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The Good Book: Reading Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* as Neo-Hoodoo's Sacred Text

Sacred - adjective \ 'sā-krəd\
worthy of religious worship : very holy : relating to
religion : highly valued and important : deserving
great respect

Text - noun \ 'tekst\
a verse or passage of Scripture chosen especially
for the subject of a sermon or for authoritative sup
port (as for a doctrine)
passage from an authoritative source providing an
introduction or basis (as for a speech)
source of information or authority

—*Merriam Webster Dictionary*

Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* uses a bricolage of techniques, forms, and styles to tell a tale of viral cultural and religious transmission: the story of Jes Grew. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a trickster that textually transmutes information (some true and some false) into a sacred text detailing the influences and history of the Neo-Hoodoo.¹ The text incorporates a large number of influences from a diverse array of artistic and intellectual sources to make a case for an alternative understanding of the cultural history of the world that challenges the mountebank constructions of the White man: the "White man will never admit his real references. He will steal everything you have and still call you those names. He will drag

1 Neo-Hoodoo is a term coined by Ishmael Reed that refers to the growth of traditional African religious practices within the modern context of American culture and society: the religion of Dahomey translated and transported to Haiti and then onwards to New Orleans.

out standards and talk about propriety” (Reed 194). Throughout the book there is constant reference to a larger conceptual notion of aesthetic and religious understanding called The Work. The Work is the comprehensive totality of a flourishing pagan view of life in complete opposition to the death culture of their opponents, the monotheistic Atonists.² Jes Grew is the unfettered and abandoned outward expression of The Work and is accompanied by something called The Text. The Text exists in different forms within *Mumbo Jumbo* and, though seemingly destroyed by the character Abdul,³ is shown instead to have merely changed appearance. The Text does what all loas are capable of doing:⁴ to ride another horse.⁵ In fact, *Mumbo Jumbo* itself can be viewed as an incarnation of The Text, a sacred text that educates and proliferates, provided one could read it inventively. In this paper I will show how the Text can take a number of forms: the sacred text of *Mumbo Jumbo* for instance.

Throughout *Mumbo Jumbo*, language and culture are seen as viral things infecting and mutating constantly. Both the Atonists and the Jes Grew Carriers are engaged in a literary and linguistic viral holy war that ebbs and flows based on control of the written word:

This Jes Grew thing. How did you predict that? Mundane astrology?

No. Knockings.

Knockings, huh? You’re quite good at that. What do you think that this Jes Grew is up to?

It’s up to its Text. For some, it’s a disease, a plague, but in fact it is an anti-plague. You will recall, Black Herman that in the past there were germs that avoided words.

(Reed 33)

The germ of Jes Grew finds its liturgical form in The Text, which spreads like a plague but is instead: “an anti-plague . . . yearning

2 I will follow Reed’s example and use Atonist as a term for White culture and individuals.

3 The character of Abdul can also be read as Malcolm X.

4 Spirits or gods of Dahomey, Haitian, or American Voodoo/Hoodoo.

5 The loas are said to ride the possessed ‘like horses’.

for The Work of its Word or else it will peter out . . . it must find its Speaking or strangle upon its own ineloquence” (Reed 33-4). This flourishing of ancient Black religion and culture requires a Text and it is essential for growth and definition of purpose: “but Jes Grew is the delight of the gods . . . So Jes Grew is seeking its words. Its text. For what good is a liturgy without a text? In the 1890’s the text was not available and Jes Grew was out there all alone” (Reed 6). As we see in the protagonist Papa LaBas’s extended retelling of history, the result of a lack of language or voice leads to a tarantelic pandemic:

He called on Osiris 1 day and argued his theory that the outbreaks occurred because the mysteries had no text to turn to. No litany to feed the spirits that were seizing the people [. . .] A Book of Litanies to which people in places like Abydos in Upper Egypt could add their own variations.

Guides were initiated into the Book of Thoth, the 1st anthology written by the 1st choreographer. (Reed 164)

The Book and The Text are similar, but where the Book is but one static liturgy, *The Book of Thoth*, the Text is the language of Jes Grew.

Jes Grew’s main opposition, the White monotheistic death cult known as the Atonists also have sacred texts and linguistic viruses.⁶ The Judeo-Christian Bible is rarely, if ever, directly mentioned. Instead, the religious texts of the modern Atonists are newspapers, such as “the Atonist voice, the *New York Sun*” (Reed 55). The newspapers are the only literature that the Atonists trust, but in contrast to the lustful and life-affirming Jes Grew, the Atonist method of survival is violence and the threat of death: “They are required to yield their column inches to the Wallflower Order if they are to survive” (Reed 133). The Atonists use the newspapers, and have always used them, to rewrite history and modify events to benefit their narrative: “Atonist scholars up to their old yellow journalism of the *Daily Heliopolitan* decided to depict Osiris as

⁶ The word Atonist is understood within *Mumbo Jumbo* to refer to the ancient Egyptian god of Aten but it also resembles the word atone. This word carries many connotations that are damning of White culture: redemption, expiation, recompense, and redress to name but a few.

Pluto, a castrated god of the underworld” (Reed 170). The majority of Atonists believe the information conveyed by the sacred newspapers, but only a select few know the truth about the *objectivity* (emphasis mine) that simply enforces their view of reality. The sacred Text of Jes Grew embraces a sweaty, rich, earthy, fecund life and the sacred Text of the *New York Sun* embraces sterility, correctness, and (supposed) accuracy. The Atonist aesthetic is exemplified by their headquarters: “You have nothing real up here . . . The aesthetic is thin flat turgid dull grey bland like a yawn. Neat. Clean, accurate, and precise but 1 big Yawn they got up here” (Reed 62). The Atonists borrow and distort, and instead of creating like J.G.C.s they destroy. Any creativity and originality is undermined through subversion of Black literature: “Their writings were banished, added to the Index of Forbidden Books or sprinkled with typos as a way of undermining their credibility, and when they sent letters complaining of this whole lines were deleted without the points of ellipses” (Reed 46). *Mumbo Jumbo* is the antithesis of the boring and staid journalistic prose that is the byline of the Atonist linguistic authorities. Ishmael Reed uses his novel as a postmodern J.G.C., infecting those who read it with questions and doubts about the mechanisms of the world. Reed unquestionably includes false and misleading information, but there is also truth within The Text, enough to make the thoughtful reader curious. This is another function of Reed’s sacred text: it bestows the impulse to investigate.

An investigatory impulse is enmeshed within the Text. The reader receives hints in the generic form which resembles a bizarre gumshoe mystery. The investigator, Papa LaBas, is searching for the roots of Jes Grew and the Text throughout the novel (while existing within the Text he is searching for). There is secret knowledge and secret rituals performed by secret societies, all waiting to be unmasked. The divination of secret histories as accessed through the loas is a major plot device of the novel. All of the alternate religious and cultural history is translated from

the *loa* Agwe⁷ through Benoit Batrville⁸ and then through Papa LaBas to the assembled crowd at the Talking Android's reading.⁹ The character of Papa LaBas is also a mystery waiting to be solved. If we embrace the information provided in the quote above about typos, or consider the metamorphic nature of text within the Text, then we could see Papa Legba as the *loa* Papa Legbas—the god of the crossroads, the divine linguist. In Herskovits's *Dahomean Narrative* Legbas is understood to:

Know all the languages known to his brothers, and he knows the language Mawu speaks, too. Legba is Mawu's linguist. If one of the brothers wishes to speak, he must give the message to Legba, for none knows any longer how to address himself to Mawu-Lisa. That is why Legba is everywhere.

You will find Legba even before the houses of the vodun (gods), because all beings, humans and gods, must address themselves to him before they can approach God.

(Herskovits 125-6)

This is not to suggest that LaBas and Legbas are *necessarily* (emphasis mine) the same individual, but Papa Labas's function within the novel certainly seems reminiscent of the *loa* Legba. In the Dahomean root-religion that gives birth to Voodoo and Hoodoo, Legba “has the ‘words’ needed to foster and sustain the unseen cosmic relationships on which the visible universe rests. He alone knows and links the speech of primordial intimacy and the many tongues of less numinous realms” (Pelton 73). Though Legbas would certainly have more power and agency than LaBas would seem to have, this can be explained by the viral mutation of Jes Grew. If the original Vodun *loa* is Legbas, then the Hoodoo descendant is Papa Labas: “Papa LaBas carries Jes Grew in him like most other folk carry genes” (Reed 23). He assumes his genetic destiny as prophet

7 The Vodoun God of the Sea.

8 A Haitian General and Houngan who conveys secret knowledge to Papa LaBas.

9 A constructed Black Atonist mouthpiece that is intended to act as a double agent against Jes Grew.

of the Neo-Hoodoo in *Mumbo Jumbo*. He is the linguistic detective unmasking the truths behind the Work and the Text.

The Jes Grew understanding of truth is in complete opposition to the Atonist perception. Black Herman explains the essential difference between these truths to Papa LaBas: “1st they [the Atonists] 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 131, my emphasis). There is a subjective truth and an objective truth, but the objective truth renders any personal experience null and void, thus producing a paradox of veracity. The J.G.C.s know that truth can only be understood subjectively, but the Atonists use any expression of that belief to attack their method. The mysteries revealed by LaBas to the crowd assembled to hear the Talking Android are ridiculed in exactly this way. The Atonists cannot allow a J.G.C. to define their work and lash out violently when confronted with alternative readings, as Biff Musclewhite reveals in his plea to Thor:

Son, these niggers writing. Profaning our sacred words. Taking them from us and beating them on the anvil of BoogieWoogie, putting their black hands on them so they shine like burnished amulets. Taking our words, son, these filthy niggers and using them like they were their god-given pussy. Why [. . .] why 1 of them dared to interpret, critically mind you, the great Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*!! (Reed 114, emphasis original).

Any reinterpretation or translation of fact is a site of violent opposition within the Text of *Mumbo Jumbo*. The HooDoo of Jes Grew must reinterpret, given the circumstances of transmission, as Black Herman explains, “[w]e were dumped here on our own without the Book to tell us who the *loas* are, what we call spirits were. We made up our own” (Reed 130). Yet, instead of being imaginary constructions, the *loas* are shown to wield considerable power. The act of making it up is shown to have succeeded in transmit-

ting the Jes Grew anti-plague and the knowledge that accompanies it. The oral tradition is revealed to have immense power as Jes Grew rapidly spreads across the nation. The forbidden and made-up knowledge has more allure than the correct and accurate headlines of the Atonist rags.

Language is constantly shifting and twisting within *Mumbo Jumbo*. In many instances the Text itself transforms and finds new ways to transmit its message or escape from those who would do it harm. The form and style of Ishmael Reed's novel prevents the reader from easily comprehending the Text—as any good mystery should. There is even a beautiful nod to the fellow detective mystery, *The Maltese Falcon*, when an innocuous old man is encountered by LaBas. Black Herman and Papa LaBas believe the Text has been destroyed but it has simply taken another form.

I am 29 but I don't look it. I said the words that night when we turned the Plantation Club upside down. I said the words and she vanished into thin air [. . .] Into thin air, do you hear? She just went away. Flew away like a delicate, beautiful white bird. A WHITE BIRD, DO YOU HEAR?
(Reed 199)

The pages of the Text have simply flapped away; the treasure has flown the coop. The Book, translated by Thoth for Osiris (alternately known as Horus) has changed into a bird. The Text within a text is a bird of unbelievable value—*Mumbo Jumbo's Maltese Falcon*. In *Mumbo Jumbo's* case, the jewels obscure the value of that which is inside the package, an inversion of the plot device in Hammett's novel.

Ishmael Reed deliberately camouflages the Text in the form of a post-modern detective novel. The truths are obfuscated behind multiple layers of historical and religious information and a shifting morass of imagery that mesmerizes with complexity. Ishmael Reed's text is the living embodiment of "Jes Grew . . . the manic in the artist who would rather do glossolalia than be "neat, clean or lucid . . . Jes Grew is the lost liturgy seeking its litany. Its words, chants held in bondage" (Reed 211). Papa Labas "demands the right to his own idols and books" (Reed 48) and in *Mumbo Jum-*

bo Jes Grew finds a new form for the Text. Though he hints at the nature of his Text, there is also skepticism about whether it can truly accomplish its destiny, as Papa LaBas says, “I don’t know the extent to which the Haitian aspects of The Work can be translated here” (Reed 52). In *Mumbo Jumbo* the setting and form must be in unison; the aesthetic and religious practice of one locale is not always suitable for another. This is why The Work, Jes Grew, and The Text must continually ebb and flow and change; they must find the most effective form to transmit the relevant information. If one form does not work it is discarded and a new one develops: this is the strength of the anti-plague Jes Grew. As the novel progresses it tells us what we need to know, that “Jes Grew needed its words to tell its carriers what it thought it was up to. Jes Grew was an influence that sought its text, and whenever it thought it knew the location of its words and Labanotations it headed in that direction” (Reed 211). We even see a prophecy encased within the pages of *Mumbo Jumbo* when the Haitian Batraverse states,

You see the Americans do not know the names of the long and tedious list of deities and rites as we know them. Short hand is what they know so well. They know this process for they have synthesized the HooDoo of VooDoo. Its bleep essence; they’ve isolated the unknown factor which gives the loas their rise [. . .] That talk you drum from your lips. Your style. What you have here is an experimental art form that all of us believe bears watching. (Reed 152)

The postmodern novel *Mumbo Jumbo* is describing itself as sacred text. It contains the rites and the knowledge of the HooDoo aesthetic. This passage could be describing Jazz, Ragtime, or the Blues, but it could also be describing the postmodern literature of 1970s America. As the Black Mason says to Papa LaBas, “we had invented our own texts and slang which are subject to the ridicule of their scholars who nevertheless always seem to want to hang around us and come to our meetings and poke into our ceremonies” (Reed 194). The sacred text of HooDoo has simply taken on another form and will someday take another.

It may seem far-fetched to assert that *Mumbo Jumbo* is a sa-

cred text, as it is commonly understood. The dogmatic and monolithic texts we normally associate with the sacred are books like the Bible, Koran, or Torah. These texts are usually seen as static and unchanging fonts of wisdom to their followers, and this would commonly be seen as a minimum requirement for a sacred text. This vision does not stand up to scrutiny if we scratch the paint off the proverbial falcon though. The Torah is a selectively edited collection of texts that has been usurped by the Bible and the Koran. In addition, all of these sacred texts are accompanied by their own apocrypha that are often seen to be as important as the foundational texts. *Mumbo Jumbo* never explicitly names itself as a sacred text, but if we think about the terms at play we can see that it follows the definitions of a sacred text. More importantly, it follows the conditions for a sacred text as defined by the followers of its faith. Jes Grew must continue to evolve and the HooDoo aesthetic requires new forms and *Mumbo Jumbo* is simply the latest incarnation of the loa Text that began with Osiris and Thoth in Egypt. At the end of the novel Papa Labas and the old man (who remains unnamed) disagree over what is needed, and the next step forward is that “[h]e wanted them to have his head. An Atonist head. While LaBas wanted them to have the heads their people had left for them or create new ones of their own. A library of stacks 1000 miles long” (Reed 217). For LaBas, the object of worship and adoration is not a shrunken doll head, but is instead textual knowledge and comprehension. Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* is but one sacred text in a immortal lineage: “Jes Grew has no end and no beginning . . . We will miss it for a while but it will come back, and when it returns we will see that it never left . . . Jes Grew is life . . . They will try to depress Jes Grew but it will only spring back and prosper. We will make our own future Text. A future generation of young artists will accomplish this” (Reed 204).

The sacred Text has spoken.

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