

American Local Color Fiction and the Phenomenology of Multiculturalism

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The aim of this paper is to explore the use of the color metaphor as a symbol of multiculturalism. Starting out from the American regionalism movement that called itself “local color,” I want to explore what this label really means when applied to multiculturalism and what kind of logic we can find in the connections between multiculturalism and the claims of “color.” In order to do this, I will look at some of the values and ideas that have been proposed by leading figures of the historical local color movement of the late nineteenth century, such as William Dean Howells, the so-called “dean” of American realism and influential editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, and Hamlin Garland, a local color author representing the farming culture of the “middle border” and author of the 1895 manifesto *Crumbling Idols*. I want to compare their values and ideas to a *bona fide* multiculturalist of the twentieth century who extends the originally territorial approach of the local colorists (or “regionalists”) to include questions of race and ethnicity as well, i.e., to the African American novelist and cultural critic Ishmael Reed. As we shall see, there are striking similarities to be found between the opinions and activities of the realist white mainstream figures of the past and the contemporary postmodern black minority person, even though their cultural roots may at a first glance seem to make them incompatible.

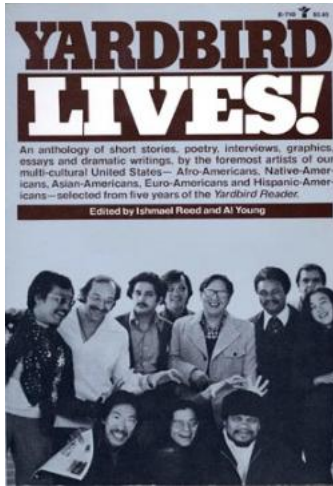


Figure 1: Ishmael Reed (front right) with friends of the Before Columbus Society (private picture)

Let me start with the observation that color imagery cannot only be found in the name of the local color movement, but it is also pervasive in Ishmael Reed's work and in what he calls the "Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic," an approach to art which manifests itself most forcefully in his signature novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). Thus when one of its main protagonists is assassinated, we read: "Berbelang's mind has rushed out on the pavement: Yellow, Red, Blue. Fire Opals" (120). Though he himself is black, Berbelang's mind is full of colors, which stand for energy, heat, and precious beauty.¹ The black Berbelang, Yellow Jack, the red José Fuentes, and the white Thor Wintergreen are running an organization that is stealing "art objects" from museums and returning them to their place of origin, to the local territory where they still have a spiritual function. These objects are the symbols, the language, the means of expression of peoples and nations that have been colonized and robbed, and who now suffer from spiritual alienation.² Significantly, in the novel the biggest collection of such ethnic objects is called the "Center of Art Detention" (CAD)—a thinly disguised version of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The name itself signals imprisonment, an unnatural strategy of restricting the circulation of art and its spiritual function of providing identity to its originators.

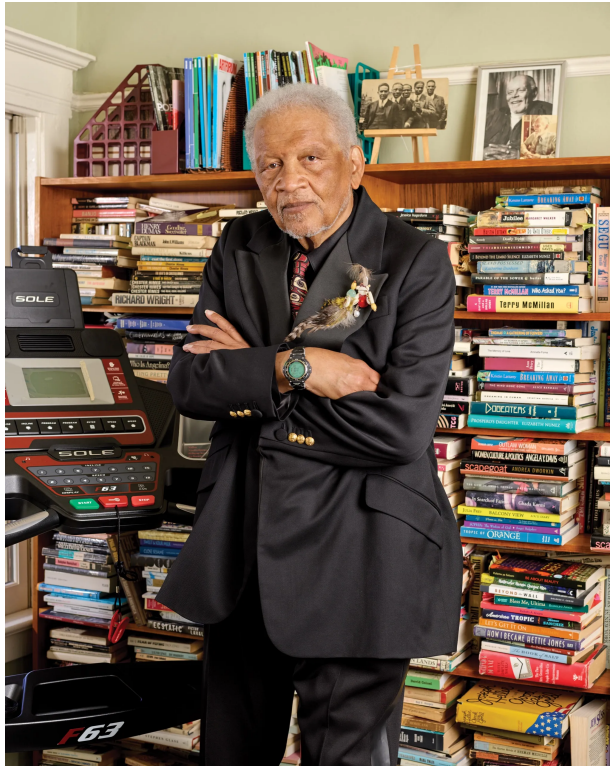


Figure2: Ishmael Reed (copyright *The New Yorker*)

Reed's main point in his Neo-HooDoo vision is that black culture, African American culture, is naturally multicultural, based on African polytheism, pluralistic representation and origins of local animism. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a detective novel that tries to solve metaphysical crimes, opposing monotheism against polytheism and animism. In the book, they are respectively called "Atonism," a label derived from the single God Aton, the sun, going back to Egypt's heretic pharaoh Akhnaton (*Mumbo Jumbo* 174), and "Jes Grew," a movement associated with the breaking out of the jazz craze in the 1920s, manifesting itself in dance, music, and improvisation.³ This bottom-up movement is described as "seeking its words. Its text. For what good is a liturgy without a text?" (6). Jes Grew is thus a symptom of life and experience in want of representation. But we are made aware that the antagonism of this plot is really one-sided; it is only binary from the perspective of monotheism or monoculturalism, which rejects all otherness as "mumbo jumbo." The "black" figure Berbelang is more than a

monochrome “other” as seen from a perspective of whiteness. He has many colors inside of him, as shown above, and his project is only “different” in the sense that it cannot be contained in a gestalt of negativity. Thus it is rather *something else* and stands for a true paradigm shift away from binarism, towards an alternative framework of thinking based on variety and multiculturalism. The very title *Mumbo Jumbo* stands for an “other” of Western thought that eludes the rational framework of the latter and carries understanding from a mere structural *negativity* towards a system of definitions originating from the other side, i.e., a framework of *variety* and many ideas (pluralism) represented by many gods (polytheism). This metaphysics of multiculturalism is thus not merely contrastive or black & white but, like Berbelang’s own mind, rather correlates with color.

*Color then stands for cultural variety.*⁴ In that sense, Ishmael Reed’s aesthetic project is not merely black or crazy or oppositional, but it makes him one of the earliest and most important advocates of American multiculturalism. Reed himself made his home on the West Coast, where he saw possibilities of a new kind of writing, as he writes in “A Westward Movement,” noting already in 1973 “an overall trend to decentralize American cultural power” (*Shrovetide* 114). In 1976, he published in *Le Monde* “The Multi-Cultural Artist: A New Phase in American Writing” (reprinted in *Shrovetide* 1978), where he claims: “New York, long the capital of American writing, has been supplanted by Regional Writing with centers in cities like Chapel Hill, Austin, Grand Forks, Seattle, Albuquerque, Des Moines, Berkeley, San Francisco, and Boulder, Colorado” (252). Ishmael Reed is thus a founding figure (or even “dean”?) of a conscientiously multicultural American aesthetics, which he originated as a concept long before multiculturalism became the contested cultural space of identity politics that made academic theorists of all hues jump on the bandwagon and enter the debate. This is why I see this African American minority author as a useful figure of comparison for a better understanding of multiculturalism in the white mainstream theory and practice of local color realism.

Let me begin my comparison with Elizabeth Ammons's project of a "reconceptualization of American realism that holds at its center the principle of multiculturalism" ("Expanding" 95). Arguing that "the melting-pot theory of the United States was contested from its very beginning late in the nineteenth century" (112), she opts for a "multicultural canon [that] yields no unified story about realism" and finds a framework that "generates provocative new links and connections" (112). Together with Valerie Rohy, she claims elsewhere that local color writing, in particular, "offers, as a genre, a powerful literary allegory of what is now called multiculturalism" (*American* xxviii). They emphasize "differences of culture as well as geography" in local color writing. We thus have two multiculturalism approaches from two different centuries that both foreground a concept of color. In the following, I will try to *sort out common paradigmatic elements* that we can find in both, traditional local color realism and in Reed's "ethnic" Voodoo aesthetic as well. Comparing the writing of these strange bedfellows may yield paradigmatic similarities that can possibly bring us closer to a proper phenomenology of multiculturalism as a general cultural value system and acquaint us with some of its quintessential qualities.

A first striking element that these two approaches (which are so different on the surface) have in common is that they are *not controlled by a single coherent theory*. To start with the realists, Michael Davitt Bell complains that it is "virtually impossible to extract from their novels and manifestoes any consistent definition of 'realism' (or of 'naturalism') as a specific kind of literary representation" (1). More specifically, in a chapter called "The Sin of Art," he deplores "the absence [...] in Howells's critical writings, of a theory of fictional *representation*" (21, Bell's emphasis). Realism has fared especially bad in the recent, theory-driven literary criticism, and Bell gets support from other highly decorated colleagues. Thus in his preface to *American Realism: New Essays*, Eric Sundquist writes about the realists:

“The problem lies in part in the central difficulty of describing the program of a group of writers who virtually had no program but rather responded eclectically” (viii). In his introduction, he shares the venerable Alfred Kazin’s 1942 statement that American realism “had no true battleground, as it had no intellectual history, few models, virtually no theory, and no unity” (qtd. 5).⁵ There is no doubt that realism existed as a literary movement, but like Reed’s *Jes Grew*, it was and still is looked down upon by philosophically-minded critics because it has so little of a consistent program or theory that justifies its practice. Realism seems to claim its territory this side of theory, or at least, of any overarching framework or “big narrative.” Is this the *claim of a bottom-up ontology*? We note, in comparison, that in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed’s *Jes Grew* is also without theory, in search of the Book of Thot, a mythical source of Osirian knowledge that would give this improvisation a permanent form (164). Significantly, the author has this “sacred anthology” destroyed at the end of his novel (201)—a clear sign that we should not count on the existence of any bible or revelatory knowledge of any kind.

Note furthermore, that for Reed even this overarching holy text should be an “anthology,” i.e., a *heterogeneous collection of many smaller texts*—a structural quality that also manifest itself in Reed’s tireless editorial work (see below). Again, then, it seems no coincidence that Hjalmar Boyeson also observes that Howells had focused his fiction on small things, or even “things of small consequence” (qtd. Shi 194). Robert Rhode quotes Carl Van Doren that “...the history of local color must be left primarily to the historian of the short story” (qtd. 10) and comments on this form and its size as “the most popular narrative vehicle” of the period (11). And in a rather spurious value judgment, Richard Brodhead praises Howells as a writer of “good minor novels” and claims that a “desire to avoid contact and competition with the work of the great ones lies behind his choice of scale” (29). But Ammons and Rohy find another reason for the realist interest in small forms: “The fact that the short story was the most common expression of regionalism further linked the genre with

‘minor’ literature and miniaturism. Despite its popularity among late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century readers, therefore, local color has occupied a marginal, feminized place in the literary canon” (xviii-xix). Hence the aspects of smallness and minor importance can also be seen as qualities of inclusiveness and the integration of the new and previously marginal.

Such lack of importance has also been attributed to realism’s *focus on “the common.”* Thus Michael Davitt Bell criticizes: “Benjamin Franklin Norris quite rightly differentiates the dull, common-place realism of Howells—‘the drama of the broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block’—from the ‘romance’ of naturalism, which takes its theoretical method from Zola” (13). One practitioner of such common-place realism, however, Hamlin Garland, sees it as something positive, “...not the literature of scholars” but of “men who love the modern and who have not been educated to despise common things” (xxv). We find a most insightful approach to this issue in Amy Kaplan, who emphasizes Howells’s “anxiety about the lack of confidence in the existence of a common, familiar, immediate reality to which language can refer” (21). According to her, Howells was in search of a common denominator in society, thus his interest in a) the common man as a promise of moving from class privilege to democratization, in b) common humanity as a sharing essential likeness, and in c) the commonplace as something ordinary and therefore accessible. This is why, according to Kaplan, the “truth value of realism lies not in the empirical accuracy but in adherence to common sense, to a communal consensus about the way things are” (23). She finds that “Howells thus envisioned realism as a strategy for containing social difference and controlling social conflict within a cohesive common ground.” It is intentionally unspectacular in order to better function as a connecting forum or platform for dialogic interaction.

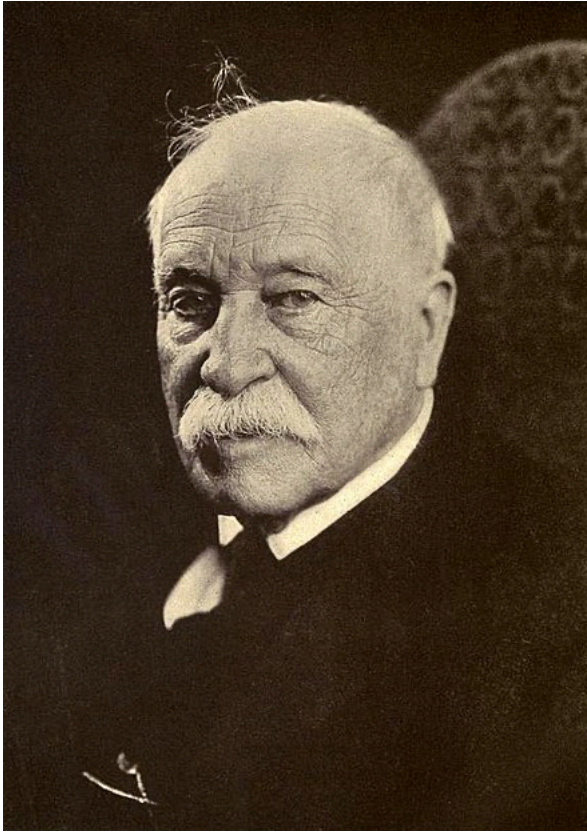


Figure 3: William Dean Howells was often called the “dean” of American realism
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Now, if anything, Ishmael Reed’s prose is certainly not boring. This postmodern Juvenal has been praised for his biting satire. But Reed is primarily using his aggressive style in order to *put down sensationalism*. Thus in *Mumbo Jumbo*, he criticizes the culture of scandal in a fictional magazine labelled *The Benign Monster*, which features a “nude flapper” and a “picture of a lynching. Bulging eyes. Entrails. Delighted sheriffs licking chocolate-covered ice cream sticks” (74). Its editors celebrate that they’ve been “banned in Boston! We’ve made it.” They comment: “Sensationalism? Why the sons of guns love it” (75). Reed explains this point in a review of Claude Brown’s *The Children of Ham*, which he calls “a peep show under the guise of sociology” (*Shrovetide* 251). He elaborates: “For four hundred years Americans have made entertainment from Blacks squirming, biting each other’s ears off, roasting, and hanging. Crowds used to witness these affairs in a picnic atmosphere.

Placing Blacks in lurid situations, despising them, dehumanizing them, has always been a national sport.” Thus like the “boring” Howells, Reed doesn’t want things to get out of hand. In fact, when we watch Reed’s soap opera *Personal Problems*, which he explicitly created as a more realistic alternative to blaxploitation, we notice that its pace is fairly slow...

Ultimately the motivation behind the aesthetic choices is strikingly similar. If Howells elaborates a utopian realm of the common to work out conflicts, we find Reed advocating civility, as in his inaugural poem when Jerry Brown became the new mayor of Oakland, which begins as follows:

Let Oakland be a city of civility
Let each citizen treat other
citizens with good will and
generosity.

Let Oakland be a city of civility
in dealings no matter how small
let the cars stop as soon as a
pedestrian steps from the curb ...

(*New and Collected Poems* 341)

Reed may sometimes be aggressive in his discourse, in particular when hitting against the big guns, but he always positions himself *against violence*, which he represents in caricatured, overdrawn cartoon ways, as in the figure Street, leader of the Moochers and a fake revolutionary in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1976), celebrated for his prison record.⁶

Howells has likewise had *problems with radicalism* as a challenge to the common. Miles Orvell calls Howells a “tightrope walker” trying to “strike the middle road” and “make realism acceptable to genteel culture” (108), who tried to contain his radicalism “safely within the margins of bourgeois tolerance” (112). Orvell explains: “Middle-class realism as Howells practiced it thus deliberately observed certain limits” (112) by “conveniently eliminating his most radical characters” (113). Orvell here refers to the radical leftist Landau, whom Howells has killed in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, simply because Landau’s views exceed the common denominator.⁷ Still Amy Kaplan argues that, especially in *Hazard*, Howells rejects “an older

representation of class difference through the genteel extension of ‘sympathy,’ and replaces it with the language of common ownership based on control and modern management” (54).

[Maybe Figure3 (Howells) can also be placed here!]

But Howells’s *business model of literature*, which he elaborates in “The Man of Literature as a Man of Business,” has only reaped him a reputation as a reactionary. In *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889), probably his thickest novel, Howells proposes a dialogic magazine called *Every Other Week*, to be owned by the authors and produced on a cooperative basis, where the authors should not be hired but function as entrepreneurs themselves. Still John W. Crowley observes that “realism has been exposed as an insidious agent of the capitalist-bourgeois hegemony” (118). This accusation is interesting in our context because Reed himself has also been called “very bourgeois” and an “entrepreneur” (*Shrovetide* 219). Reed comments on this: “I guess I’m being penalized for participating in the society and trying to build things” (221). In his *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* we find taciturn “Workers” go about their “business” of making “gumbo”—a reference to multicultural food but also to conjuring as “the Work” of Voodoo practitioners. Still Reed’s point is ultimately not merely ideological but political. As he writes in “The World Needs More Guys Like Pee Wee” about his murdered friend: “I used to kid him about being a ‘capitalist,’ and he used to kid back. That was before I found out that an independent black businessman or worker threatens the status quo more than those who spend a lot of time saying that they do” (*Shrovetide* 291). We find here a common element in the approaches of Howells and Reed to business.

A further similarity is the fact that both these authors are extremely *active editors*. Reed edited the periodicals *Yardbird*, *Quilt*, and *Konch*, which is now a web publication. And he edited a great number of books, from *19 Necromancers From Now*, to *Califia*,

MultiAmerica, Before Columbus Foundation Fiction Anthology, Before Columbus Foundation Poetry Anthology, PowWow, From Totems to Hiphop, and Black Hollywood in Chains—and more books are still in the pipeline. Reed had stakes in several publishing houses, the latest called *I Reed Books*. In short, in addition to being a very active writer himself, his mission has always been to *publish a great variety of other authors*, based on the credo of inclusiveness of the Before Columbus Foundation, of which he was a founding member and which does for publishing what the Mu'tafikah of Reed's fiction do for ethnic art. Such strong involvement in editing work is also what we find in Howells's legacy at *Atlantic Monthly*, "introducing to his New England readership authors from the West and the South, such as Mark Twain and Bret Harte, and more aggressively at *Harper's* by throwing his weight behind young writers such as Stephen Crane, Abraham Cahan, and Hamlin Garland" (Kaplan 18). Howells was trying to teach Americans a new literary taste, introducing them to new writers and new international trends.

This leads to a *sense of cosmopolitanism and polyglossia* as a further common denominator. Where Reed is an avid international traveler who has claimed that his work is more appreciated abroad than at home, and has started learning Japanese, Yoruba, and Hindi late in his life—even publishing poetry in some of these languages (!), Howells as the man from Ohio was fluent in Italian, German, French, and even lived in Venice for a while. We find here two variations of the same values in different contexts.

Still another attitude that these literary figures have in common is their *concern with cultural power centers and their monopolizing attitudes*. As we have already seen, Reed's Mu'tafikah in *Mumbo Jumbo* are looting the "Center of Art Detention" in New York and bringing works of art back to their places of origin in order to reconnect them with their spiritual roots. And as we observed above, Reed also rejects New York's publishing monopoly and has opted for small presses, with his own business on the West Coast. As for the realists, Howells would first make his career in New England, following his literary

heroes to Boston, but then moved on to powerful New York, like his literary hero Basil March. But Howells never forgot his roots in Ohio, and his aim as a literary influencer was always to open up the canon.

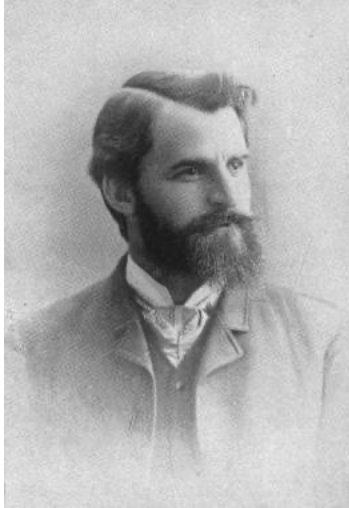


Figure 4: Hamlin Garland, “son of the middle border” (copyright public domain)

An extremely pointed attitude towards this sense of cultural monopoly can be found in Hamlin Garland’s *Crumbling Idols*. Garland envisions a “process [...] of decentralization, together with one of unification” and wants “to show that never again can a city or a group of States overshadow the whole of literary America. It is not merely a question of New York and Chicago now, it is the rise of literary centers all over the nation” (118). A true regionalist, the “middle border” author Garland sees culture beyond any center, as a rooted movement of varieties beyond any standardized conformity. And like Reed, this makes him drift into religious vocabulary when he states that “old idols are crumbling in literature and painting as in religion.” These idols, referred to in the title of his manifesto, “are no longer as gods” (141). Thus he adds a twist to Matthew Arnold’s idea that a secularized “sweetness and light” of culture will replace religion, attacking instead the sense of superiority of such a standardized culture itself. Garland’s vision rather is a *bottom-up praise of provincialism*:

“The ‘provincialism’ which the conservative deplors is not provincialism, but the beginning of an indigenous literature” (7). Like Reed’s *Jes Grew*, where people follow the urge to represent themselves, Garland argues, “the changing currents of human life, grown quicker, pass by [the idols] without looking up there where they sit” (142). Thus representation is local and of local significance.

A last point that local color and Reed’s Neo-HooDoo have in common is their *respect for tradition*. Kaplan asserts: “Howells saw himself as the guardian of tradition” (18). In that sense, many critics have, however, seen regionalism as a backward-looking way of salvaging local culture at the cost of rejecting the progress of a dynamic modern society. To be sure, the local color movement has imposed some fairly static mapping of the literary landscapes, and change is often represented as a feared standardized industrialism that is encountered as a mere difficulty to cope with. Here we can learn from Reed’s approach. His animist paradigm is also rooted in historical awareness, but basing his Neo-HooDoo approach on the oral tradition of improvisation, he connects this respect for tradition to “new loas” in America, “modernizing” Haitian Voodoo instead of yielding to Modernism, moving from New Orleans HooDoo, to jazz, blues, and the Black Arts Movement, respecting the old in new forms and ways.⁸ But both approaches clearly oppose industrialized mechanization and standardization. In *Louisiana Red*, for example, the workers are described as “innocent victims caught by the american [sic] tendency towards standardization, who monotonously were assigned to churning out fragments instead of the whole thing” (7).

One major difference where Reed’s new vision of multiculturalism is more developed is his *criticism of “Tokenism,”* of refusing the idea that all perspectives in a minority should be alike. This shows in his “Talking Android” figure, set up by the monoculturalists in *Mumbo Jumbo* as a single “token spokesman” to manipulate the “Negro Viewpoint” (75). Reed thus insists on variety *within* the black experience! This explodes the big picture of traditional local colorism, which mainly tried to map the United States with salient

representatives of the different parts of the country as well as the social groups, failing, for example, in some of its ethnic representation when Garland naively mentions “Joel Harris” as representing “the new study of the negro” (29). Yet Garland specifies that self-representation is important: “The negro will enter the fiction of the South, first, as subject; second, as artist in his own right” (60). Even if the main aim of the local colorists was not to leave any empty spots in mapping American regions, we note a clear *limitation of the spatial paradigm* because in Reed’s model, in contrast, the very local colors themselves may vary, and hence they cannot be contained within a static vision, *not even a big colored one*.

Thus not only do we move from monochromatic contrast to colored variety in both models, but the very original colors that constitute this variety *may shift because of individual experiences*. Instead of a static colored image, we get a dynamic colored video, as in William James’s pragmatist “stream of experience,”⁹ rich and very much alive and changing, always ahead of our understanding, reminiscent of Reed’s other detective, Nance Saturday in *The Terrible Threes*, whose “clues kept getting ahead of him” (35-36). In that sense, the local color movement of the nineteenth century is a stepping stone, an opening up to a static color paradigm that has been developed by Ishmael Reed into a much more complicated, dynamic framework of dialogue and interaction, a vision that *rejects any superimposed notion of harmony*. It is wildly competitive beyond the imagination of any “vision” and is, in Reed’s aesthetic, best expressed aurally, for example, in the argumentative “sound” of jazz improvisation: “Because in the Voodoo rites a lot of loas show up at the same time, sometimes, and they start quarreling, everybody talking at the same time. You get that in Dixieland” (Reed qtd. Gover 15).¹⁰ In such a framework of life and agency, colors are always moving about, and even changing their colorful views! This goes far beyond any ugly melting pot of “brown” as claimed for the local color period by Lewis Mumford in *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America, 1865-1895* during the heydays of Modernism, and

also beyond any salad bowl imagery, because the mixing and the adding of ingredients is never finished. Reality is like a chameleon—no color or metaphor is final.

Postscript: As already hinted above, my discussion of “color” as a metaphor for multiculturalism clearly shows the *conceptual limitations of binarism as a structuring device of meaning*, whether it be in dialectics, structuralism, poststructuralism, or dysfunctional aims at defining the origins of American culture as Saints fighting in the Wilderness modelled on Old Testament monotheism, or even the representative deadlocks of a “first past the post” two-party system in politics and its appropriative gerrymandering strategies that limit proportional representation and cooperation (also in Britain). In short, as we are facing cultural pluralism, the structural implications of a truly functional color framework will be ever-developing and force us always to search for new forms and channels of understanding and interacting.

Notes:

1. In the plot of *Mumbo Jumbo*, Berbelang is the leader of the so-called Mu'tafikah. We read in a footnote: “According to The Koran, the inhabitants of the Ruined Cities where Lot's people had lived” (15). But Reed's multiethnic group of “art-nappers” are of course metaphorically showing the finger to Western culture.
2. Much of Reed's art napper argumentation agrees with John Dewey's pragmatist approach in *Art as Experience* (5-9). For example: “For, when what he knows as art is relegated to the museum and gallery, the unconquerable impulse towards experiences enjoyable in themselves finds such outlet as the daily environment provides. Many a person who protests against the museum conception of art, still shares the fallacy from which that conception springs. For the popular notion comes from a separation of art from the objects and scenes of ordinary experience that many theorists and critics pride themselves upon holding and even elaborating” (6). We also can read this view as a comment on global semiotics and the implicit claim that meaning originates locally and hence reflects locally. Any kind of prioritized uniform general theory is thus rejected.
3. The reference is to Harriet Beecher-Stowe. We read that according to James Weldon Johnson, the “earliest Ragtime songs, like Topsy, ‘jes’ grew” (qtd. *Mumbo Jumbo* 11).
4. Literature specialists will observe that this radical rejection of binary logic bypasses any structuralist or protostructuralist theoretical approaches, i.e., most of the formalist literary theory that has dominated the 20th century.

5. Note Sundquist's uncritical citing of Modernist dogma, taking sides with the elitist academia of the twentieth century.
6. Louisiana Red is the hot sauce which stands for this violence that has to be overcome: "Louisiana Red was the way they related to one another, oppressed one another, maimed and murdered one another, carving one another while above their heads, fifty thousand feet, billionaires flew in custom-made jet airplanes" (7).
7. Yet Howells adds lengthy moments of mourning dedicated to Lindau in his novel, thus forcing the reader to reflect on the exact circumstances of this elimination.
8. I see Reed's recognition of the old in the new rather as the opposite of the Modernist Poundian appropriation of "Make it new!"
9. From a philosophical perspective, William James is a clear forerunner of multiculturalism, providing a first blueprint of such a theory in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909).
10. For a deeper analysis of this issue of vision vs. acoustics in multiculturalism, see my *CONCRETE LANGUAGE*, chapter 16.3.

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