its Text (neither of which is ever revealed nor their mysteries solved in the standard sense of the genre) is relayed through the dialogue of the *données.* This means that the movement of the narration is from cause to effect, from the New Orleans branch of the Wallflower Order and their plans to "decode this coon mumbo jumbo" (*MJ,* p. 4) through their attempts to kill its Text and thereby dissipate its force. The detective of the tale, PaPa LaBas, moreover, is integrated solidly into the action and universe of the other characters, risking his life and systematically discovering the murdered corpses of his friends and colleagues as he proceeds to decode the signs of the mystery's solution, in the manner of "the vulnerable detective," which Todorov identifies as a subtype of the suspense novel (*PP,* p. 51).

In these ways, the structure of *Mumbo Jumbo* conforms to that of the

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suspense novel. The crucial exception to the typology, however, whereby Reed is able to parody even the mode of the two stories themselves and transform the structure into a self-reflecting text or allegory upon the nature of writing itself, is *Mumbo Jumbo*'s device of drawing upon the story of the past *to reflect upon, analyze, and philosophize about* the story of the present. The story of the present is narrated from the limited but multiple points of view of the characters who people its sub-plots and sub-mysteries; the story of the past, however, is narrated in an omniscient voice, which "reads" the story of the present, in the manner of a literary critic close reading a primary text. *Mumbo Jumbo*'s double narrative, then, its narrative-within-a-narrative, is an allegory of the act of reading itself. Reed uses this second mode of ironic omniscient narration to signify upon the nature of the novel in general but especially upon Afro-American naturalism and modernism.

The mystery type of narrative discourse is characterized by plot inversions, which, of course, function as temporal inversions. Before discussing Reed's use of the narrative-within-a-narrative and its relation to the sort of indeterminacy the text seems to be upholding, it would be useful to chart his use of inversion as impediment. The summary of the *fable,* the essential causal-temporal relationships of the work which I have sketched in part 2 above, is somewhat misleading, for the novel can be related in summary fashion only *after* we have read it. In the reading process we confront a collection of mysteries, mysteries-within-mysteries, all of which are resolved eventually except for the first two. We can list the following mysteries which unfold in this order as the *subject,* or the plot:[41]

1.	The mystery of Jes Grew ("the Thing").	These are basic mysteries. They frame the plot and remain unresolved.
2.	The mystery of its Text.	
3.	The mystery of the Wallflower Order's history and its relation to that of the Knights Templar.	The mystery of the identity of these medieval orders, Jes Grew's antagonists, runs the length of the novel and is resolved only in the recognition scene at Villa Lewaro. Figured as antithetical dance metaphors.

41. For a wonderfully useful discussion of *fabula* ("fable") and *sjužet* ("subject"), see Victor Šklovskij, "The Mystery Novel: Dickens's *Little Dorrit,*" in *Readings in Russian Poetics,* pp. 220–226. On use of typology, see p. 222.

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4.	The *Mu'tafikah*'s raids on American art museums, especially the North Wing of the Center of Art Detention.	This partial mystery is resolved, but disastrously for LaBas' forces. It creates a series of imbalances between Earline and Berbelang, and between Berbelang and PaPa LaBas, which function as structural parts to the tension between the Wallflower Order and the Knights Templar.
5.	Installation of the anti–Jes Grew President Warren Harding and mystery of his complex racial heritage.	Plot impediments.
6.	The mystery of the Talking Android.	
7.	Gang wars between Buddy Jackson and Schlitz, "the Sarge of Yorktown."	
8.	Mystery of the U.S. Marine invasion of Haiti.	Resolved midway; allows for ironic denouncement.
9.	Mystery of PaPa LaBas' identity and Mumbo Jumbo Kathedral.	Resolved in epilogue.
10.	Woodrow Wilson Jefferson and the mystery of the Talking Android.	Plot impediments; resolved, but ambiguously. Explanations resort to fantastic element.
11.	Staged mystery of "Charlotte's (Isis) Pick" (Doctor Peter Pick).	
12.	Hinckle Von Vampton's identity.	This mystery is resolved and in the process resolves the mysteries of the Wallflower Order and the Atonist Path.
13.	Mystery of the fourteen J.G.C.s and the sacred anthology.	This resolves mystery 2, but only partially, superficially.
14.	The mystery of Abdul Sufi Hamid's murder and his riddle, "Epigram on American-Egyptian Cotton."	These mysteries function in a curious way, seemingly to resolve the mystery of Jes Grew's Text.

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15.	Berbelang's murder and betrayal of the *Mu'tafikah* by Thor Wintergreen. Charlotte's murder.	Plot impediments.
16.	Earline's possession by Erzulie and Yemanjá *loas;* Doctor Peter Pick's disappearance.	
17.	Mystery of *The Black Plume* and Benoit Battraville, and the ring of the Dark Tower.	VooDoo/HooDoo exposition. Resolves Knights Templar mystery. Leads to capture of Von Vampton.

Most of these interwoven mysteries impede the plot in the manner of detective fiction by depicting, as does jazz, several simultaneous actions whose relationship is not apparent. These mysteries run parallel throughout the novel, only to be resolved in the scene of recognition in the library at the Villa Lewaro, where PaPa LaBas presents his decoded evidence through his elaborate recasting of the myth of Osiris and Set. This allegory recapitulates, combines, and decodes the novel's several simultaneous sub-plots and also traces the novel's complex character interrelationships from ancient Egypt up to the very moment of LaBas' narration. The narration leads to the arrest of Gould and Von Vampton, but also to the antidiscovery of the sacred Book of Thoth, the would-be Text of Jes Grew. Recast myths serve the same function of plot impediment for the purpose of repeating the novel's events through metaphorical substitution in two other places: these are the allegories of Faust and of the *houngan,* Ti Bouton (see *MJ,* pp. 90–92, 132–39). These recast myths serve as the play of doubles, consistent with the "double-image on form," which Reed sought to realize, and are implicit in the nature of allegory itself.

Plot impediment can be created in ways other than through temporal inversion; local-color description does as well. Local color, of course, came to be a standard feature in the social novel; in the Afro-American narrative, realism-as-local-color is perhaps the most consistent aspect of black rhetorical strategy from the slave narratives to *Invisible Man.* Reed uses and simultaneously parodies the convention of local color as plot impediment by employing unpunctuated lists and categories throughout the text, as seen in the novel's first paragraph:

> A True Sport, the Mayor of New Orleans, spiffy in his patent-leather brown and white shoes, his plaid suit, the Rudolph Valentino parted-down-the-middle hair style, sits in his office. Sprawled upon his knees is Zuzu, local doo-wack-a-doo and voo-do-dee-odo-fizgig. A slatternly floozy, her green, sequined dress quivers. [*MJ,* p. 3]

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The following sentence exemplifies Reed's undifferentiated catalogs: "The dazzling parodying punning mischievous pre-Joycean style-play of your Cakewalking your Calinda your Minstrelsy give-and-take of the ultra-absurd" (*MJ,* p. 152). Viktor Šklovskij says that the mystery novel was drawn upon formally by the social novel; Reed's use of devices from the detective novel, then, to parody the black social novel reverses this process, appropriately and ironically enough.[42]

I have discussed how the tension of the two stories generally operates in the types of detective fiction. Reed's play of doubles assumes its most subtle form in his clever rhetorical strategy of using these two narratives, the story of the past and the story of the present. It is useful to think of these two as the narrative of *understanding* and the narrative of *truth.* The narrative of understanding is the presented narrative of the investigation of a mystery, in which a detective (reader) interprets or decodes "clues." Once these signs are sufficiently decoded, this narrative of understanding reconstitutes the missing story of the crime, which we can think of as the narrative of truth. The presented narrative, then, is implicitly a story of another, absent story and hence functions as an internal allegory.

The nature of this narrative of the investigation in *Mumbo Jumbo* can be easily characterized: the narrative remains close to the action with local-color description and dialogue as its two central aspects; character-as-description and extensive catalogs propel the narrative forward; the narrative remains essentially in the present tense, and the point of view is both in the third person and limited, as it must be if the reader's understanding of the nature of the mystery is to remain impeded until the novel's detective decodes all the clues, assembles all the suspects, interprets the signs, and reveals the truth of the mystery. The detective makes his arrests, and then everyone left eats dinner.

Mumbo Jumbo's prologue opens in this narrative mode of the story of the present. Near the end of the prologue, however, a second narrative mode intrudes. It is separated from the first narrative by spacing and is further foregrounded by italic type (see *MJ,* p. 6). It not only interprets and comments upon characters and actions in the first story but does so in a third-person omniscient mode. In other words, it *reads* its counterpart narrative, of which it is a negation. Following its italic type are three other sorts of sub-texts which comprise crucial aspects of this second, antithetical narration of past, present, and future: a black-and-white photograph of people dancing; an epigraph on the nature of the "second line," written by Louis Armstrong; and an etymology of the phrase "mumbo jumbo," taken from the *American Heritage Dictionary.* That which the characters ponder or "misunderstand" this foregrounded antithetical narration reads "correctly" for the reader.

42. See Šklovskij, "The Mystery Novel," pp. 222, 226.

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> *But they did not understand that the Jes Grew epidemic was unlike physical plagues. Actually Jes Grew was an anti-plague. Some plagues caused the body to waste away; Jes Grew enlivened the host. . . . So Jes Grew is seeking its words. Its text. For what good is a liturgy without a text? In the 1890s the text was not available and Jes Grew was out there all alone. Perhaps the 1920s will also be a false alarm and Jes Grew will evaporate as quickly as it appeared again broken-hearted and double-crossed* (++). [*MJ,* p. 6]

This second, anti, narration consists of all of *Mumbo Jumbo*'s motley sub-texts which are not included in its first narration. Whereas the first story adheres to the present, the second roams remarkably freely through space and time, between myth and "history," humorously employing the device of anachronism. It is discontinuous and fragmentary, not linear like its counterpart; it never contains dialogue, it contains all of the text's abstractions.

All of the novel's sub-texts (illustrations, excerpts from other texts, Situation Reports, etc.) are parts of this second narration, which we might think of as an extended discourse on the history of Jes Grew. The only mysteries this antithetical narration does not address are the text's first two mysteries—what exactly Jes Grew is and what precisely its Text is. After chapter 8, the foregrounding of italics tends to disappear, for the narration manages to bracket or frame itself, functioning almost as the interior monologue of the first narrative mode. While the first story remains firmly in the tradition of the presented detective story, the second turns that convention inside out, functioning as an ironic double, a reversed mirror image like the cryptic *vé vé* on the novel's cover.

This second mode of narration allows for the "allegorical double" of *Mumbo Jumbo.* As many critics have gone to great lengths to demonstrate, *Mumbo Jumbo* is a thematic allegory of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s rendered through causal connections with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. A more interesting allegory, however, is that found in the antithetical narrative, which is a discourse on the history and nature of writing itself, especially that of the Afro-American literary tradition. *Mumbo Jumbo,* then, is a text that directs attention to its own writing, to its status as a text, related to other texts which it signifies upon. Its second narration reads its first, as does discourse upon a text. It is Reed reading Reed and the tradition. A formal metaphor for Reed's mode of writing is perhaps the bebop mode of jazz, as exemplified in that great reedist, Charlie Parker, who sometimes played a chord on the alto saxophone, then repeated and reversed the same chord to hear, if I understand him correctly, what he had just played. Parker is a recurring figure in Reed's works: "Parker, the houngan (a word derived from *n'gana gana*) for whom there was no master adept enough to award him the Asson, is born" (*MJ,* p. 16).[43] Just as Jes Grew, the novel's central

43. A *houngan* is a priest of *Vaudou.* On *Vaudou,* see Jean Price-Mars, *Ainsi parla l'Oncle* (Port-au-Prince, 1928) and Alfred Metraux, *Le Vodou haitien* (Paris, 1958).

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"character," in searching for its Text is seeking to actualize a desire, to "find its Speaking or strangle upon its own ineloquence," so too is the search for a text replicated and referred to throughout the second, signifying narration (*MJ*, p. 34).

What is the status of this desired Text? How are we to read Reed? Jes Grew's desire would be actualized only by finding its Text. *Mumbo Jumbo*'s parodic use of the presented story of the detective novel states this desire; the solution of the novel's central mystery would be for Jes Grew to find its Text. This Text, PaPa LaBas' allegorical narrative at the Villa Lewaro tells us, is in fact the vast and terrible Text of Blackness itself, "always already" there: "the Book of Thoth, the sacred Work . . . of the Black Birdman, an assistant to Osiris. (If anyone thinks this is 'mystifying the past' [the narrative intrudes] kindly check out your local bird book and you will find the sacred Ibis' Ornithological name to be *Threskiornis aethiopicus*)" (*MJ*, p. 188). The irony of the mystery structure evident in *Mumbo Jumbo* is that this Text, Jes Grew's object of desire, is "defined" only by its absence; it is never seen, or found. At the climax of LaBas' amusingly detailed and long recapitulation of his process of reading the signs of the mystery (as well as the history of the dissemination of the Text itself), LaBas instructs his assistant, T Malice, to unveil the Text:

> Go get the Book T!
>
> T Malice goes out to the car and returns with a huge gleaming box covered with snakes and scorpions shaped of sparkling gems.
>
> The ladies intake their breath at such a gorgeous display. On the top can be seen the Knights Templar seal; 2 Knights riding Beaseauh, the Templars' piebald horse. T Malice places the box down in the center of the floor and removes the 1st box, an iron box, and the 2nd box, which is bronze and shines so that they have to turn the ceiling lights down. And within this box is a sycamore box and under the sycamore, ebony, and under this ivory, then silver and finally gold and then . . . empty!! [*MJ*, p. 196]

The nature of the Text remains undetermined, and indeed, indeterminate, as it was at the novel's beginning. Once the signs of its presence have been read, the Text disappears, in what must be the most humorous anticlimax in the whole of Afro-American fiction.

We can read this anticlimax against the notion of indeterminacy. Geoffrey H. Hartman defines the function of indeterminacy as "a bar separating understanding and truth."[44] The "bar" in *Mumbo Jumbo* is signified by that unbridgeable white space that separates the first narrative mode from the second, the narrative of truth. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a novel about indeterminacy in interpretation itself. The text repeats this

44. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven, Conn., 1980), p. 272.

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theme again and again. In addition to the two narrative voices, the Atonist Path and its Wallflower Order are criticized severely for a foolish emphasis upon unity, upon the number 1, upon what the novel calls "point." One of the three symbols of the Atonist Order is "the #1" (*MJ,* p. 65). Their leader is called "Hierophant 1" (*MJ,* p. 63). A "hierophant," of course, is an expositor. The Atonists are defined in the antithetical narrative as they who seek to interpret the world through one interpretation: "To some if you owned your own mind you were indeed sick but when you possessed an Atonist mind you were healthy. A mind which sought to interpret the world by using a single loa. Somewhat like filling a milk bottle with an ocean" (*MJ,* p. 24). The novel defines the nature of this urge for the reduction of unity:

> 1st they intimidate the intellectuals by condemning work arising out of their own experience as being 1-dimensional, enraged, non-objective, preoccupied with hate and not universal, universal being a word co-opted by the Catholic Church when the Atonists took over Rome, as a way of measuring every 1 by their deals. [*MJ,* p. 133]

One is an Atonist, the novel maintains consistently, who attempts to tie the sheer plurality of signification to one, determinate meaning.

In contrast is the spirit of Jes Grew and PaPa LaBas. As I have shown, the name "LaBas" is derived from Èṣù-Ẹlẹ́gbára. The Yoruba call Èṣù the god of indeterminacy (*àriyèmuyè*) and of uncertainty. PaPa LaBas, in contradistinction to Hierophant 1, has not one but two heads, like the face of the sign: "PaPa LaBas, noonday HooDoo, fugitive-hermit, obeah-man, botanist, animal impersonator, 2-headed man, You-Name-It" (*MJ,* p. 45). Moreover, he functions, as the detective of Jes Grew, as a decoder, as a sign reader, the man who cracked *de* code, by using his two heads: "Evidence? Woman, I dream about it, I feel it, I use my 2 heads. My Knockings" (*MJ,* p. 25). LaBas is the critic, engaged in The Work, the work of art, refusing to reduce it to a "point":

> People in the 60s said they couldn't follow him. (In Santa Cruz the students walked out.) What's your point? they asked in Seattle whose central point, the Space Needle, is invisible from time to time. What are you driving at? they would say in Detroit in the 1950s. In the 40s he haunted the stacks of a ghost library. [*MJ,* p. 218]

While arguing ironically with Abdul Sufi Hamid, the Black Muslim who subsequently burns the Book of Thoth, LaBas critiques Abdul's "black aesthetic" in terms identical to his critique of the Atonists:

> Where does that leave the ancient Vodun aesthetic: pantheistic, becoming, 1 which bountifully permits 1000s of spirits, as many as

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> the imagination can hold. Infinite Spirits and Gods. So many that it would take a book larger than the Koran and the Bible, the Tibetan Book of the Dead and all of the holy books in the world to list, and still room would have to be made for more. [*MJ,* p. 35; see also Abdul's letter to LaBas, *MJ,* pp. 200–203]

It is indeterminacy, the sheer plurality of meaning, the very play of the signifier itself, which *Mumbo Jumbo* celebrates. *Mumbo Jumbo* addresses the *play* of the black literary tradition and, as a parody, is a *play* upon that same tradition. Its central character, Jes Grew, cannot be reduced by the Atonists, as they complain: "It's nothing we can bring into focus or categorize; once we call it 1 thing it forms into something else" (*MJ,* p. 4). Just as LaBas the detective is the text's figure for indeterminacy (paradoxically because he is a detective), so too is Jes Grew's "nature" indeterminate: its Text is never a presence, and it disappears when its Text disappears, as surely as does Charlotte when Doctor Peter Pick recites, during his reverse-minstrel plantation routine, an incantation from PaPa LaBas' *Blue Back: A Speller* (see *MJ,* pp. 104–5, 199).

Even the idea of one transcendent subject, Jes Grew's Text, the Text of Blackness itself, *Mumbo Jumbo* criticizes. When the poet, Nathan Brown, asks the Haitian *houngan* Benoit Battraville how to catch Jes Grew, Benoit replies: "don't ask me how to catch Jes Grew. Ask Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, your poets, your painters, your musicians, ask them how to catch it" (*MJ,* p. 152). Jes Grew also manifests itself in more curious forms:

> The Rhyming Fool who sits in Rē′-mote Mississippi and talks "crazy" for hours. The dazzling parodying punning mischievous pre-Joycean style-play of your Cakewalking your Calinda your Minstrelsy give-and-take of the ultra-absurd. Ask the people who put wax paper over combs and breathe through them. In other words, Nathan, I am saying Open-Up-To-Right-Here and then you will have something coming from your experience that the whole world will admire and need. [*MJ,* p. 152]

Jes Grew's Text, in other words, is not a transcendent signified but must be *produced* in a dynamic process and manifested in discrete forms, as in black music and black speech acts: "The Blues is a Jes Grew, as James Weldon Johnson surmised. Jazz was a Jes Grew which followed the Jes Grew of Ragtime. Slang is Jes Grew too," PaPa LaBas tells his 1960s audience in his annual lecture on the Harlem Renaissance (*MJ,* p. 214).

"Is this the end of Jes Grew?" the narrative questions when we learn that its Text does not exist. "Jes Grew has no end and no beginning," the text replies (*MJ,* p. 204). The echoes here are intentional: Reed echoes Ellison, or, rather, Ellison's echo of T. S. Eliot. "In my end is my beginning," writes Eliot in "East Coker," "In my beginning is my end." The

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"end," writes Ellison, "is in the beginning and lies far ahead."[45] Reed signifies upon Ellison's gesture of closure here, and that of the entire Afro-American literary tradition, by positing an open-endedness of interpretation, of the play of signifiers, just as his and Ellison's works both signify upon the idea of the transcendent signified of the black tradition, the Text of Blackness itself.

The tradition's classic text on the "Blackness of Blackness" is found in the prologue of *Invisible Man:*

> "Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness.' "
>
> And a congregation of voices answered: "That blackness is most black, brother, most black . . ."
>
> "In the beginning . . ."
>
> "At the very start," they cried.
>
> ". . . there was blackness . . ."
>
> "Preach it . . ."
>
> ". . . and the sun . . ."
>
> "The sun, Lawd . . ."
>
> ". . . was bloody red . . ."
>
> "Red . . ."
>
> "Now black is . . ." the preacher shouted.
>
> "Bloody . . ."
>
> "I said black is . . ."
>
> "Preach it, brother . . ."
>
> ". . . an' black ain't . . ."
>
> "Red, Lawd, red: He said it's red!"
>
> "Amen, brother . . ."
>
> "Black will git you . . ."
>
> "Yes, it will . . ."
>
> ". . . an' black won't . . ."
>
> "Naw, it won't!"
>
> "It do . . ."
>
> "It do, Lawd . . ."
>
> ". . . an' it don't."
>
> "Halleluiah . . ."
>
> ". . . It'll put you, glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE'S BELLY."
>
> "Preach it, dear brother . . ."
>
> ". . . an' make you tempt . . ."
>
> "Good God a-mighty!"
>
> "Old Aunt Nelly!"
>
> "Black will make you . . ."
>
> "Black . . ."
>
> ". . . or black will un-make you."
>
> "Ain't it the truth, Lawd?" [*IM,* pp. 12–13]

45. Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York, 1952), p. 9; all further references to this work, abbreviated *IM,* will be included parenthetically in the text.

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This sermon signifies on Melville's passage in *Moby-Dick* on "the blackness of darkness" and on the sign of blackness, as represented by the algorithm $\frac{\text{signified}^{46}}{\text{signifier}}$. As Ellison's text states, "black is" and "black ain't," "It do, Lawd," "an' it don't." Ellison parodies here the notion of essence, of the supposedly natural relation between the symbol and the symbolized. The vast and terrible Text of Blackness, we realize, has no essence; rather, it is signified into being by a signifier. The trope of blackness in Western discourse has signified absence at least since Plato. Plato, in the *Phaedrus,* recounts the myth of Theuth (*Mumbo Jumbo*'s "Thoth") and the introduction of writing into Egypt. Along the way, Plato has Socrates draw upon the figure of blackness as a metaphor for one of the three divisions of the soul, that of "badness": "The other is crooked of frame, a massive jumble of a creature, with thick short neck, snub nose, black skin, and gray eyes; hot-blooded, consorting with wantonness and vainglory; shaggy of ear, deaf, and hard to control with whip and goad."[47] Reed's use of the myth of Thoth is, of course, not accidental or arbitrary: he repeats and inverts Plato's dialogue, salient point for salient point, even down to Socrates' discourse on the excesses of the dance, which is a theme of *Mumbo Jumbo.*[48] It is not too much to say that *Mumbo Jumbo* is one grand signifying riff on the *Phaedrus,* parodying it through the hidden polemic.

Both Ellison and Reed, then, critique the received idea of blackness as a negative essence, as a natural, transcendent signified; but implicit in such a critique is an equally thorough critique of blackness as a *presence,* which is merely another transcendent signified. Such a critique, therefore, is a critique of the structure of the sign itself and constitutes a profound critique. The Black Arts Movement's grand gesture was to make of the trope of blackness a trope of presence. That movement willed it to be, however, a transcendent presence. Ellison's "text for today," "the 'Blackness of Blackness' " (*IM,* p. 12), analyzes this gesture, just as surely as does Reed's Text of Blackness, the "sacred Book of Thoth." In literature, blackness is *produced* in the text only through a complex process of signification. There can be no transcendent blackness, for it cannot and does not exist beyond manifestations of it in

46. Melville's passage from *Moby-Dick* reads: "It seemed the great Black Parliament sitting in Tophet. A hundred black faces turned round in their rows to peer; and beyond, a black Angel of Doom was beating a book in a pulpit. It was a negro church; and the preacher's text was about the blackness of darkness, and the weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing there. Ha, Ishmael, muttered I, backing out, Wretched entertainment at the sign of 'The Trap' " (*Moby-Dick* [1851; New York, 1967], p. 18). This curious figure also appears in James Pike's *The Prostrate State: South Carolina under Negro Government* (New York, 1874), p. 62.

47. Plato *Phaedrus* 253d–254a. For the myth of Theuth, see 274c–275b.

48. See ibid., 259b–259e.

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specific figures. Put simply, Jes Grew cannot conjure its texts; "texts," in the broadest sense of this term (Parker's music, Ellison's fictions, Romare Bearden's collages, etc.), conjure Jes Grew.

Reed has, in *Mumbo Jumbo,* signified upon Ellison's critique of the central presupposition of the Afro-American literary tradition, by drawing upon Ellison's trope as a central theme of the plot of *Mumbo Jumbo* and by making explicit Ellison's implicit critique of the nature of the sign itself, of a transcendent signified, an essence, which supposedly exists prior to its figuration. Their formal relationship can only be suggested by the relation of modernism to post-modernism, two overworked terms. Blackness exists, but "only" as a function of its signifiers. Reed's open-ended structure, and his stress on the indeterminacy of the text, demands that we, as critics, in the act of reading, *produce* a text's signifying structure. For Reed, as for his great precursor, Ellison, figuration is indeed the "nigger's occupation."

4. *Coda: The Warp and the Woof*

Reed's signifying relation to Ellison is exemplified in his poem, "Dualism: in ralph ellison's invisible man":

> i am outside of
> history. i wish
> i had some peanuts, it
> looks hungry there in
> its cage.
>
> i am inside of
> history. its
> hungrier than i
> thot.[49]

The figure of history, here, is the Signifying Monkey; the poem signifies upon that repeated trope of dualism figured initially in black discourse in Du Bois' essay "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," which forms the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk.* The dualism parodied by Reed's poem is that represented in the epilogue of *Invisible Man:* "Now I know men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health" (*IM,* p. 499). For Reed, this belief in the "reality" of dualism spells death. Ellison, here, had refigured Du Bois' trope:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a

49. Reed, "Dualism: in ralph ellison's invisible man," *Conjure,* p. 50.

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> world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.
>
> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost.[50]

Reed's poem parodies, profoundly, both the figure of the black as outsider and the figure of the divided self. For, he tells us, even these are only tropes, figures of speech, rhetorical constructs like "double-consciousness," and not some preordained reality or thing. To read these figures literally, Reed tells us, is to be duped by figuration, just like the signified Lion. Reed has secured his place in the canon precisely by his critique of the received, repeated tropes peculiar to that very canon. His works are the grand works of critical signification.

50. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (1903; New York, 1961), pp. 16–17.

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