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The world of academic study and university education privileges a so-called “global” process of thinking as universal, but this process actually relies on practices with a European centrality. This thinking process gets taught to individuals and “programs” the manner of thinking for the majority of the world’s population, serving a neocolonial purpose in global conversations. After first revealing that Western civilization’s institutions of learning propagate a disorienting perspective for other ethno-cultural viewpoints, Ishmael Reed utilizes a discursive process called Jes Grew that parasitically rewrites the institutionalized hegemony of the Western academy and its influence on the arts, thoughts, and actions of other ethno-cultural groups.

In his novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, Ishmael Reed uses Jes Grew, a type of infovirus, to recode both the reader of the text and the academy itself through de-centering and deconstructing academic practices and texts of Western civilization, and then reconstructing and rewriting these into a more fluid, unbound academic system not circumscribed within the confines of Eurocentric hegemony. Reed accomplishes this task with the construction and implementation of Jes Grew that he first seeds in the imaginary and then extends out into physical, lived reality. Through a deconstruction of the physical and fictional text and an analysis of Reed’s structural approach in *Mumbo Jumbo*, it becomes clear that his target hosts for Jes Grew infection are academic readers. Reed begins his process by shifting a European paradigm to an African one, and through this process he de-centers the “universal” centrality of Western culture. Reed’s Jes Grew

rewrites thinking into a system of thought that equally privileges multiple ethno-cultural viewpoints by de-centering and deconstructing the infected reader and re-centering the academic manner of processing information. This process de-privileges a Western manner of thinking and creates, instead, a fluid, unbound method of processing knowledge. Jes Grew reconfigures thinking itself in a manner that decolonizes the global psyche.

INFECTING THE ACADEMY: HOW RECONFIGURED THOUGHT

JES GREW FROM ISHMAEL REED'S *MUMBO JUMBO*

by

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CHAPTER I

EXIGENCE

Also, if globalization means in essence, the “globalizing of modernity” (*Giddens 1990*, 63-65) and, further, if we understand, as Habermas, Giddens, Wallerstein, Charles Taylor, and other do, modernity itself as a “Western Project” (*Giddens 1990*, 174-176), then globalization appears as a form of neocolonialism. It is not only that. But it is certainly that, too.

-- Christian Moraru, “The Global Turn in Critical Theory”

It is that insofar as the academic discourse of history—that is, “history” as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university—is concerned, “Europe” remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian,” “Chinese,” “Kenyan,” and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called “the history of Europe.”

-- Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*

The Eurocentric academy monopolizes global institutional discourse, pushing most other ethnocentric viewpoints right off the campus. Academics view Western civilization’s traditions as the centerpiece for all intelligent developments in human history,¹ and the vernacular of the Eurocentric academe constitutes the language of nearly all institutional fields of study—politics, history, sociology, philosophy, economy, even

¹ Refer to Gregory Jay and Sandra Jones article in *Melus*, “Whiteness Studies and the Multicultural Literature Classroom,” where the association between Eurocentric culture and white privilege is made, saying that “The transnational character of white privilege results from the legacy of European colonial imperialism, so that Whiteness Studies may be usefully articulated with theories of globalization and postcoloniality as well” (100). In Jay and Jones’ attempt to restructure the thinking of the students, they first deconstruct and reveal to the students that in whiteness, “one’s own beliefs or truths are seen as universal” (111).

geography. Thought and the process of *thinking* itself for the general global population proceed from this educational monopoly. Other ethno-cultural perspectives achieve identity in the academy primarily when a Eurocentric lens absorbs them, deconstructs them, and then reflects their “otherness” in a manner circumscribed by Western parameters. These “others” almost never have the chance to “self-program” and must adapt themselves to a type of “globalized” Western “programming” in order to function within an increasingly global social network.

Postcolonial residue marginalizes the manner of thinking of and about “others” due to the monocultural universality assumed in contemporary “globalization.” Christian Moraru describes this hegemonic, homogenizing form as “often the most visible outcome of globalization, rendering it symbolically an expansion of the Western model.” Despite some compatibility between globalization and postmodernism, he suggests that this reproductive function of “sameness” in global thinking “render[s] postmodernism a discourse critical of globalization” (“The Global Turn in Critical Theory” 77).

Postmodernism works against such homogeneity and promotes difference for good reason. Bengali historian Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses this Western programming in the way his own peers have “intellectual traditions once unbroken and alive in Sanskrit or Persian or Arabic” but, that they now “treat these traditions as truly dead, as history.” However, Chakrabarty points out, while South Asian historians treat these traditions as dead, “past European thinkers and their categories are never quite dead for us in the same way” (Chakrabarty 6). The universalizing of thought and culture privileges certain centralities, particularly a European one, above that of other ethnic groups, leaving the

“others” in the margins or left, as in Chakrabarty’s example, lifeless. Though physical subjugation from colonialism has disappeared across the globe, it still dominates *thinking* itself in academic discourse and, from there, incorporates itself into the larger body of population.

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, novelist Ishmael Reed constructs a discursive process – a parasitic rewriting – that works to reshape and effectually attack the “universalizing” strain of Western civilization. Moraru states in a discussion on Reed’s writing that “[i]n its particular form of intertextual performance and ludic rewrite, writing serves as a political weapon” (*Rewriting* 90). Reed’s novel enters the literary canon to galvanize a type of postmodern literary revolution² in the academy, launched from inside his very text. Reed writes and rewrites his way into the channels of Eurocentric *thinking* and engineers Jes Grew, a virus that recodes³ this thinking, to act as his vehicle for reshaping thought and de- and reprogramming the global population. He proceeds from construction (a process performed by the reader reading the novel) to circulate the virus in the university through setting the contagious text loose in the sphere of academic study. First breaking down the academy’s traditional defensive system by de-centering and deconstructing the university’s actual academic practices and texts, Reed then

² This follows John O’Brien’s suggestion that “the revolution seems to be taking place in the imagination, not in a political-social environment” (36). Reed, therefore, situates his Jes Grew reprocessing in the imaginary.

³ I interchangeably use the terms recoding, reprogramming, reconfiguration, and reconstruction with slightly different implications to describe the parts of the process that Jes Grew performs in the text and on the reader. Each term implies three general steps that include a base, a dismantling of the base, and a reformation of the base – construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction.

reconstructs these academic coding devices into a more fluid, unbound academic system without any dominant centrality.

In the course of *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed transfers cultural and historical centrality from Europe to Africa. Joe Weixlmann suggests that “*Mumbo Jumbo* dramatizes the direct confrontation between Euro- and Afro-centric thought and culture” (61). Even so, Weixlmann’s point misses that Reed’s work enforces a multicultural reconfiguration rather than a simple substitution of African for European. From the postmodern analyses of Henry Louis Gates Jr. in 1983 to the cyber-criticism of Michael A. Chaney in 2003, the majority of critics writing about *Mumbo Jumbo* follow this trend. By associating Reed’s discursive process with a strictly African American reconfiguration of thought, they miss one of Jes Grew’s most important components – that of favoring multiculturalism. While he starts the de- and re-centering process with Africa, Reed comes across clearly enough: Jes Grew “knows no class no race no consciousness” (*MJ* 5).

Since Western education institutions propagate a disorienting illusion of a universal Eurocentric worldview, Reed focuses his own re-centering on an African centrality to disrupt European centrality, not replace it with a new Afrocentric hegemony. Instead of creating a so-called universal Afrocentric worldview, Reed’s Jes Grew follows a deconstructionist process of de- and re-centering perspective for all. Transferring centrality from Eurocentric thought to include other human beings shifts global privileging away from Europeans. Reed targets history, religion, psychology, literature, and philosophy as well as other major disciplines in the academy as the breeding ground

for such widespread Eurocentric management of the actual *thinking* process and, therefore, primarily focuses his literary infovirus on these subject areas.

CHAPTER II

JES GREW, THE INFOVIRUS

America, Europe's last hope, the protector of the archives of "mankind's" achievements had come down with a bad case of Jes Grew and Mu'tafikah too.

-- Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*

Jes Grew reconfigures thought throughout the entirety of *Mumbo Jumbo*, so whether on the surface or beneath, it remains an essential, "omnipresent, compelling force" (Gates 705). Michael Chaney's study of Ishmael Reed's technological utilization establishes one of the most applicable interpretations of Jes Grew, suggesting it signifies "African-American culture as a viral form of information that eventually causes an imperialist crisis of communication control (cybernetics)" (262). In Chaney's relating of Reed's technological metaphors to Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard's theories, he proposes that critics like Robert Fox observe "at best, prototypical references to informational viruses" and that this "disregards Reed's subtle interlacing of technologies more contiguous with the 1990s than the 1970s" (262). Jes Grew resembles, as Chaney suggests, a computer infovirus that recodes and reprograms the host. The flaw, however, with Chaney's argument results from his reiteration of Baudrillard's theory on virality, a theory that Reed's rewriting process subverts. Christian Moraru discusses the implications of Baudrillard's theory in his book *Cosmodernism*:

[V]iruses “communicate” themselves, the same information all the time. Vehicles of sameness, they do not carry information proper. They are not reflective of something or somebody else but self-reflective; they are redundant and redundancy at work. (259)

This virality, then, destroys variation rather than produces multiplicity. “In the vortex of metastatic dedifferentiation, cultures bleed to death—death as deculturation and indistinction” (259). This convirality takes away “evolutionary” possibility through eliminating “genetic” variations and cloning sameness.

Viral attack is the pathology of the closed circuit, of the integrated circuit, of promiscuity and of the chain reaction—in a broad and metaphorical sense, a pathology of incest. He who lives by the same shall die by the same. The absence of otherness secretes another, intangible otherness: the absolute other of the virus. (Baudrillard “Prophylaxis and Virulence” 65).

Reed’s virus runs a different course than Chaney’s model of Jes Grew. Chaney depicts the viral reproduction as particularly African and African American. But, if this were the case, then Baudrillard’s dedifferentiation through viral reproduction would be shown in Reed’s viral creation because Jes Grew would only serve to reproduce itself – a limited Afrocentric manner of thinking. Reed’s version, however, deconstructs and then reconstructs a multicultural reality where difference is not only valued, but the primary aim of its production. Jes Grew averts sameness rather than (re)produces it.

Reed’s Jes Grew infovirus models itself after the idea of spontaneous, new creation made out of many elements yet not necessarily having any one element as a direct precursor to it. Reed uses Papa LaBas to show the multicultural “rewrite” that Jes Grew performs, both in the text and effectively on the reader. LaBas is Reed’s central

protagonist and main host for Jes Grew, who “carries Jes Grew in him like most other folk carry genes” (*MJ* 23). During the climactic “reveal” of the book, when Papa LaBas reveals the history and, consequently, “rewrites” Judeo-Christian history, he explains that Osiris is the progenitor of Jes Grew and that he “toured the world with his International Nile Roots Orchestra, dancing agronomy and going from country to country with his band” (165). During this tour where “he taught people to permit nature to speak and dance through them,” the infected (for Osiris gets called the “Human Seed and all, a Germ” and “perform the feat of the Germ”) would “mimic him and add their variations to fit their country and climes” (165). They did this spontaneously, “[j]ust as fast as Osiris would teach these dances” (165). From the start, then, Jes Grew performed a rewriting of culture that spontaneously absorbs, adapts, and creates new, re-centered, and reprogrammed processing. Not only that, but these processes get taught by Osiris since education has a central position in reshaping *thinking*.

Reed pulls his Jes Grew process from a remark made by James Weldon Johnson in *The Book of American Negro Poetry* where Johnson states that “[t]he earliest Ragtime songs, like Topsy, ‘jes’ grew” (xi). In Johnson’s explanation of his own Jes Grewing, a process very similar to that used in Reed’s own novel writing gets revealed.

I remember that we appropriated about the last one of the old ‘jes’ grew’ songs. It was a song which had been sung for years all through the South. The words were unprintable, but the tune was irresistible, and belonged to nobody. We took it, re-wrote the verse, telling an entirely different story from the original. (xii)

Jes Grew works in a fashion like Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s signification; it "is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed, is our trope of chiasmus itself, repeating and simultaneously reversing in one deft, discursive act" (686). Rewriting from multiple sources, combining and hybridizing, creates an original appropriation and composes a central phase in Jes Grew, and Jes Grew epitomizes Reed's HooDoo theory of rewriting. As Moraru contends,

Of course, this does not superannuate the notions of "difference" and "ancestry"; it is through these concepts that Reed's HooDoo (VooDoo) theory of rewriting works. What the author puts forward here is a dialectic conception. A dogmatic understanding of "origins," he implies, would go against the grain of the spirit of spectacular rewriting at play in various cultural lines, which inevitably combines themes, tropes, and styles. Furthermore, neither Western nor African America traditions rest solely in such "pure roots," which allows Reed to rewrite both black and white authors, to play out both the difference and the profound "hybridity" of the performed texts. (Moraru *Rewriting* 98)

In *Mumbo Jumbo* Reed rewrites novelistic form (the detective genre), history (his Harding subplot), myth (the Moses and Jethro story), past and present writers (Gauld's "Harlem Tom Toms" rewriting Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha") and so on and so forth. Reed signifies, just as Gates describes, in his rewriting by parodying and subverting meaning, but he also recodes and reconfigures *thinking* in the process. While the initial scene of the novel has the New Orleans doctors scrambling after they "decoded this coon mumbo jumbo" (Reed *MJ* 4), Reed signifies that Jes Grew has already been seeded in the text and begun a process of recoding and rewriting. Their decoding lends itself to Jes Grew's own recoding, and it is no mistake that Jes Grew enters the story in multicultural New Orleans, "the amalgam of Spanish French and African culture" (6). Reed's project

performs this process continually, jes' growing and recoding in the rewriting. Moraru explains how "rewriting does not dump the initial code—it is a forging recodification that 'outwrites' that code" (*Rewriting* 100). Jes Grew builds and constructs new from the old. Johnson explains that 'jes grew' is "growing all the time" (xiii) and that it "is more than adaptability, it is a transfusive quality" (xix). Reed isolates and places this Jes Grew germ inside the novel, having the text carry it and transmute it – becoming one of Reed's multilayered Jes Grew Carriers (J.G.C.s) – into the reader, who, through performing a reading, is (re)written as a host for the virus as well.

Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* and, through proxy, the "psychic epidemic" Jes Grew begin before the book even starts, the first infections occurring in the Front Matter of the physical book – the thing – itself. Through the Front Matter, Reed already starts "Jes Grewing" inside the host, reprogramming the *thinking* of the reader just as the characters of the novel get recoded in Reed's (re)processing. After subverting novelistic traditions by including this literal pre-text, Reed's storytelling introduces the Mayor of New Orleans who receives the call that "a creeping Thing" has entered into his American city and that the "Thing has stirred in its moorings" (4). Entering the initial spot of infection, the Mayor discovers that the doctors knew "that something was Jes Grewing" (5). The infirmary continues to fill with patients and interrogation of one of the infected provides an insight into how Jes Grew (re)processes its hosts. At first the patient sees "Nkulu Kulu or the Zulu" and feels "the heart and lungs of Africa's interior" (5). First Jes Grew de-centers the patient's Western senses and recodes him to see and feel things African. Though, from there, its symptoms spread beyond an African re-centering as he hears

“shank bones, jew’s harps, bagpipes, flutes, conch horns, drums, banjos, kazoos” and starts “to speak in tongues” (5). Jes Grew’s de-centering and re-centering allow for a deprivileging of any single, supposed universal monoculture. Not even academic training in the Western academy provides protection as, among the infected, “6 of them are some of the most distinguished bacteriologists epidemiologists and chemists from the University” (5). The doctors and Mayor, acting as guards of Western tradition, fear that “[i]f this Jes Grew becomes pandemic it will mean the end of Civilization As We Know It” (4). However, Reed implies that the end of Western civilization’s centrality and reproduction of sameness would enliven culture as opposed to engendering death. Created to “defend the cherished traditions of the West against Jes Grew” (15), Reed shows the Wallflower Order as “[v]arious wooden, metallic and plastic figures shaped like human beings, pet zombies and creatures whose mothers were scared by computers to speak to 1 another in code” (64). In their headquarters extinction gets celebrated, evidenced by the species counter where “[d]ots of a dead white color are placed in Birds Reptiles Amphibians and Fish” and, when an entire species dies off, the man working the counter “grins, resumes his position, then places a dot in the watercress darter” (65). Western civilization reproduces sameness and homogeneity, celebrating death rather than life since difference and variation are genetically essential for survival. Before the pre-text concludes, “[t]he Mayor feels that uncomfortable sensation at the nape and he is doing something resembling the symptoms of Jes Grew, and the Doctor who rushes to his aid starts slipping dipping gliding on out of doors and into the streets” (6). Jes Grew symptoms include dancing and movement – celebrations of life, not death, as the Osiris

myth explains later in the novel when dancing gets linked to agriculture, fertility, and growth.

Rewriting difference and variation into the text and the reader promotes development, making Jes Grew “unlike physical plagues... Jes Grew was an anti-plague. Some plagues caused the body to waste away; Jes Grew enlivened the host” (6). Spontaneously creating, de- and re-centering, and retooling in a sporadic rhythm that disrupts the ordered structure of Eurocentric understanding, Jes Grew finds power through its morphing and mutating ability. Improvisational like jazz, the anti-plague has the ability to “play hide and seek with us, a case occurring in 1 neighborhood and picking up in another. [Jes Grew] began to leapfrog all about us” (4). The fluidity in its movement and mutations allow Jes Grew to not only cross over the fictional temporal and physical space in the novel, but also the space between fictional world and lived space of the reader. Weixlmann correlates this fluidity of the virus with the Book of Thoth’s destruction inside the fictional plot of *Mumbo Jumbo*. He states that, “[w]ith the written text(s) of Jes Grew gone, its manifestations once more recede. But as LaBas explains to his assistant, there is no need for alarm, since Jew Grew’s true Text is not a book but a feeling—or, perhaps more precisely, a state of mind and being” (62). Jes Grew may find its shape and structure within the Text, but its energy and life are not fixed to any vehicle, and this mobility of Jes Grew, hopping from imaginary space to lived space and from fictional character to living identity, encodes adaptability and improvisation into its hosts:

The novel has the improvisational feel of the best jazz, which remains permeable and elastic as it borrows, shifts, and changes, sounding slightly different with each

performance. However, Reed's interweaving of facts, fictions, songs, poems, pictures, news clippings, footnotes, and narrative leads to a movement in voice and tone from one paragraph to the next. The end result feels shifting and permeable; never does the text feel like Text because the reader suspects slippage at any moment. (Harde 362)

Implanted within the characters, the plot, the text, and the readers, Jes Grew is more than pandemic, traversing from imaginary to lived worlds. The "slippage" Harde mentions implies continual transformation and reshaping, and this reformation in flux is something that people have a difficult time observing. Reed states, "I think the ultimate purpose of Jes-Grew is to manifest processes that we as mortals cannot perceive" (Gaga 55). Reed, then, engineers Jes Grew to mutate, adapt, and transform itself to have both a physical and metaphysical substance because, "[w]ithout substance it never fully catches on" (Reed *MJ* 213). Metafictional devices gets used to make the reader cognizant of this hidden (re)processing. Spreading from host to host, fictional character to living person, Jes Grew eventually gets housed in an invisible process of thought reconfiguration that manifests in physical actions and processes.

The main symptoms, however, remain rooted as informational, de- and reconstructing a worldview where Western historical, cultural and methodological tradition no longer holds privilege. Michael A. Chaney discusses the make-up of Jes Grew, proposing that "[f]rom the outset Jes Grew conflates virological associations with information, transmissions of black culture, blackness itself, and HooDoo possession" (273). While Chaney's insight of Jes Grew's informational virology is significant, the information embedded in the Jes Grew virus ruptures the imposed coding of Eurocentric

thought rather than just recoding thought towards a new centrality that (re)produces a different form of sameness. Once again, such substitution would only (re)produce dedifferentiation which Reed wants to avoid; Reed breaks these barriers between ethno-cultural paradigms to liberate the reader from boundaries rather than create new ones.

Inside the plot, Abdul Hamid⁴ suggests that all people subjected to Eurocentric academic training have been held captive by the illusion of its necessity and universal truth. He explains this epiphany of his, saying,

I always wondered why the teachers just threw knowledge at us when we were in school, why they didn't care whether we learned or not. I found that the knowledge which they had made into a cabala, stripped of its terms and the private codes, its slang, you could learn in a few weeks. It didn't take 4 years, and the 4 years of university were set up so that they could have a process by which they would remove the rebels and the dissidents. By their studies and rituals of academics the Man has made sure that they are people who will serve him. (Reed *MJ* 37)

Hamid's tirade against education presents the idea that Western educational practices encode the student with the methodologies of academic thought – the terms, private codes, and slang he references – through the rituals and practices of academic training, and this suggests too that academics are processed and programmed by education. Reed creates reflexivity here for the reader and as Jes Grew liberates the host from limitations imposed through this Western “programming,” its process of recoding begins to work in the reader. Abdul Hamid, whose ability to translate the Book of Thoth reveals his own

⁴ Hamid, whose minor role has major effects on the plot, finds academic liberation from being physically imprisoned, perhaps because he recognizes that freedom under Eurocentric hegemony is an illusion.

independence from Western academic *thinking* (though he imposes his own limits on cultural experience), explains the thought process that went into his own liberation: “It occurred to me that I was borrowing from all of these systems: Religion, Philosophy, Music, Science and Painting, and building 1 of my own composed of their elements” (38). Hamid’s deconstruction of boundaries and synthesizing from multiple sources that turns traditions and preconceptions upside down follows the same discursive process as Jes Grew. When he calls the foundation of this educational system “a cabala” full of “terms and private codes, its slang,” Reed signifies on the traditional practices in Western academia. In its process, Reed’s Jes Grew applies a number of elements listed in Moraru’s definition of postmodernism:

a theory and practice of cultural networks, intertextuality, heterogeneity, dialogics, dissemination, displacement, deterritorialization, etc. *but also* cultural difference, dissidence, ‘rhizomic’ forces, locally ‘constructed’ subjectivities, idiomatic formations, and resistance. (“The Global Turn in Critical Theory” 77),

Reed’s Jes Grew applies a discursive process in the vein of postmodernism to turn Eurocentric universality on its head and allow the majority of the human species to become subject rather than object. This new perspective strips privilege away from the Western academy and improvises a fluid, unbound paradigm of *thinking* that embraces difference.

While virological infections form from destructive parasites, Jes Grew is more like a counter-parasite, giving life rather than feeding off of it. The virus makes “the air ‘as clear as they had ever seen it,’” and is “electric as life and characterized by ebullience

and ecstasy” (Reed *MJ* 6). Jes Grew possesses its host with joy, setting itself and its host free from the restrictions of an imposed universalism. Through his rewriting, Reed (re)processes the reader into also being infected with Jes Grew and excitement in its liberating possibilities follow rather than a malaise that would be typical in most infections. The antiplague makes the infected want and desire more, to feel alive as one of Reed’s mock headlines evidences: “POTENTIAL VICTIMS GATHER ABOUT THE ALREADY INFECTED REJOICING CHANTING GIVE ME FEVER GIVE ME FEVER” (*MJ* 32). The restrictions of Western civilization stifle the psyche of other ethno-cultural groups and, through Jes Grew’s reprogramming of its host, the academy can be freed from its self-imposed boundaries. Reed initializes this rewriting infection because, as Moraru suggests, “he also participates in the repetition-as-progress cultural scenario because this enables him to imagine change” (*Rewriting* 84). This change is toward a multicultural manner of *thinking* itself, where there is no single identity privileged over others. Reed explains in an interview with Peter Nazareth that he uses his aesthetic and creates Jes Grew to reverse the oppressiveness that Eurocentricity’s supposed universality has on other ethno-cultural perspectives: “So what I’m dealing with is a multi-cultural aesthetic of which the Afro-American part may be the strongest part because that is my strongest heritage, which is Native American and Irish-American as well” (Nazareth 123). *Mumbo Jumbo* composes itself as it does, and must be composed like this, through Reed’s own reflexivity, but the process of Jes Grew itself separated from Reed privileges no single culture in its newly created model of thinking. Jes Grew gives rather than takes from the infected, making the characters in and the

readers of the novel search out, absorb, and disseminate the virus across other academic fields.⁵ *Catching Jes Grew* liberates the infected from rigid restriction in the Western educational institutions. It refuses relegation to a single ethno-cultural paradigm, synthesizing elements from African, European, Asian, South American and other origins to (re)format, liberate and vary the manner in which people *think*.

⁵ Once “infected,” this would suggest that the reader’s reconfigured fields of study will metastasize into the greater body of the academy.

CHAPTER III
AFROCENTRICITY NOT OVER EUROCENTRICITY

Despite Reed's emphasis to the contrary, most critics approach *Mumbo Jumbo* as an Afrocentric text. Ishmael Reed often gets categorized as a postmodern writer or as a writer in the African American literary tradition, and sometimes as both. His first novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* appeared in 1967, followed in 1968 by *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*, and then *Mumbo Jumbo* in 1972. More fiction as well as nonfiction and poetry appeared throughout the later 70s, including perhaps his most critically appraised work along with *Mumbo Jumbo*, his 1976 (re)writing of the slave narrative *Flight to Canada*. He followed these works with a series of fiction novels and nonfiction writings in the 80s and 90s (Dick *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed* xv-xviii). He continues to write mostly nonfiction into the new millennium.

Critics of Reed range from those in a postmodern/poststructuralist school to critics more in the vein of African American literary tradition. Michel Fabre, for example, falls into the postmodern school with his analysis focusing on Reed's language and avant-garde techniques, his "verbal inventions and linguistic achievements" (xxiii). Lorenzo Thomas, on the other hand, focuses primarily on Reed's African American social connections and his place in that tradition. Then there are critics who combine Reed's African American and postmodern influences, like Henry Louis Gates Jr. whose

"The 'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey" later gets anthologized in his book *The Signifying Monkey* as well as Christian Moraru, who devotes a chapter of his book *Rewriting* to suggest Reed draws "upon traditionally African American strategies of appropriation and (re)circulation, their works reconstruct particular texts in both black and white traditions to ferret out narrative possibilities of configuring a new, 'postmodern,' African American identity" (84). Reginald Martin's *Ishmael Reed & the New Black Aesthetics* examines Reed and contextualizes him with a range of writers from Thomas Pynchon to Imamu Amiri Baraka (2). Martin's work also presents Reed as deeply embedded into the African American literary tradition, linking his work to slave narratives like that of Frederick Douglass, more socially active writers and thinkers such as Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois and, finally, with those whom Martin places in the Black Aesthetic: Clarence Major, Addison Gayle, Houston Baker, and Amiri Baraka (7-21). Martin describes Reed's presentation of "Western tradition and the oppressive and stress-filled Western/European/Christian way of doing things" in a "way joined in the chorus of Clarence Major, Addison Gayle, and so many other black writers of the 1960s, whose response to past and present exploitation and alienation of blacks was to condense all evil under one rubric" (63). Martin's discussion places Reed appropriately into the African American literary tradition, a place Reed references often and uses as a central position in his writing.

However, critics who focus on this African American element miss a key aspect to Reed's true aesthetic. Lorenzo Thomas, for example, states that "Reed deals on the level of Mythology, our ancient and futuristic Black Science. Sound Science. Bebop.

Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* is in the African and Afro-American tradition without compromise to Europeanism. He practices sound science" (40). While Reed negates Europeanism and a Eurocentric history and mythology as the sole source of cultural tradition through his deconstructions, he does not completely reject all European influence. His purpose differs significantly from the eradication of an entire cultural presence. It is true that Reed centers his revision of history and culture on Africa through his use of Egyptology and Hoodoo, but he affirms that his purpose is just "to tap or use the energy of an alternative cultural or art system" (Gaga 55). His deconstruction of Western culture reconstructs an open, fluid system that does not claim privilege for any ethno-cultural paradigm. "Reed's code switching humor, then, problematizes both the notion of ethnocentric boundaries and the conventional western concept of a unified self" (Jessee 137). Reed breaks down walls and barriers that privilege specific groups and those groups' traditions over "others" so that none of these groups or traditions gets marginalized by the recoded academe. The multicultural art (re)possessing Mu'tafikah who get associated with the Jes Grew "epidemic" from the start of the novel exemplify the permeable boundaries Reed delineates among cultures as the ring of Mu'tafikah consist of Asian, African, South American, and European members, embodying the notion that the new living Text requires liberation and free *thinking* from *all* cultural hegemonies.

Reed's effort to deconstruct the cultural totalitarianism of Western civilization, which has not only equated itself with 'universality,' but has also within its own context, drastically defined the parameters of what it takes to be its authentic tradition by structures of exclusion that have historically kept out much that is valuable, the very 'despised' elements Reed wishes to reinstate. (Fox 48)

The walls of history must also become permeable just like the other walls protecting a Eurocentric cultural hegemony, which is why, in Jes Grew's rewriting of history, La Bas connects the Osiris story to "the Navaho Indians in North America, at Aztec festivals, around West African people" (Reed *MJ* 167). Sharon Jessee states that "Reed signifies on the ethnocentric tendencies of any group, because ethnocentricity is another rigid form: an identity formulation which limits rather than liberates and which reduces rather than enriches" (129). Jes Grew transcends socially or naturally constructed boundaries and "knows no class no race no consciousness" (Reed *MJ* 5). The antiplague refuses to recognize the boundaries Western universality assumes, making it even more dangerous to the preservationists⁶ of Western civilization as seen in the plot of *Mumbo Jumbo* since, if they allow the virus to spread, the illusion of a universal worldview gets revealed as façade. Western civilization cannot let it spread because "Jes Grew recodes people of all races to behave according to a mysterious programming associated with ancient primitivism, Africanicity, jazz music, bacchanalia, and voodoo possession" (Chaney 273). More than that, Jes Grew recodes for multiculturalism. Reed depicts the threat Jes Grew suggests for Western civilization through his use of allegory and satire which the infected academic now translates with a recoded methodology. The reader's reconfigured perspective helps him or her discern the seriousness of Reed's argument from the humor of the text.

⁶ While I use the term preservationist here, the identifiers of militant historians, Crusaders, or conservatives would equally work in context with Reed's novel.

The same Jes Grew now detected in the infected reader gets explained through the meta-allegorical satire of *Mumbo Jumbo*'s plot. As the allegory unravels with the "mystery"⁷ of the novel and the reader detects the germ of Jes Grew in his or her thought process, it reveals a new layer to Jes Grew, which explains the nature of his or her new recoded methodology. Reed creates "a physical manifestation, *a manual of codification*,"⁸ in *Mumbo Jumbo*" (Martin 93). Deconstructions of history, culture, and religion follow LaBas' revealing in the plot as he solves the mystery of the Text, really exposing Jes Grew's function and process working inside the reader. The allegorical transformation of these institutions is too satirical to be a superficial instructional manual, but through the process deciphered from Jes Grew's recoding, it depicts a revised history of civilization from which a reconfiguration of Eurocentric academic training is made possible; this revision – the discursive rewriting that Jes Grew performs on the reader – *becomes* the instructional manual for reprogramming thought.

Reed's allegory pits Jes Grew's liberating infection against Western civilization. Symptoms of Jes Grew include dances of the roaring twenties, like "[p]erforming the Turkey Trot," wanting to "dance belly to belly and cheek to cheek," as well as to "Funky Butt and Black Bottom" (21-22). Unrestrained celebration, dance, and music are central to a reconfigured methodology of thought. Reed objectifies and dehumanizes the Wallflower Order, making them plastic androids who want to reproduce sameness – to

⁷ There are three central mysteries in the book apropos the detective genre the text is modeled after: where is Jes Grew's Text, who killed Abdul Hamid, and what is Jes Grew.

⁸ Italics here are my emphasis.

clone “miniscule replicas of yourself” (64) and avoid the possibility of genetic variation. Sameness takes away from humanity, adding nothing in imposing a stifling order and reduction on existence, leading to eventual extinction like the various species the Order “wanted to rub out” – “to become a job order for the taxidermist” (153). Western authority desires a “mind which sought to interpret the world by using a single loa” (24). Depicted as robotic or zombie-like,⁹ Western civilization’s institutionalized training drains life and diminishes the choice to assume multiple perspectives. Jes Grew communicates this possible threat, envisioned through Reed’s signifying, as part of the reprogramming process for the reader. All other worldviews get labeled by the Wallflower Order – Western tradition – as inferior and are made into “aesthetically victimized civilizations” (15). Reed engineers Jes Grew to infect the academic reader as the monocultural worldview – the single loa – first gets integrated into the *thinking* process so that Jes Grew can transform these Eurocentric-bound individuals. The Haitian ambassador Battraville reveals that there is a method for this reconfiguration when he tells LaBas and Black Herman “[w]e have a new loa with very special appetites. This 1 possesses a technological bent” (137). The loa – spirits that can “ride” an individual and possess him or her – can also help the reader repossess him or herself when, effectively, *Mumbo Jumbo* itself becomes a loa. LaBas “hadn’t required that the technicians learn the Work,” but the manual of the book teaches “his version of the Work” (28). The reader at

⁹ Robots and zombies here are not being used towards a posthuman argument; rather, they are part of Reed’s allegorical context and are used to contribute to Reed’s application of cinematic devices and stock characters.

least understands, by the end of the novel and its reprogramming, what the loa are capable of and, while they may not conduct “his work,” the reader (re)constructs his or her own version of “the Work.” Reed recognizes that deconstructing these limitations within Western civilization’s academic training and reconstructing a more diverse worldview allows agency to new processes of “Jes Grew,” which in itself works like the loa, inspiring new and innovative creations that are fluid and varied in origin. The parasitic (re)writing expands and empowers *thinking*, opening rather than closing the mind of the (re)programmed.

In *Mumbo Jumbo* the secret society, the Wallflower Order, preserves Western civilization by protecting “the Atonist Path”.¹⁰ This Order’s duties include maintaining European tradition by stifling all other ethno-cultural perspectives. Sharon Jessee links the Order to Reed’s infiltration of the academy when she points out that “[a]nother way Reed makes fun of Atonists is his creation of the term ‘Wallflower Order’ (the name itself a parody of the ‘Ivy League’), which is the infamous center of Atonist activity, the ‘administrative backbone’ of the ‘Atonist Path’” (132). The Wallflower Order links to American universities that work within the Western academic traditions—as Reed says, “America, Europe’s last hope” (*MJ* 15). Reed traces the Wallflower Order and the domineering approach they bring to the globe back to his Egyptological revision of the Osiris and Set myth. In Reed’s carefully crafted allegory, Osiris represents multicultural thought with his diverse “band” and Set represents monocultural thought – sameness. Jes

¹⁰ The Atonists not only represent Western civilization, but trace back to all Judeo-Christian based civilization.

Grew's primary purpose is to spread dancing, art, and music around the world because these practices differentiate and share across cultural boundaries. It becomes clear in LasBas' exposition that the Wallflower Order follows the footsteps of Set, "the man who can't shake it 'til he breaks it" (163). The Eurocentric academy's allegorical origin in Set means that Jes Grew and Jes Grew Carrier Papa LaBas follow the oppositional and multi-ethnocentric force traced back to Set's brother, Osiris. However, since the two are brothers, it suggests that, despite differences in methodology and even in light of Reed's constant parodies, he does not completely want to eliminate Western society's place in a global culture — he just subverts the imperialistic mentality he finds in historical Western thinking.

Reed signifies on Eurocentricism's reliance on ancient tradition and myth by constructing an even more ancient tradition for his multi-ethnic paradigm. LaBas, a play on the Hoodoo loa Legbas,¹¹ carries "Jes Grew in him like most other folks carry genes" (23). Written into him genetically, then, LaBas carries difference inside him and spreads that variation to others as he teaches the reader in his revised history seminar on Egyptology and Jes Grew—the one that the reader discovers has made up the entirety of *Mumbo Jumbo*. Throughout the allegory, then, Papa LaBas remains the protagonist and embodies the voice of Jes Grew. This makes sense since Legbas is the guardian of the crossroads, leading the reader along the path from European ratiocination (his detective Work) and deeper into the recesses of Jes Grew's (re)processed rewriting.

¹¹ Legbas guards the crossroads.

LaBas explains in his climactic disclosure at the Cotton Club that Jes Grew comes from the free-spirited agricultural and celebratory education that Osiris “learned from the long-bearded Black men in the university at Nysa” (162). Using a diverse education that is not limited in the way of Eurocentricism, an education where addition and growth are integral, “People were eating good, the crops were abundant, things were going smoothly, and Osiris and Isis were happily married” (163). The reprogramming directly correlates to life and varied reproduction. Peace and harmony follow in a fairly laid back place where privileging does not occur and there are no longer “men eating men” (162). Jes Grew remains fluid and adaptable, creating new life rather than feeding on itself until annihilation. Jes Grew, after all, is variation and variation in genetic coding – differentiation over dedifferentiation – which is integral to actual survival.

This mutability in Jes Grew conflicts with Set’s rigid monocultural traditions; Osiris’ version of society dissolves boundaries while Set’s creates them. The recoded academic now decodes in the allegory the contrast between the Eurocentric worldview and that of Jes Grew’s multi-ethnic perspectives. “Osiris, who represents an unrestrained and uninhibited energy and movement, has as his nemesis his brother Set. Set, the polar opposite of Osiris’ education (black professors at a North African University) and world view, dismiss[es] his brother’s free expression as trivial” (Hawkins 100). This haughty expression of superiority—the same that Reed connects to traditional practices in Western civilization—typifies the limitations of following Set’s perspective to the reader. Papa LaBas unveils the origin of the viral Jes Grew while Set’s murder of Osiris is explained. Set asks that if Osiris is “Human Seed and all, a Germ, would he perform the

feat of the Germ... Surely if he had learned the arts of the sagacious bearded Black men in Arabia Felix at the University of Nysa he could perform this act” (Reed *MJ* 165). Though he is murdered by Set and the Book of Thoth (Jes Grew’s temporary Text) disappears with Isis, Osiris spreads more fluidly than ever through the germ of Jes Grew, cyclically reappearing and infecting the population with alternative worldviews and, really, allowing the infected to “self program.” The newly recoded reader takes this deconstructed myth and reconstructs history and culture in his or her own format. “Still, *Mumbo Jumbo*’s impulse is not that of the fascist, to do away with history in the name of history, but rather to revise, to breathe new life into language” (Harde 361). Jes Grew progresses through the recoded academic to revitalize the host’s understanding of history and, while disillusioning a Western universality, permeates an unrestrained humor and fulfillment of life that is absent while coded by Western tradition.

Papa Labas’ elucidation of Jes Grew’s origin conflates past and present—as does the presence of Knight Templars of the Crusades,¹² Hinkle Van Vompton and Hubert Safecracker Gould, when they appear in the twenties to become the villains of the novel. Reed reprocesses even the Western conception of time, invoking an African sense of permeability in temporal space.

The historical sense of time in Reed’s discourse, based on the African concept of time, is not linear, or diachronic, as diachronicity is commonly discussed in Western times. Obviously, this is not to say that Africans do not acknowledge the passage of time; but along with this acknowledgment goes a most pointed emphasis on the present, the here-and-now. (Martin 74)

¹² Reed offers an entirely alternate history of the Middle Ages.

Reed capitalizes on the satire drawn from combining past and present, applying Jes Grew's signifying to subvert authority in Western figures. Perfect examples of Reed's use of satire by playing with temporalities are found in the medieval leftovers, Hinkle Von Vampton and "his old comrade-in-arms Hubert 'Safecracker' Gould, 1-time carpetbagger, now 'radical education expert'" (72). Reed makes the Knight Templar rituals, down to Hinkle Von Vampton's peculiar diet¹³ and the Templar chant, into slapstick to signify on the ridiculousness of many Western traditions and superstitions. Gould, depicted as a medieval thug who eavesdrops on conversations at speakeasies to research African American vernacular, gets called a "radical education expert" to undermine the traditional process of even "radical" education in the Western educational model. This designation shows the reader how, since Western traditions are antiquated and stagnant, it imitates popular lived culture and indoctrinates the citizens using such appropriations under its "universal" umbrella. This is the view that Biff Musclewhite later enforces as he explains to Thor Wintergreen the danger in the Mu'tafikah and their mission. Reed similarly signifies on Hinkle Von Vampton in the role of editor and on the way that literary and arts journals infect¹⁴ the academic world. To these voices of Western culture, "other" cultures need to be contained and held in check by letting their art and cultural expressions get displayed in designated venues.

¹³ He eats creatures and other things that breed around the graveside—connecting his long life to feeding on death.

¹⁴ Infect here in reference to the traditional academic coding devices falls in line with Baudrillard's viral theory – a reproduction of sameness rather than differentiation in Western civilization.

CHAPTER IV
WESTERN COUNTERATTACK

The 2nd stage of the plan is to groom a Talking Android who will work within the Negro, who seems to be its classical host; to drive it out, categorize it analyze it expel it slay it, blot Jes Grew. A speaking scull they can use any way they want, a rapping anti-biotic who will abort it from the American womb to which it clings like a stubborn fetus.

-- Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*

The spectre of the Same had struck again.

-- Jean Baudrillard, "Prophylaxis and Virulence"

Western civilization's response to the de-centering (and re-centering) effects of the Jes Grew anti-plague virus comes from a "Talking Android" vaccine that acts much more like Baudrillard's virus than Jes Grew. The vaccine reproduces Western sameness and closes off variety and differentiation "within the Negro" (*MJ* 17). Unlike Jes Grew, the Talking Android works in a closed circuit, transforming the living into, as its name suggests, robotic dedifferentiated machines. Without differentiation, bodies are made more susceptible to infection:

It is because our human bodies—neuronal, operational machines—that they have lost their immunity and the viruses are laying hold of them. And it is also because computing has become purely a matter of media technology that it has become vulnerable to all the viruses of information. (Baudrillard *Screened Out* 172)

In *Mumbo Jumbo* the Wallflower Order and the Knights Templar create such a vaccine though it fails to take in its implementation. Reed constructs the vaccine in the text to serve as part of his own discursive process of Jes Grew, since the Talking Android is in binary opposition to Jes Grew, embodying the life and death element of differentiation and dedifferentiation. As he talks to Papa Labas and Black Herman, Bennoit Battraville explains how the defensive (immune) system for Western civilization “needs a Talking Android; a Human Vaccine who will make Jes Grew seem harmful to the J.G.C.s; make certain that they don’t pick up on it” (Reed *MJ* 137). As Jes Grew closes in on its Text, the Wallflower Order headquarters bustles with activity. Video screens are littered about showing the progress of the virus and aides run around hectically. Hierophant 1, who leads the Wallflower Order, gives the job to the once disgraced Knights Templar even though, as he states, “[w]e are not in a position to share power” (67). The statement goes to the heart of the inability of Western civilization to share centrality even with its allies. Grudgingly, Hierophant agrees to reinstate the Order and burn the trial records at the Vatican that resulted in the Order’s defamation. He says, “The Knights Templar will be in charge of the anti-Jes Grew serum. I have no choice. The Black Tide of Mud will engulf us all” (69). That Hierophant refers to it as a fear of mud – of dirt, which also implies fertility and life – fits perfectly in considering that the Wallflower Order has already been associated with desiring death for species and variety in the world. Reed focuses the Talking Android response then – this desire for sameness – on the fear and impotence Western civilization has if the de-centering effects of Jes Grew are allowed to

thrive and the “universal” center fostered over “2,000 years of probing classifying attempting to make an ‘orderly’ world” (153) dissolves.

Hinkle Von Vampton engineers the response to Jes Grew with his design for the Talking Android, mirroring Jes Grew’s own system of infiltration, even though it subverts the intention. Working from deep inside the African American community and, through infecting African American art and culture, the Talking Android configures a Western centered model to infiltrate into the heart of the African American population.

Von Vampton explains to Hierophant 1 how the “vaccine” would work:

You see, the J.G.C.s that Jes Grew have no control over who speaks for them. It’s in the hands of the press and radio. What we will do is begin a magazine that will attract its followers, featuring the kind of milieu it surrounds itself with. Jazz reviewers, cabarets, pornography, social issues, anti-Prohibition, placed between acres of flappers’ tits. Here we will feature the Talking Android who will tell the J.G.C.s that Jes Grew is not ready and owes a large debt to Irish Theatre. The Talking Android will Wipe That Grin Off Its Face. He will tell it that is it derivative. He will accuse it of verbal gymnastics, of pandering to White readers. He will even suggest it abandon the typewriter completely and create a Black Tammany Hall. He will describe it as a massive hemorrhage of malapropos; illiterate and given to rhetoric. (69-70)

Von Vampton, posing as an arts patron, successfully creates his *Benign Monster* as the vehicle from which he can implement the Talking Android.

The Talking Android works from the inside of the African American community and undermines any Afrocentric tendencies before they have a chance to develop. Through a carefully crafted blend of Eurocentric ideas masked beneath so-called “jive” and “slang,” the Talking Android dismantles the growth of Jes Grew and breaks down confidence in any “self-programming” that “others” have developed. Seeking acceptance in popular

culture, “others” must sacrifice their own traditions in order to be accepted within the mainstream. The Human Vaccine begins its work within the “brain” of the African American culture – the primary circle of black intellectuals, artists, and leaders, and, from there, it trickles into the rest of the culture. When Von Vampton says that the Talking Android will suggest that African Americans “create a Black Tammany Hall,” it plays as a “political machine” that will direct culture towards a “universalizing” and sterilizing Western monoculture. The Android is objectified, dehumanized much like Reed has shown Western civilization’s general trend to be, and as Von Vampton enters the “gathering” this is shown when the Android gets called his “Find” (Reed *MJ* 157). This language turns the Android into property, an object, substituting its own center for that of its owner. The Talking Android also provides an intended Western model for all African American artists, and Reed signifies on the falsehood of such an infiltrator when Papa LaBas reveals with a swipe of his finger that the Talking Android is actually “Safecracker” Gould in black face with a European and “jive” mixture of poetry being given to black cultural elite – an artificial rewriting of traditional Romantic poetry laced with “black” catch phrases. “Harlem Tom Toms,” the poem Gould recites, is only imitation with nothing original about it.

Reed, however, embeds the Talking Android vaccine into the story to actually vaccinate the reader from any kind of real Talking Android that he or she may come across. In a way, the Talking Android vaccine is still part of the Jes Grew process, whose discursive method involves this rhetorical element to prepare the reader for an authority that asks for “sameness,” especially since this is shown as an element intrinsically built

into literary and scholastic journals. Skepticism becomes a part of Jes Grew's reprogramming of the reader.

CHAPTER V

ON CAMPUS

There are multiple instances in the novel when the reader is reminded that *Mumbo Jumbo* is educational – a process of recoding being taught to the reader. Jes Grew relies on a Text, “seeking its words. Its text. For what good is a liturgy without a text?” (Reed *MJ* 6). It spreads through reading and processing like an academic textbook. Because of that, placing the reader into an educational position of understanding thought and thinking is an actual part of the Jes Grew process. The form of *Mumbo Jumbo* itself mimics textbook designs and, beyond the object-textual form of the novel too, there are moments in the fictional story that situate the reader into the book in a way where the university and world of academic practices gets highlighted.

One such occasion occurs when Abdul Hamid addresses his education to LaBas and Black Herman. Another important academic moment embedded within the plot is when Berbelang aligns the Mu’tafikah’s purpose with his City College academic experience. The Mu’tafikah from the start of the book gets associated and conflated with Jes Grew. On another occasion, during one of the more illuminating revelations in the book, metaphysical detectives Papa LaBas and Black Herman realize they have not been talking to Bennoit Battraville all night, but, rather “have been talking to a seminar all night. Agwe, God of the Sea in his many manifestations, took over when [Battraville]

found it difficult to explain things” (138). These moments center internal elements of the novel into the academy and, by the end of the novel, the reader feels akin to Papa LaBas’ helper T Malice whose last line in the book is to ask Papa LaBas, “Pop, can I have the car tonight, you know I’m returning to Lincoln University Monday for the fall semester” (205). Each reader of *Mumbo Jumbo* acts as a student receiving a lesson – the one that Reed is giving as well as LaBas – with Jes Grew at the lesson’s center. Like T Malice, during most of the novel the reader picks up on an adjusted understanding of the academy and reconfigures his or her academic processing abilities to align with the instruction of the book. This includes a more disciplined skepticism in looking at the very academic tools on which the student gets taught to rely.

Reed mentions literary journals multiple times in the novel and uses Hinkle’s *Benign Monster* to epitomize how academic journals, even these supposedly designed for non-European ethnic groups, influence academic thought to promote Western traditions. On the fictional level of the book, Papa LaBas sees that Black Herman has “folded to the society page and [with] a red pencil had circled the picture of a distinguished looking grey-haired man above the caption ‘Patron-of-the-Arts.’ It was Hinkle Von Vampton, publisher of the *Benign Monster*” (Reed 131). The two metaphysical detectives have their eyes less on expected sources of oppression, such as the military or police, or even the government, and more on Von Vampton who represents the media and literary field from the start of the story when he works at the newspaper, the *New York Sun*. They recognize that internal subterfuge can be much more dangerous than an exterior attack. Jes Grew remains an “omnipresent” force according to Gates, so every item in the book that

enforces a reconfiguration of thinking is part of the discursive process and reflexivity incurred by reading *Mumbo Jumbo*. Von Vampton with his black culture magazine promoting “culture” and the “arts” represents a much more dangerous faction of Western civilization because Von Vampton can tap into the thinking processes of his readership.

Von Vampton’s manipulation of the literary journal constitutes a formidable weapon against non-Europeans. Harde suggests that “[i]n several places, the novel takes aim at literature and the literary journal as generators of culture” (366). Hinkle Von Vampton creates the *Benign Monster* to showcase the Talking Android vaccine and stop the arts from jes growing. He explains to Hierophant 1, “I will create the Talking Android so that New York resistance will be firm if J.G. decides to make a foray into the city” (Reed MJ 69). Recoded readers can now, having been infected with Jes Grew, decipher from Reed’s satire that academic journals so highly used in university research and work must be observed skeptically. Eurocentric vision consistently takes a center stage in editorial decisions for these academic journals according to Reed’s (re)processing, meaning the self-interests of men like Hinkle Von Vampton continually prevail in all types of media, and oftentimes through subterfuge. Hawkins states that “Hinkle Von Vampton endorses every black or African influenced American cultural effort through European criteria” (99). Hinkle Von Vampton undermines other ethno-cultures by launching his magazine with a “disinformation campaign intended to dissipate the power of Jes Grew” and “lur[ing] a black person who will be transformed into the talking android needed to stop Jes Grew in its tracks and destroy its text” (Harde 366). Woodrow Wilson Jefferson, the first intended construction of the Talking Android, exemplifies the

kind of identity of which academic journals approve. He qualifies for Von Vampton when he tells him, “I have read all the 487 articles written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and know them by heart” (Reed *MJ* 76). He regurgitates European theories of Marxism and undermines other ethnic groups by critiquing all black and non-European art forms. Most importantly, W.W. never even sees a flaw in his unoriginal reproduction of Marxist theory.

Jes Grew Carriers in the novel recognize and signify on literary journals and the critics that control these academic machinations. T Malice explains to Papa LaBas that at the Cotton Club “there’s a terrific comedy team called the Warp and Woolf formerly of the Diastole and Systole who imitate 3rd-rate literary critics with a passion. They are hilarious” (149). Their awareness, now that Jes Grew’s processing of the reader has created a level of reflexivity in them, reminds the reader that Jes Grew’s recoding enlightens the host. Harde, speaking about T Malice’s observation, states that “Mumbo Jumbo thus parodies literary critics with a team that imitates them, while pretending to be a fundamental aspect (warp and woof) of life’s pulse (the diastole and systole of the heart)” (367). Academic journals create and enforce the Western academic canon and are, therefore, opposed to Jes Grew and the living Text. Through Reed’s discussion of academic journals, it becomes clear that “[i]t is not just the prejudice of professors that Reed satirically attacks, but the bias of Western culture, whose myths and legends he sees being propagated by university departments of art and literature to the exclusion of those emanating from other cultures” (Lindroth 193). The vital connection between the world

of academia and of academic journals directs the infected reader to where Jes Grew must spread in order to reconstruct Western academic methodologies.

Harde points out that the academic journal functions in the same way as the art museums Reed allegorizes as Art Detention Centers. The Mu'tafikah, who the Wallflower Order associates directly with the spread of Jes Grew, stands in opposition to this kind of cultural suppression where sacred objects and cultural icons are put on display to a different culture, but sterilized and without context. "With the detention centers, *Mumbo Jumbo* allegorizes the Western preoccupation with cataloguing fine art and hiding it safely away from the masses, but the novel also performs the same function with Hinkle's pseudomodernist journal, *Benign Monster*" (Harde 366). Western academia constantly obfuscates cultural art forms for the masses instead of exposing them to the public. Jes Grew and a multiple ethno-cultural thinking liberate the arts, putting them back into social context – giving them life instead of suffocating them in a display box. The Mu'tafikah infect the art world in the novel with Jes Grew by reappropriating the ancient icons and granting those ethnic groups agency to revive traditions that had been in stagnation while isolated. Putting these pieces back into circulation gives them room to grow and the same should be done with the academic journal by the reader. Cultures need to live, adapt, and develop just like the movement of Jes Grew.

Biff Musclewhite, head of security for the Art Detention Centers, suggests the limited and stifling worldview that simple "collecting" and isolating engenders when he tells Thor Wintergreen, "They're the 1s who must change, not us, they... they must adopt our ways, producing Elizabethan poets; they should have Stravinskys and Mozarts in the

wings, they must become Civilized!!!!” (Reed 114). The call for reproduction immediately eliminates possibility of evolution. Recoded readers recognize Biff’s attitude as the product of Western coding, and Lindroth elucidates in his reading of *Mumbo Jumbo* as a revisioned Grail legend that the infected reader is “encouraged not to identify with the ‘European’” (1245). Jes Grew reconfigures the reader and, in a reconstruction of academic education, the reprogrammed academics “refuse to be Milled and Humed at your universities, would return to the tribes, don the Robes of the Leopard Skin Priests and purge the Atonist from their minds, girding themselves to do battle against your thing” (Reed *MJ* 68). The push here comes from a call to reinvest in life and variance rather than the “closed circuit” of academic reproduction. Reed’s allegorical battles reinstruct the reader and recode his or her worldview, and the reader’s recoding completes at the end of the book:

in the final section of *Mumbo Jumbo*, wherein the origins of evil and the origins of the ‘original Afro-American aesthetic’ are revealed in a long detailed, diachronic section which begins with the creation of the world by the Egyptian sky-goddess, Nut, and ends with the Hoodoo priest (houngan) Papa Labas lecturing to college classes in the 1960s about the powers of Voodoo. (Martin 75)

LaBas breaches the imaginary world and comes to lived-reality when his lecture is realized as the entire plot of *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Papa LaBas plays, again, the role of Legbas, guardian of the crossroads, when he bridges the allegorical text and enters into the living Text of the novel *Mumbo Jumbo*. He establishes Jes Grew’s authenticity and real potency when the “novel closes with its protagonist Hoodoo detective PaPa LaBas delivering a lecture at Harvard University on

the Harlem Renaissance. We are audience to a seminar as we read *Mumbo Jumbo*” (Chaney 274). The permeable and diverse ethno-cultural models endorsed by Jes Grew liberate the reader from Western academia’s domination of methodology. Now it is time for the recoded academic to go about infecting and spreading Jes Grew through the academy, though Reed suggests that the process has already begun as he completes the Text on “Jan. 31st, 1971, 3:00 P.M.” at “ Berkeley, California” (MJ 218). Just as the professor who has invited LaBas to lecture in the first place wonders “whether to dismiss Jes Grew or go with it” (218), the academic has already begun the process of de- and reconstruction necessary for entering into a multi-ethnocentric phase of education. Of course, while the effectiveness that Jes Grew has in successfully de- and re-centering all institutions of learning remains questionable; Reed reshapes the reader’s methods of *thinking* through the discursive process of Jes Grew, whether consciously or subconsciously.

CHAPTER VI

MUMBO JUMBO INFILTRATES AS SCHOLARLY TEXT

Let us examine the text of *Mumbo Jumbo* as a text-book, complete with illustrations, footnotes, and a bibliography.

-- Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The 'Blackness of Blackness':
A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey"

To transform and reshape *thinking*, Reed intentionally toys with the physical, textual form of *Mumbo Jumbo*. Instead of a standard, fictional narrative, the book looks like an academic text, a textbook. Beth McCoy suggests that because of this textual construction, Reed targets "those who consume textbook knowledge: students" (61). University trends stand at the forefront of propagating Eurocentric thinking, so it is a logical place to begin restructuring *thinking* habits. As Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, such an "engagement with European thought is also called forth by the fact that today the so-called intellectual tradition is the only one alive in the social science department of most, if not all, modern universities" (Chakrabarty 5). Reshaping thinking, then, and eliminating this European control means reprogramming the student at the heart of educational coding practices to provide the best venue for widespread infection of Jes Grew.

Restructuring *thinking* requires a reformation and reeducation of education. Reed explains in an interview, "I think the people we want to aim our questioning toward are

those who supply the nation with its mind, tutor its mind, develop and cultivate its mind, and these are the people involved in culture” (O’Brien 37). Who is involved in cultural formation? The academy and those in it establish culture – all information and trends circulate through the academy and the student body and, as such, they are the cultural target of Reed’s Jes Grew virus. Reed himself states, “now we are examining the student culture” (Domini 129).

Mumbo Jumbo first enters into the academic sphere after Reed’s first two novels, *The Freelance Pall-bearers* and *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, had already made a place for Reed in the literary canon. Alan Friedman points out that Reed already appears in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, which “spans the centuries from Chaucer to Reed. Whether he likes it or not, Ishmael Reed has for some time now occupied a black outpost in a white landscape” (35). With such established critics in the academic world as Harold Bloom¹⁵ concludes that Reed belongs in the literary canon, Reed resides in a unique position where he can affect the literary framework that Eurocentric culture (already weakened by deconstructionist de-centerings of Derrida¹⁶ and those in his circle) with Jes Grew, reconfiguring thought on the academic stage from the inside out. When Henry Louis Gates Jr. analyzes *Mumbo Jumbo* in connection with the Signifying Monkey trope, he gives a sense of Reed’s narrative style as a postmodern attack on Western hegemony:

¹⁵ In his 1994 text, *The Western Canon: Books and Schools of the Ages*, Bloom places *Mumbo Jumbo* in the section titled “The Chaotic Age: A Canonical Prophecy.” These books, Bloom implies, have potential to become canonical. Bloom, of course, would also represent the kind of “authority” Reed wants the reader to question.

¹⁶ Robert Elliot Fox describes Derrida’s theoretical project to have as its aim “to shake the totality of the philosophic totalitarianism which he views structuralism as constituting” (Fox 48).

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 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. (Gates 700-701).

Gates takes *Mumbo Jumbo* as his foremost example for the Signifying Monkey trope, but Reed intends actual change, as Moraru asserts in *Rewriting*, and not just to signify on European history and culture. Jes Grew enters into the student body, beginning a reformatting of thinking within the student population before it matures and becomes central to global culture.

Reed illustrates how the student body resides at the center of Western thinking through the Mu'tafikah layer of *Mumbo Jumbo*. The ring of art (re)possessors conceive their goal while at the City College, as Berbelang, Papa Labas' defector assistant, explains to potential Mu'tafikah Thor Wintergreen:

It's when we met at the University at the Art History class that we decided to do this. We vowed. We began to see the Art instructor was speaking as if he didn't know we were in the room. We felt as if we were in church, stupid dull sculpture being blown up to be religious objects. (Reed *MJ* 89)

Berbelang's explanation reveals the distortions of reality that marginalized people feel while being instructed within Western academia. Molefi Asante describes this same distortion as a loss of "our cultural centeredness: that is, we have been moved off our

platforms. This means that we cannot truly be ourselves or know our potential since we exist in a borrowed space” (Asante *The Afrocentric Idea* 8). However, Thor, the white liberal student, is a central example as to why Reed must reconfigure thinking more deeply than just through rhetoric and why a parasitic discursive virus like Jes Grew is necessary for reshaping thought.

Thor’s disillusionment and disgust at the Eurocentric hegemony in the thinking process shows that the student’s mind is still open, but Thor’s betrayal of the Mu’tafikah after being coerced by Biff Muscwhite’s appeal to a universal “classic” cultural loyalty shows that a deeper reconfiguration of the thought process is necessary in order to affect actual change within the population. All it takes for Thor to betray his friends is for Biff to appeal to Elizabethan poetry and the fear of losing *Moby-Dick* to the criticism of “others.” Full conversion comes from a deeper de- and reconstruction of thought itself that Reed makes more susceptible to infiltration through the forced self-reflexivity of the reader in a scene like this, where Jes Grew’s rewriting of thinking, steeped into the academic tools of the text, retools the way the individual processes information. Part of Jes Grew’s efficacy lies in its ability to take the reader through the steps of learning and thinking that are already part of academic instruction.

Reed breaks down the defensive system surrounding Western folklore and legends to make the reader more susceptible to (re)thinking staples of the European psyche – myths, tropes, and archetypes. Fox claims that this is a transformative process:

Reed inscribes his (re)visions and (re)interpretations in a manner that calls into question the tendency of literature to monumentalize one canonical form of

discourse as the discourse which bespeaks tradition. He seeks to transform the monologue of such a discourse into a polylogue. (49)

Through these de- and reconstructions, the reader becomes more susceptible to reformatting his or her thinking process as reading *Mumbo Jumbo* provides exercises in revising mythology, folklore, and legends. For example, the reader begins to see a dialogue between cultures when Papa LaBas delves into “natal astrology” that he claims have brought “traditional prejudices to the art. We do not use the systems employed by the Egyptians Aztecs or Babylonians” (Reed *MJ* 212) or how “Priests of Africa and South America are able to identify any Spirit or God that possess a person, an art the Greeks knew well” (213). LaBas claims that these things have been “corrupted by Atonist scholars” (212), implying that they are part of the monologue instead of dialogue. Like any kind of educational exercise, the more the student goes through the process, the easier it is to recall and accomplish again. Putting this idea of the academic exercise into conversation with Fox’s statement, dialogues between different ethnoc-cultural identities becomes a norm and a single Eurocentric soliloquy no longer dominates student thinking the more they process through Jes Grew’s rewriting in his or her own reading performance.

Reed knows that European modes not only guide literary writing and study at large, but they also guide the study of his text. Even this argument applies theories and thinking from European origins – deconstruction and postmodernism – in its exploration of Reed’s book. Lorenzo Thomas describes it in the following way:

[T]he European mode of plotting, ‘characterization,’ ‘exposition.’ A system of untruths they call Fiction and teach in their schools. And their schools are geared to deal with *Mumbo Jumbo* in the same manner his book could be compared to Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as a further extension of surrealist social comment; but *Mumbo Jumbo* is most nearly like Robert Deane Pharr’s *The Book of Numbers* as a work of historical revision, an illuminating book. (40)

Reed’s best chance at success in reconfiguring the reader, then, is to reformat and instruct a process of re-thinking that appropriates European textual traditions. Jes Grew, after all, seeks to adapt and develop through all cultures, including European culture. Reed plants his multi-ethnic dialogues and deconstructions of Western thought into the actual reading process of his text. Reed imitates “the trappings of the Western novel” (Nazareth 117).

He explains his use of standard European genres in an interview:

For example, in the 1940s the detective or mystery movies always has a form or formulas where the detective would assemble all the characters involved in the crime, give a summary of how it happened, and then point to the guilty person. Well, that’s what I did in *Mumbo Jumbo*, only I exaggerated. You’re supposed to laugh when the detective goes all the way back to Egypt and works up to himself in reconstructing the crime. (O’Brien 16)

While Reed signifies on the detective genre, he still applies the traditional form in order to pass easily into the Western student’s *thinking* process. Further, Reed also appropriates the structural layout of the textbook.

Simply flipping through the pages of Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* allows the reader to see that the structure of the book is unlike that of a traditional novel. The text presents a paratext through footnotes, citations, photographs, charts, and even a partial bibliography.

Mumbo Jumbo is interlaced with a plethora of pictorial and textual elements borrowed from external, and in many cases nonbellettristic, sources. There are photos, posters, and drawings; dictionary definitions, anagrams, and epigraphs; symbols, graphs, and newspaper clippings. And at the book's end there appears a 104-item bibliography drawn from such diverse disciplines as psychology, history, dance, religion, mythology, music, theatre, economics, journalism, design, literature, astrology, the occult, sociology, ethnology, art, oratory, political science, and the life sciences. (Weixlmann 62).

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. states that “*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” (Gates 703). These textual layers serve two major purposes in Reed’s literary (re)programming of the reader: first, it creates entry into the field of literary study and, at the same time, de-centers and deconstructs presumptions and processes of Western thinking; second, it reconstructs a vision of culture and history that is no longer centered in a solely European origin. Harde concludes that this format “authenticates [Reed’s] re-vision and inclusion of African American history with the trappings of historical scholarship” (363). The reader finds confidence and security by seeing the familiar layout. Footnotes explaining sources like “‘The Complications of American Psychology,’ first published (1930) as ‘Your Negroid and Indian Behavior’— Carl G. Jung” (209) imitate academic expectations. This simulation of traditional academic text lowers the European academic training resilience to the Jes Grew infection. Martin calls attention to this same idea.

To lend the narrative authenticity, [Reed] adds the favourite scholarly crutches: facts from non-fictional, published works; photographs and historical drawings as evidence; and a bibliography. There is an unstated sub-text throughout the book,

which is, ‘My aesthetic is just as good as yours—maybe better—and certainly is founded on no more ridiculous a set of premises than yours.’ (85)

Reed’s use of scholarly writing traditions allows the text to infiltrate the mind of the academic who has already been trained to read and trust texts in this Euro-American style. Since Eurocentric practices of *thinking* have been embedded within academic education coding the student body with a Eurocentric manner of thinking, they must be de- and recoded by Jes Grew.

Tricking the mind of the student into using his or her own Eurocentric methodologies to process *Mumbo Jumbo* drops Eurocentric resilience to Jes Grew and more quickly and effectively infects the reader. Footnotes and bibliography mean outside research, which the Western academic training has prepared the student to take for granted. Pictures, graphs, and diagrams imply nonfiction. Reed even injects himself into the text with authorial asides as found in academic articles to empower the appearance of scholarship and further ensnare the student’s thinking in the trappings of scholarship. Reed tactfully engineers Jes Grew to maximize on its potential entry into and infection of the Western academy.

The textbook format Reed applies imitates a traditional European design which Beth McCoy’s reading of *Mumbo Jumbo* correlates to following Ramist textbook designs.¹⁷ These designs “depend upon paratextual elements to break their subjects into small visual blocks” (609). Appropriating these tools in the engineering of his literary

¹⁷ Peter Ramus, McCoy explains, was a sixteenth-century French scholar whose methodology became foundational in textbook construction in the Western academy.

infectious, Reed gives *Mumbo Jumbo* an academic appearance that tempts any reader or, as Reed intends, student to trust it as scholarship. Once Reed gains access into the reader's mind and makes the text part of the academic experience, he begins to deconstruct European academic traditions from a structural angle. Before the plot of the novel transforms into vehicle for Jes Grew's spreading of infection, the actual layout of the book de-centers expectations and the coding of the reader becomes confused and infused with Jes Grew. Sudden mutability and adaptation—specific elements of the thinking process Reed associates with his recoded thought—must be used in order to continue reading and for the infectious to set. This requires that the reader begin a (re)processing of the information using Jes Grew as his or her guide. This includes mock headlines, radio broadcasts, and interviews. Reed embeds satire and humor into the textual designs to signify¹⁸ on and deconstruct traditional academic methodology—and the reader in the (re)processing of the book picks up on these elements and the deconstruction of Western preconceptions that they generate.

Following McCoy's argument that *Mumbo Jumbo*'s format coincides with Ramist textual designs, Reed uses them in part to seriously approach the reader and also as partial farce. He satirizes rather than endorses these methods of scholarship as he uses the formal, structured European textbook designs to poke fun at Western academic hegemony. Signifying subverts and flips the target on its head as it repeats and rewrites.

¹⁸ I use Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s definition of signification here and not Saussure's as expressed in Gates' iconic article, "The 'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey."

The magic (or rather HooDoo)¹⁹ of Reed's writing process enables him to use the tools and format of the European academy against itself and signifies on its own academic traditions, deconstructing the reliance on such traditions in the mind of the reader and further de-centering him or her. The reader then turns out to be more susceptible to Reed's meanings through this satire, perceiving the text through his recoded methodology.

Reed infects the reader with a revision of academic tools so that, when *Mumbo Jumbo* requires the reader to decipher these academic codes and cull out the actual historical facts being presented from Reed's historical and cultural revisions, the novel creates a process of deciphering Reed's other coded information, whether it be in the form of HooDoo or satire. The structure, including the mixture of humor and satire with fact and documentation, makes the reader read differently, and this process spreads into the reading of other texts. Sharon Jessee's discussion on Reed's use of humor and satirical strategy suggests that "[s]ignifying draws attention to the technique of the signifier, more than to what is signified upon, although the parodying—through a repetition which shows resemblance but then inverts or reverses that form—usually refers to something" (130). Reed follows this process of signifying, repeating Western academic practices as parody. Jessee's argument asserts that Reed signifies to draw attention to his deconstructing technique rather than on the actual signifying of western civilization. Reed makes all of Western civilization appear as flawed caricatures—

¹⁹ While HooDoo is used even within the text, Martin in particular discusses Reed's invention and use of the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic.

ridiculing politicians (Harding), religious leaders (the pope), and other sacrosanct portions of Western culture (Freud, Jung and Western psychology). His text requires the reprogrammed reader to use Eurocentric textual tools of decoding (recoded by Jes Grew, of course) who should now see the problems within the monocultural model.

Reed's paratextual experimentation disrupts the traditional European thought processes while positing reliability in his revision of Western civilization's ideas of history and culture. At the same time, Reed implies a psychic reconfiguration in the reader.

He is dealing not only with the phenomenon of possession (consciousness ridden by forces or concepts) and the act of possession (appropriation of ideas or artifacts) but also with re-possession—the reclamation of lost, scattered, or denied areas of experience and tradition (s). Reed, through a deliberate strategy of anachronism, multi-media devices, footnotes, bibliographies, and the like, opens up his texts, allowing dispossessed history to enter. (Fox 48-49)

Reed creates doubt as to the reliability of these academic texts in the European tradition which, consequently, boosts the credibility of his own academic deviation from the traditional textbook. McCoy posits, “[t]hrough the paratext, textbooks suppress the constructed and interdependent nature of an academic subject and maintain the fantasy of that subject's self-contained masterability” (609). Making even the more astute reader question the masterability of the text is one of Reed's chief goals. His playful vision in *Mumbo Jumbo* problematizes academic textual expectations. Jes Grew penetrates, then, deeply into the Western academic tradition and works a reconstruction from the inside out.

CHAPTER VII

COLLAPSING THE TEXTUAL WALL

To spread virally, objects first deobjectify, lose their materiality and moorings in material contexts.

-- Christian Moraru, *Cosmodernism*

Reed reveals in an interview with John O'Brien that the inception for *Mumbo Jumbo* and the possibility of creating Jes Grew "jes grew" out of his poem "D Hexorcism of Noxon D Awful" in which he attempts to put a "writing" – something like a hex or the use of a gris gris doll²⁰ – on Nixon through his use of the written word (16). In that poem, Reed explains, "I wanted to make a crude, primitive fetish, and that would put a 'writing' on an individual considered an enemy to the tribe" (Reed "W a S" 59). He then describes how "In the 'writing' I wanted to encapsulate his essential characteristics and through the inter-telepathic energy of the readers aim a psychic 'fix' at this individual" (59). This is the first time Reed makes contact with the physical through the writing process, proving to Reed that writing in the imaginary can affect the physical. Jes Grew, then, writes and rewrites into the imaginary.

Yeah, it was a primitive piece which resembles more the dolls that you see in religious ceremonies. I had read something in African witchcraft, which is not really a good name, 'witchcraft,' that there was such a thing as 'the breath of men.' Where an enemy could be destroyed or fixed by the idea one put out. More

²⁰ Also referred to as "voodoo" dolls.

and more people concentrate and transmit telepathic evil upon an enemy of the nation or the clan. (Nazareth 185)

Reed echoes this idea not only as an experimental shift through the wall between fictional and lived realities, but also as an actual attack on his opposition. This presages Reed's confrontation of the Western civilization and monocultural *thinking* itself in *Mumbo Jumbo*. In order to effectively contest this manner of thinking in lived reality, "[Reed] made the abstract concrete in [his] fiction" (Nazareth 117). Reed explains how the imaginary – the spiritual or metaphysical – can cross into the real, lived world.

Reed claims that his purpose for *Mumbo Jumbo* is to have it become a living Text, taking the next evolutionary step in the way of sacred texts. He applies a mixture of magic and poststructuralist Hoodoo to pull *Mumbo Jumbo* across its textual boundaries. The book, then, "casts its spell" and unites the physical with the metaphysical. Reed claims that this is an element from "African religion, the seer, the prophet, the necromancer" and that "[t]here are powers that really influence people in strange ways in those books... there may be powers that we unleash in the books, in the words and language rhythms" (Nazareth 120-121). *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Jes Grew* work in the same fashion as an ancient incantation – they tap into basic and natural energies embedded in the human psyche. These powers manifest themselves in *Jes Grew*'s infiltration of the Western worldview. The spell is the same as the infection in much the same way that the scientific and the magical are conflated in the rituals of Hoodoo. Papa Labas explains how his magic (knockings) is equitable to empirical data when he exclaims, "Evidence? Woman, I dream about it, I feel it, I use my 2 heads. My knockings" (Reed *MJ* 25). Reed

states that, “[m]y reading leads me to believe that HooDoo—or, as they say in Haiti and other places, ‘VooDoo’ or ‘Vodun’ –was always open to the possibility of the real world and the psychic world intersecting” (Reed “W a S” 62). In these intersections, abstract and concrete ideas lose their separation and the boundaries between the two become hazy.

Boundaries and categorizations dissolve through these intersections and an element of the syncretic comes into play. Reed even points out that the permeability of the abstract is equal to the permeability of the concrete when he explains that “[p]hysicists have discovered an element called neutrinos that can pass through walls (ghosts?)” (Reed “W a S” 62). Objects and things in the physical cross metaphysical space, proving the transmutability between the two. Reed “fetishizes” *Mumbo Jumbo* as he tells Nazareth that, “I think the books can be seen as amulets. An amulet, you know, is something you carry around and people say they carry my books around. With *Mumbo Jumbo* I advise if you don’t read it, put it over your door! That comes out of the idea of the holy book, the sacred book” (121). It is no mistake that he juxtaposes his text with objects and things long thought to hold intangible spiritual quality – the quality often explained as “magic.” Reed, however, engineers this abstract quality and gives it a physical vehicle from which it can spread out across concrete, lived reality. Lisa Slappery suggests that “Spiritual forces need the text as a focus to keep them visible and strong, and as much as *Mumbo Jumbo* wants to become, on a metanarrative level, its own sacred text, the novel demonstrates that Jes Grew exists outside its own written text

within the text that is the natural world” (46). The intangible, imaginary reality conflates itself with the tangible, objectified physical reality.

Reed’s conception of his book as amulet and as sacred object implies that the object itself has power on the lived world, and its textuality infects the words of the page, then the pages of the book, then the reader as it circulates through new hosts. The contagion spreads through the host as the reader processes the text. It begins recoding as the reader processes the words on the page. Julian Cowley, in a discussion of the sacred objects²¹ in the Centers for Art Detention, finds that, like the sacred objects housed in the museum, “*Mumbo Jumbo* is just such an amulet. Its appearance alone cannot disclose the positive power it can exercise in the world, but it proclaims its objecthood loudly, through typography and illustrations, footnotes and bibliography” (1240). As object and carrier of Jes Grew, *Mumbo Jumbo* itself has the agency to reconfigure and shape the tangible world. Reed engineers his virus to incubate inside the text which appears as sacred object, a book. This gives more agency to the text because he constructs it to maximize infiltration into the body of Western institutions. In order to reach this end and plant an infection deep enough in the center of the Western “universality” to gradually infect the entirety of its being, Reed selects the most susceptible entranceway.

Reed chooses the world of the academy, where methods of thinking are actually taught, to achieve maximum efficacy in rethinking *thinking*. For the seed of the infection to set, it needs to be placed where there will be a phase of metastasis – an infection

²¹ Reed also describes these as cultural “fetishes” and “Ikons” (15). According to cultural traditions these objects can act on both the physical and the imaginary spheres.

beginning in the brain (the academy), spreading into the rest of the body (mainstream society). Of course, to infect the world of the reader and, by consequence, the world of the academy, the novel must be made into more than only text. It must function beyond the boundaries of fictional space and have agency in lived reality. Reginald Martin argues in his book *Ishmael Reed & the New Black Aesthetic* that the central mystery of the novel, that of finding Jes Grew's Text²² (the Book of Thoth), constructs the new, living Text (*Mumbo Jumbo*) where Jes Grew can incubate. "*Mumbo Jumbo* is itself the Text, and it appears in 1972 as a direct, written response to the assertion that there is not a black way of doing things; that black contributions to world culture have been insignificant at best" (Martin 93). Martin's argument conflates Reed's spreading infection in the plot of the novel, Jes Grew, with the actual, lived embodiment of blackness, and Reed intends it to be that and more. Reed's argument deconstructs assumptions about the agency of all marginalized ethnicities.

In order to reconfigure thought and dismantle these marginalizing assumptions, Reed revises history and culture by beginning his antiplague in the fictional world of his novel where, between plot and paratext, Jes Grew mutates and escapes from the fictional plot to influence the thinking of the real world reader. Jes Grew's rewrites history, culture, and thinking and, through the performance of reading the text, the reader becomes infected by the virus and thinking in the reader becomes reconfigured. For both the characters and the readers, Jes Grew, therefore, becomes "psychic epidemic" (Reed

²² Reed designates the difference between object text (a simple book) and an abstract conception of Text as embodiment of conceptual change through the capitalization of the "T."

MJ 5). The antiplague only stabilizes, according to the novel's plot that serves as a meta-model for Jes Grew's real-life diffusion, when it finds a textual host in lived reality. Stabilizing for Jes Grew means gaining substance enough to grow and not just be "mistaken for entertainment" (211). In the same way, the real world "Jes Grew" taking the form of *Mumbo Jumbo* must be considered more than entertainment, and actually lead to a reevaluation of culture and identity. *Thinking* must be reshaped. The Text that the characters search for in Reed's novel becomes the living Text that the reader has in his or her hands. This action moves beyond allegory into meta-allegory—an allegory that is aware of itself working through the reader's imagination to reconfigure it into a new reality.

Donald L. Hoffman agrees with Martin's analysis, but adds a step. "Abdul's incineration of the Book of Thoth, the Text Jes Grew has been seeking becomes Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo* itself." Here Martin's analysis would end, but Hoffman goes on to state that, "Without rejecting this view, I would suggest that *Mumbo Jumbo* is merely one manifestation of the Text. What Abdul has really done, despite himself, has been to liberate the Text from the book" (1252-1253). Hoffman imagines that Reed's fictional text of *Mumbo Jumbo* functions to liberate the Text—what Hoffman describes as an abstract conception of blackness in opposition to Eurocentricity—from the confines of any single host and enact transformation on Reed's book, and, in effect, on other books, other arts, other people, and to be "self-propagating" (Reed *MJ 5*). Once again, the argument does not quite match the extent to which Reed pushes his project. Through implanting Jes Grew in the reader, the Text no longer needs to be held in the physical

world by an object. Instead, it can become part of the greater imaginary and work through each individual host into other hosts of all ethnic origins. Martin and Hoffman's conception of the novel grants it actual agency to infect other texts, the readers of these texts, and the institutions where these texts are housed and studied, and Reed's Jes Grew functions to spread a continually in flux hybrid of ethno-cultural paradigms. Thus, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* acts like a computer virus, infecting the academy and the entire social network with the Jes Grew germ and recoding thought.

The Text's liberation from the text grants it substance and offers a pathway for it to follow and spread. Jes Grew, Reed's antiplague, escapes from the walls constructed by the novel and begins to infect the reader with a de- and re-centering of centrality invoked by a combination of ethos, logos, and pathos in following the actual text of *Mumbo Jumbo*. Metastasis gets reached once the reader completes reading Reed's book. Michael A. Chaney's reading of the book asserts, similarly that, as readers, "we are also becoming a host for the antiplague with which Reed tantalizes us. The novel quite distinctly becomes a carrier of the information (virus) that destabilizes the linearity of Western Judeo-Christian epistemologies" (274). But Chaney's argument neglects to discuss how the virus can actually affect such change, nor does it explain how Jes Grew, as an informational virus, can actually infect the European methodologies and institutionalized thought that homogenizes the global conversation. Reed, however, hacks into a specific host from which the infection can spread and affect, deconstruct, and transform this Western hegemony. Reed thus engineers the virus according to very specific criteria – to be aimed at the academy for multiple groups of peoples – for Jes Grew's successful

implantation, spread, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the reader's process of thinking. Reed makes sure through manipulating the host that it infects that "Jes Grew is immune to the old remedies, the saving Virus in the blood of Europe" (Reed *MJ* 18). Otherwise, the antiplague dies out again and remains ineffective in restructuring thinking and breaking down the illusion of a "universal" monoculture. Jes Grew's only chance of thoroughly recoding *thinking* on a wide scale comes through infiltrating the academic reader.

CHAPTER VIII

REED'S PROBLEMS WITH A EUROCENTRIC UNIVERSALITY

European thought is at once both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought—which is now everybody's heritage and which affects us all—may be renewed from and for the margins.

-- Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*

Reed finds it necessary to reconstruct thinking because he identifies problems in a self-universalizing Western – which he seems to imply means Eurocentric – worldview. In Ishmael Reed's novel Western civilization is synonymous with what Reed terms "Atonist." These monocultural paradigms trace foundational global culture no further back than to the Ancient Greek thinkers, using this as the primary emergent episode for a global contemporary culture.²³ Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that "an entity called 'the European intellectual tradition' stretching back to the Ancient Greeks is a fabrication of relatively recent European history" (5). By using this as a starting point for understanding a supposed global human psyche, the paradigm consistently distorts archetypes and identifiers, suggesting universality for a global community that neglects deeper archetypal artifacts embedded in separate cultural psyches. The presumption that all humans follow trends that can only be traced back to Greek myth neglects large portions

²³ According to Enrique Lamadrid, Greek myth cannot explain the Chicano/a psyche (Lamadrid 497).

of the globe, though it identifies a singularly *European* manner of thinking.

In his argument to add Chicano writer Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) into a deeper conversation and understanding of a Chicano world view, Enrique Lamadrid similarly looks at Freud's work in connecting Greek mythology to the Eurocentric psyche, noting that "Freud was able to tap Greek mythology for insight into the European psyche and on it founded the basis for Western psychology" (497). However, he claims that it would be a mistake to use the same process to understand the Chicano psyche. Lamadrid's argument suggests that the Chicano mind works differently from a European one. This problematizes attempts to apply a Eurocentric umbrella to cover a global culture for Chicanos, and Lamadrid's argument applies to other ethno-cultural perspectives as well.

Molefi Asante's work with Afrocentricity similarly separates European and Africa psyches. Molefi Asante suggests in "De-Westernizing Communication: Strategies for Neutralizing Cultural Myths" that "the western construction of knowledge as articulated by the early Greek thinkers, those upon whom so much of the Western intellectual structure rely, namely Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, create, among other things, a cultural hierarchy of knowledge that seeks to promote its narcissism as universal" (Asante "De-Westernizing Communication"). He proposes to "decolonize" the Eurocentric hold on global communication through a process of postmodern Afrocentricity that works in a similar fashion to Reed's Jes Grew virus. Asante suggests that Afrocentricity's purpose "is about taking the globe and turning it over so that we see all the possibilities of a world where Africa, for example, is subject and not object" (*The*

Afrocentric Idea 1). Asante makes it clear that, though he focuses on Afrocentricity, his ideas apply to all non-European ethnic groups, highlighting two authors he deems Asiocentric writers, Yoshitaka Miike and Jing Yen (*An Afrocentric Manifesto* 8). He claims that their works “liberate the discourse around Asian communications ideas and rhetorical concepts away from being forced into the straitjacket of Western ideas” (8). In other words, by de-centering and re-centering a single “universal” centrality in global culture, Asante allows other ethno-cultural identities to (re)possess a “decolonized” global perspective.

The escape from a Western universality remains central to Reed’s reconfiguration of *thinking* in *Mumbo Jumbo* since this supposed universality applies itself to other people’s viewpoints, violating their self-identification and then circumscribing rules for processing and understanding spiritual, social, political, academic, and economic spheres. While Reed never correlates his own Jes Grew process to Asante or Lamadrid’s arguments, they converse on the same pivotal point—Western thought—Eurocentricity—is not universal and the mental and physical colonization process thrives only if universality becomes accepted by other ethnic groups in the imaginary. Reed provides an example in *Mumbo Jumbo* of the universalizing by Atonists when Haitian Benoit Battraville explains to Papa Labas and Black Herman how the Atonists defeat folks of other ethnic groups:

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 ideals. (Reed *MJ* 133).

The idea is that the monoculture – Western civilization – enforces a rigid coding that defines everything from history to religion and architecture to writing. Reed argues that people are measured by these means even when they innately follow a non-European centrality:

I think you can ascertain that by going and reconstructing a past which I call Neo-Hoodoo in my work. I call it Neo-Hoodoo because you can have your own psychology rather than someone else's. In other words they are trying to make us Europeans in this country, and we don't think that way. We are different; people are different. I'm not a social biologist, but I think that although we can prove our common ancestry—the one-cell amoeba or some distant primate or whatever—we are different and it's wrong for one group of people to impose their psychology on another. Blacks don't think the way Europeans think. The techniques of analyzing the European psyche do not work with the African psyche, as Africans are discovering in the United States! (Nazareth 122)

This idea of “the West and the rest” which really just means “the West is the best” devalues other global cultures. The universal umbrella distorts perspective for the large multicultural global community—in academics and beyond.

Nonetheless, while under this umbrella, all ethno-cultural paradigms develop their particular vocabulary and frame of reference without actually using their own centers as a focal point. Through this distorting process of programming, old ethnic understandings disappear, and an essential part of cultural awareness is lost. Identity itself gets obfuscated through a lack of self-reference and identifying. Reed describes this as he

looks at the case of the traditional “conjure man” understood in African American tradition.

Later what happens is that the conjure man becomes a buffoon and loses his powers. This was a very sorry episode for blacks in this country when the decline of the conjure man occurred, when blacks went North and were exposed to all the ideas of Europe. They seemed to lose this kind of wonder and became materialists. (O’Brien 35)

Through this assimilation into American culture, Reed implies that the African American loses a sense of a particularly African mystery and magic, gaining instead a materialistic concern that remains rather distorted. Reed further describes this influence from Western universality when he states that, “[o]ne mistake our theoreticians have made is going to other models, like Europe.” Reed explains, “When even a West Indian militant, who speaks very loudly from New York City thinks of an example of revolution, he thinks of Petrograd, 1917, of the Russian Revolution or the French Revolution. They take European models” (Young 42). Other ethno-cultural perspectives remain entangled in a monocultural view even when they actively retaliate against Western hegemony. Almost perversely, cultures act unnaturally to follow the monoculture, making them follow Reed’s description of the “Set” frame of mind – where Set wants “men eating men” and is “the 1st man to shut nature out of himself” (MJ 162). Reed connects this cultural tendency to American academia when he describes Americans today being, “educated in American schools which are mere exercises in chauvinism—Euro-American chauvinism. The treatment of Indians has been distorted; the treatment of blacks has been distorted” (Nazareth 122). Reed breaks from such a viewpoint and first replaces it with an African

centrality because, “the Afro-American material I use is part of an international aesthetic that blends in with other cultures very easily. It’s absorptive” (Nazareth 123). More importantly, he wants an international, multi-ethnically diverse worldview, not a swapping of one centrality for another. Jes Grew uses this African centrality only to rupture the European one. Keeping an international, multi-ethnic worldview involves a continual de- and re-centering where no one centrality gains dominance over another. Constant flux is necessary. A simple swap still distorts reality for others, no matter if it is to an African, Asian, or South American perspective. Reed needs a more complex system to balance out global identity and thought. This creates the reason for his Jes Grew virus and infection of thinking. Reed needs a deeply embedded reconfiguration to withstand a relapse.

Reed’s motivation for de-centering and deconstructing Western culture and re-centering and reconstructing a multi-ethnic worldview is to reveal that the illusion of Western civilization’s “better” culture is simply that, illusion. Reed clarifies to the reader that there is a major problem with the “history lessons which view the arrival of the Europeans as a ‘civilizing’ rescue mission, a view held by the majority of those in the United States’ history profession” (Reed “S and L” 225). The basic conceptual base that perceives the European invaders as liberators and the natives invaded as savages functions with fundamental flaws. Reed provides specific examples of this kind of misconceived manner of understanding history by addressing the work of historian Stephen Thernstrom:

Typical of the monocultural spin on the European invasion of the Americas is that offered by Professor of History at Harvard University Stephen Thernstrom. He must have a large following among American ‘educators’ because his article ‘The Columbus Controversy’ was printed in both *The American School Board Journal* and *American Educator*, published by the American Federation of Teachers. Further proof that the current educational system is dividing American society with a school curriculum that’s based upon white pride, ethnocentric boasting rather than global culture and ideas. (Reed “S and L” 226)

The idea that one group deserves privilege over another is misguided and bigoted.

Teaching through this kind of bigoted system only reproduces such bigotry and arrogance. If infection occurs within the Eurocentric academy, Jes Grew can help to reduce such prejudiced and presumptive beliefs

Through *Mumbo Jumbo* Ishmael Reed co-creates a real method in which culture can Jes Grew – a process where multiple ethno-cultural perspectives re-center themselves after they have been de-centered and deprogrammed from the monocultural coding they have experienced since their earliest initiation into the global conversation. In an interview with Gaga, Reed refers to this process, mirrored by his actual writing, as “synthesizing and synchronizing. Synthesizing by combining elements like making a gumbo. Synchronizing by putting disparate elements into the same time, making them run in the same time, together” (53). In this interplay of elements, everything gets given equal push and pull; Jes Grew fluctuates and works like glue among multiple ethnic groups: “In joining certain unrelated references and coming out joining them together so that they could co-exist smoothly and be comprehended” (54). Once centrality fluctuates and remains in that constant state of flux—continually de- and re-centering—no one centrality’s particular “program” of *thinking* and processing gains privilege over another.

Reed delineates the kind of powerful energy necessary to inject Jes Grew, the deprogramming infovirus, into America's veins. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Black Herman and Papa LaBas declares how, "[t]hat's our genius here in America. We were dumped here on our own without the Book to tell us who the loas are, what we call spirits were." America, since it had no set guidelines and rules, "made up our own. . . . The Work that we do is just as good. I'll bet later on in the 50and 60s and 70s we will have some artists and creators who will teach Africa and South America some new twists" (130). In Reed's fiction, innovation and creation directly result from the process of Jes Grew.

Reed signifies on the old "swap-a-roo" and substitutes European tropes and parts with ones from African and African American tradition. After all, "[s]ignifying draws attention to the technique of the signifier, more than to what is signified upon, although the parodying—through a repetition which shows resemblance but then inverts or reverses that form—usually refers to something" (Jessee 130). Reed's parodies do more than make fun of European myth; they retool classical so-called mythologies that are central to the Eurocentric psyche. Through the infusion of Egyptology and Hoodoo into Western mythology, like in Reed's retooling of the Moses and Jethro²⁴ stories, he deconstructs traditional Western tropes and reconstructs a re-centered version that both aligns with and disrupts European traditions. Since the groundwork of the reader's thinking process that Reed is working with retains Western mechanics for processing,

²⁴ During Papa Labas' big detective "reveal" at the Cotton Club, he discusses the restructured Biblical stories using an Egyptian mythology to usurp the Judeo-Christian one.

Reed 'Jes Grews' a new mythology that can hold the same metaphysical weight but now for his recoded culture.

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