

Magical Mystery Tours: Ben Okri, Ishmael Reed and the New Age of Africa

Ruth Mayer

Abstract: This essay correlates a postcolonial and a postmodern novel, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, on the basis of their concern with issues of spirituality and (African) magic. Both novels aim at reconciling 'ancient' African knowledge and 'modern' Western achievements rather than casting these conditions as mutually exclusive or radically oppositional. This reconciliation of modernity and magic, tradition and technology, reflects a more pervasive shift in popular culture to spiritual issues since the 1960s which affected postmodern and postcolonial writing like- wise. In view of pervasive experiences of alienation and fragmentation, these new spiritualities gain special significance as they promise new ways of meaning production and orientation.

In Western representations of Africa from Modernism to Postmodernism, from Joseph Conrad to Thomas Pynchon, Africa is enacted time and again as the other space, the realm of darkness beyond representation, a highly suspicious and ambivalent terrain.¹ Many recent African-American and African texts have challenged this notion of 'Africanicity' (Toni Morrison), casting Africa either as a repressed point of origin, the diaspora's 'hidden' self,² or dismissing the Western context altogether in a totalization of the African space of magic.³ Both the Nigerian author Ben Okri and the African American Ishmael Reed have drawn upon this alternative repertoire, representing Africa as the hidden subtext of Western civilization and the magical space which replaces and subverts Western logic. Correlating Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) with Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), I will reflect upon some analogies in these otherwise

- 1 I have outlined this Western 'mythification' of Africa and (post)modern attempts to come to grips with it in another context (Mayer: 1995/1996).
- 2 The topos of the 'hidden African self surfaces in African-American writing since the nineteenth century, as Eric Sundquist has shown who has also pointed out the need for a positive and concrete symbolic framework as provided by these texts. Especially in fictional variations on the Pan-African theme Africa presents always both a geographical, historical and political reality and an imaginary 'mindscape' open to individual projections and desires. Sundquist correlates this idea of Africa as a "figurative region," so popular at the turn to the twentieth century to the idea of a "hidden self" as thematized in psychological theories of the day. Thus, according to Sundquist William James' "theory of diasporic consciousness [...] was capable of yoking together the conception of a split-off, perhaps hidden but in any case culturally oppositional 'personality' and the conceptions of race nationalism comprised by the ideological watchword 'African personality'" (Sundquist: 1993, 570-571).
- 3 Edward Said has delineated this strategy of inverting the dichotomy between Africa and the West and totalizing the African space by analyzing African revisions of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* such as James Ngugi's *The River Between* and Tayb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (Said: 1993, 252).

highly contrastive texts, analogies which derive from a common concern with issues of spirituality and magic. While both texts seem to open up alternative 'African' systems of thought in contrast to a 'Western' logic of secular rationalism, the very differentiation between an African world of magic and a Western world of technology collapses in the course of the narratives, as both novels tend to conjoin these worlds in the very process of contrasting them.

I.

Okri's novel relates the events on the eve of Nigerian independence and the gradual 'Westernization' of the country, yet instead of dramatizing the clash between Nigerian traditions and Western intrusions dwells on the borderline between a fantastic spirit world and everyday Nigerian reality. The *Famished Road* is narrated by the boy Azaro who belongs to the *abiku*, "the spirit-children [...], the strange ones, with half of [their] beings always in the spirit world" (Okri: 1991, 4) and it interweaves traditional beliefs and political plots, social upsurges and spiritual revelations inseparably. Azaro's constant oscillation between two levels of reality discloses a world dominated by invisible powers and magical forces. As he struggles with these experiences and their incommunicability he gets to know 'the photographer,' the novel's only character with a modern profession, whose pictures communicate what Azaro perceives. Documenting chaotic and irreal scenes of spontaneous communal resistance and social protest, the photographer manages "to make them real with his magical instrument" (Okri: 1991, 182), which will make him famous, yet lead to his political persecution. The photographer's power to 'freeze' the moment, to capture a situation that would otherwise have gone unnoticed comes close to Azaro's view on the spirit world. He is the ultimate magician, making visible unseen links and relations, a sorcerer calling up the spirits of the dead. Having escaped from his persecutors he briefly returns to talk to Azaro:

"Where have you been?"

"Hiding."

"Where?"

"In my camera."

"How?"

"Traveling on the back of the silver light."

"Doing what?"

"Visiting other continents. Flying round the universe. Seeing what men and women do.

Taking photographs."

"What will happen to your glass thing?"

"I will leave it."

"So you won't display your pictures anymore?"

"Not here in this street. But I will display them to the whole world."

"How?"

"By magic." (Okri: 1991, 262)

In this as in many other conversations Azaro's unrelenting and unmediated questions bring about a magical subtext, the arcane dimensions of seemingly ordinary practices and mundane activities. Here as elsewhere in the novel, the dichotomy of magic and modernity, sorcery and science collapses, as the latter proves to be already inscribed into

the former. The child's seemingly naive view not only reintroduces a sense of agency into the alienating and unmotivated structures of modernity but moreover manages to envelop the world into a closed, if by implication paranoic, system of meaning: instead of taking an airplane you "travel on the back of silver light," instead of publishing in international magazines you "display [...] to the whole world [...] by magic" (Okri: 1991, 262).

This strategy of casting modern processes in the imagery of magic culminates when Azaro has a vision which unmasks global politics as mere side-effects of an invisible spiritual battle of apocalyptic extensions:

Conflicting forces were fighting in the future of our country in the air, at night, in our dreams, riding invisible white horses and whipping us, sapping our will while we slept. [...] On and on it went, in every village, every city of the country, and all over the continent and the whole world too. (Okri: 1991, 495)

The true and all-pervasive world view, a vision brought forth in Azaro's dreams and the photographer's pictures likewise, discloses that "[a]ll things are linked" (Okri: 1991, 483), and thus reveals a world without 'coincidences' or 'accidents,' where everything is significant and everything interrelates. In a way this notion ties back to pre-scientific models of thought which hold "that events in the world have meaning" and deny "the existence of the contingent," as Kwame Anthony Appiah has shown, so that a meaningful framework of witchcraft, magic and spiritual agents is set up to hold the idea of a meaningless order of things at bay (Appiah: 1992a, 124).

And yet, *The Famished Road*, a twentieth-century text which is concerned with the impacts of modernity on a traditional society, does not actually restore (or even retain) pre-modern conceptions.⁴ The novel reverberates traditional stances when enacting notions of magic, yet these traditional views are deeply entangled with the context and conditions of modernity. In a way the novel aims at an effect comparable to the photographer's pictures which make things 'real' and make people "SEE" (Okri: 1991, 498) - the very process of representation is to bring forth an entirely new aspect of the mundane, thus effecting not so much the obliteration of the modern context but rather its transformation, collating traditional (mythical, magical) and modern (rational, technical) structures to relate the advent of a "new age," "[a] great something [which is] going to [...] change the face of the earth" (Okri: 1991, 498).

II.

At first sight, no two texts seem farther apart than Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*. The very structure of Reed's novel, its comic book style, its pervasive self-reflection and intertextual playfulness (or tautological self-referentiality),⁵ in short, its postmodern aesthetics seem to clash most violently with the apocalyp-

4 For a reading of the novel which stresses its postmodern aesthetics and Okri's specific correlation of Yoruba traditions (being no Yoruba himself), Western experimental writing and Latin American magic realism, see: Gates: 1989a.

5 While Henry Louis Gates, Jr. read *Mumbo Jumbo* as an exemplary instance of the African-American intertextual strategy of 'signifying,' as for him Reed parodies the "notions of closure implicit in the key texts of the Afro-American canon itself" (Gates: 1989, 260), Theodore O. Mason, Jr. has criticized Reed

tic pathos of Okri's postrealist narrative.⁶ And yet, both texts put forth similar scenarios of the intersecting realms of magic, myth and everyday reality, and both map out similar constellations of modernity and African traditions, envisioning networks of interrelations rather than clear-cut contrasts. Instead of counterposing a mythical 'deep' knowledge buried in Africa and the superficial structures of (African-)American modernity, Reed fuses both realms, depicting a modernist America (the frame narrative is largely set in the 1920s) drenched with African magic and an ancient Egypt replete with modern conceptions. The effect might be rightfully called a-historical as it dismantles the differences between then and now, myth (Egypt), history (the 'Jazz Age') and narrative present, but then these differentiations are made out to be most dubious ideological concoctions anyway.

Inverting postmodern techniques of alienation and differentiation, Reed renders everything—even ancient African myth—familiar, casting the Egyptian god Osiris as a cool bandleader touring the world “with his International Nile Root Orchestra [...] and a choir directed by a young comer named Dionysus” (Reed: 1972a, 165), and his brother and opponent Set as a “stick crook and flail man [...] the deity of the modern clerk, always tabulating, and perhaps [he] invented taxes” (Reed: 1972a, 162). Of course, this levelling of historical depth which equates mythical past and twentieth-century popular culture, does not ‘naturalize’ the past after all, ultimately Reed expresses not only the need for historical revision, but more importantly the need to highlight the traces of this revision, by demarcating the modern perspective and auctorial interventions, in order not to fall back upon the criticized patterns of historiographical totalization after all. The textuality of history, just like the textuality of fiction, is accentuated:

If the search for the sacred text is the focus of what is happening, of what is narrated in *Mumbo Jumbo*, the quest for its own form, the problem of its status as a text, determine its ultimate meaning as ‘fiction’ and ‘history’ (Lenz: 1986, 333).

Mumbo Jumbo reveals a transhistorical global conflict between black and white forces, HooDooists⁷ and Atonists, a conflict which is shown to erupt regularly throughout history, triggered by a dance epidemic, “Jes Grew,” which in turn links back to occult African practices. The narrative is set primarily in the 1920s, the Jazz Age, a period which Reed felt to be “very similar” to the 1970s in its redefinition of black identity and a general social sense of crisis (Reed: 1974, 22). Upsurging in the 1920s, *Jes Grew* is

for choosing ‘indeterminacy’ over (political) commitment and thus ending up with a tautologically ‘closed’ conception of history after all (Mason: 1988: 106-107). Of course, Mason’s critique could be extended to almost every postmodern historical novel, as the very project of dismantling established historiography semantically implies the (paranoid) suspicion that an underlying force might exist which purports these established versions - be that ‘V.’ as in Pynchon’s novel, the Templars as in Umberto Eco’s *Il pendolo di Foucault* or the Atonist conspiracy as in *Mumbo Jumbo*.

6 ‘Postrealist’ is Anthony Appiah’s term for contemporary African fiction, a term meant to distinguish African literary revisions of traditional narrative modes from an American literary postmodernism in the wake of Thomas Pynchon. In view of *Yambo Ouologuem’s* *Le devoir de violence* Appiah outlines the postrealist approach as an effort at assaulting the conventions of realism in view of a postcolonial reformulation of national identity: “He seeks to delegitimize the forms of the realist African novel, in part, surely, because what it sought to naturalize was a nationalism, that, by 1968, had plainly failed” (Appiah: 1992b, 150; see also: Miller: 1985). Analogously Flora Veit-Wild has recently invoked the ‘hybrid realism’ of postcolonial African literature countering earlier, anti-colonial, literary approaches (Veit-Wild: 1996, 83).

7 HooDoo/hoodoo is a synonym for Voodoo, when not referring directly to Reed I will use the latter term in the following. About Reed’s ‘Neo-HooDooism’ cf.: Fox: 1984; Lenz: 1986.

made out to affect everybody coming into contact with it, regardless of racial origin, but just like before it subsides eventually, since as long as “it could not find its Text [...] it would be mistaken for entertainment” (Reed: 1972a, 211). Both the HooDoo priest and trickster Papa LaBas, and his antagonists, the Atonist “Wallflower Order,” an organization intent on defending “the cherished traditions of the West against Jes Grew” (Reed: 1972a, 15), try to locate this Text, the mythical “Book of Thoth,” “the 1st anthology written by the 1st choreographer” (Reed: 1972a, 164); Papa LaBas in order to provide scope (and sustenance) to the power inherent in Jes Grew, the Wallflower people in order to destroy it once and for all. Ironically, the text is eventually destroyed not by an Atonist but by a black nationalist, Abdul Sufi Hamid, who argues for concrete political action instead of “this dancing and carrying on, fulfilling base carnal appetites” (Reed: 1972a, 34).⁸

Even in this radically reduced plot line it is apparent that in *Mumbo Jumbo* the clear distinctions between ‘magic’ and ‘science,’ ‘myth’ and ‘history,’ HooDoo and the Judeo-Christian tradition is futile as the latter concepts prove to be only secondary variations and imitations of the former. Consequently, the very idea of ‘Western civilization’ is exposed as a fake, a poor copy of the real thing—African myth. This is epitomized in Reed’s parodic revision of the Western narrative of a quest for knowledge—the Faustian tale:

I always puzzled over why such a legend was so basic to the Western mind, but I’ve thought about it and now I think I know the answer. (Reed: 1972a, 90)

In *Mumbo Jumbo* Faust, “this ‘wandering conjurer and medical quack,’” is by no means a tragic individualist, seeking the truth and failing gloriously as in Goethe’s drama. Instead Faust is presented as a pretty inept sorcerer, a bokor (as opposed to an houngan, a genuine HooDoo priest). He performs the old HooDoo rituals he picked up on his way and comes up with a curious experience:

Well 1 day while he is leeching people, cutting hair or raising the dead who only have diseases which give the manifestations of death, something really works. He knows that he’s a bokor adept at card tricks, but something really works. He tries it again and it works. He continues to repeat this performance and each time it works. [...] He becomes wealthy with his ability to do The Work. [...] They say that he has made a pact with the devil because he invites the Africans who work in various cities throughout the Empire to his castle. (Reed: 1972a, 90-91)

- 8 Of course, the destruction of the Book within the novel, the fact that Papa LaBas fails to come up with the longed-for written documentation could be read as an allusion to the other text, the novel itself, which takes over the function of the Book of Thoth, becoming Jes Grew’s choreography, as Reginald Martin has argued (Martin: 1988, 93). While this reading makes sense, however, it is always only one possible reading, complemented by others. Thus, Gunter Lenz has pointed out the analogies to filmic discourse and their implications: “If *Mumbo Jumbo* is a multi-dimensional, open black postmodern literary text that dramatizes Jes Grew’s determinate search for its Text, the final (or almost final) evocation of the film, again, subverts its status as a literary text by redefining the book as a ‘film-script’ that is only the project, one prerequisite of a work to be ‘realized’ in another medium” (Lenz: 1986, 336). A third implication of the lost Book has been elucidated by Donald L. Hoffman who like Lenz reflected upon Reed’s aesthetics of HooDoo which eventually leads to a reemphasis of the body (as the ultimate Text) over the Book: “What Abdul has really done [destroying the Book of Thoth], despite himself, has been to liberate the Text from the book. Since unlike the Pentateuch or Gospels, the Book of Thoth was choreography, it was never the page as read, but the page as danced that conferred meaning. Abdul’s censorship thus liberates the Grail, so that the chalice, the container of the Divine Spirit, is now congruent with the body of the worshipper” (Hoffman: 1994, 1253).

Faust's lack of control and insight over his practices, his dependency on techniques he cannot really judge, proves to be fatal: while blindly performing the ancient rituals, he fails to grasp their significance, thus reducing the complex and powerful Work of 'black magic' to the self-centered, irresponsible workings of 'white magic':

China had rocketry, Africa iron furnaces, but [Western man] didn't know when to stop with his newly found Work. That's the basic wound. He will create fancy systems 13 letters long to convince himself he doesn't have this wound. What is the wound? Someone will even call it guilt. But guilt implies a conscience. Is Faust capable of charity? No it isn't guilt but the knowledge in his heart that he is a bokor. A charlatan who has sent 1000000s to the churchyard with his charlatan panaceas. Western man doesn't know the difference between a houngan and a bokor. He once knew the difference but the knowledge was lost when the Atonists crushed the opposition. [...] His sorcery, white magic, his bokorism will improve. Soon he will be able to annihilate 1000000s by pushing a button. I do not believe that a Yellow or Black hand will push this button but a robot-like descendant of Faust the quack will. The dreaded bokor, a humbug who doesn't know when to stop. (Reed: 1972a, 91)

Faust's and his descendants' thoughtless self-satisfaction is precisely (and exclusively) what distinguishes the knowledge of HooDoo and the attributes of modernity - technology and science - by dint of the novel's logic. Positing African magic as the paradigm for any kind of human inquiry, then, implies the existence of one committing pattern, a code which still 'works,' even if due to a long history of manipulation, distortion and secrecy it is no longer accessible - its documentation, the Book of Thoth, dispersed and eventually destroyed. This structural pattern organizes the novel's plot line, rendering the struggle between good and bad, the big conflict between Atonists and HooDooists, the core of signification, and evoking a transhistorical and global motivation for racist aggression and resistance, a 'plot' indeed: "It may have looked like a gang war but in reality it was a struggle between who were in the Know. The White man will never admit his real references" (Reed: 1972a, 194).

The world presented in *Mumbo Jumbo* is a divided world, split up in a mundane, meaningless surface and a subtext of myth, conspiracy and magic, which renders the surface events meaningful after all. And Reed's narrative strategy of interweaving grotesque, fantastic, disparate textual fragments summons an imagery of the real and the fantastic which calls to mind *The Famished Road*: every little experience, every action and every movement can be read within a conclusive structure of significance by the initiate, those who "SEE" (Okri), those who are "in the Know" (Reed). The accidental, the contingent and the arbitrary have as little place in Reed's novel as in Okri's, and Reed's ironic inversion of traditional African-American narrative structures in the very process of calling upon them has the same effect as Okri's rupturing of traditional beliefs by their immersion in a modern context. Eventually, HooDooism turns into Neo-HooDooism - "the Now locomotive swinging up the Tracks of the American Soul" (Reed: 1972b, 25) and Azaro realizes "that new forces [are] being born to match the demands of the age" (Okri: 1991, 496): both turns envisioning a world in (technological) transformation and privileging scenarios of spontaneous, immediate and original action over reenactments of traditional rituals. And, indeed, I argue, instead of trying to trace traditional and pre-modern 'magical' patterns of thought in these novels, a more appropriate context for reading both Reed's and Okri's magical mystery tours into Africa is a contemporary one — the pervasive shift in popular culture to spiritual issues since the 1960s

which is deeply entrenched with the post-colonial condition and its new and complex global processes of interaction, appropriation and subversion.

III.

All in all, postmodernity can be seen as restoring to the world what modernity, presumptuously, had taken away, as a re-enchantment of the world that modernity tried hard to disenchant.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (x)

The re-enchantment of the world which Baumann associates with postmodernity presents not so much a return to an older, pre-modern order than a suffusion of the modern world with alternative systems of signification, a hybrid concoction of vague allusions and undifferentiated sources: Western popular culture, Eastern religions, indigenous traditions, fairy tales and myths. John McClure has further elaborated the idea of a “New Spiritual Awakening” since the 1960s (Elwood: 1994) when he evoked a “post-colonial return of the repressed” (McClure: 1995, 147) and pointed out the need to turn to “less academically accredited sources” to come to grips with this phenomenon:

For the articulation of new spiritualities, the elaboration of new sacred discourses, is taking place at some distance from the most academically fashionable sites of cultural production, in the most marginalized work of feminist and ecospiritual theologians, for instance, and Native American spiritual teachers, and the heretical proponents of creation theology. [...] The key words of the spirituality they promote are immanence (the spirit in the world, not over it), interconnectedness, and finitude. [...] This emerging counter-spirituality, which shapes the political imagination and practice of many people in contemporary communities of opposition, has received little attention in literary and cultural studies, but versions of it are articulated everywhere in contemporary fiction, sometimes quite starkly, sometimes in ways that reflect a characteristically postmodern suspicion of any totalizing narrative, any celebration of a center. (McClure: 1995, 156-157)

While providing means of orientation in an increasingly disoriented, de-centered and meaningless world, these new spiritualities do not actually imply a break with the achievements of modernity. Instead of positing magic against modernity, they aim at a reconciliation of technology and tradition for the sake of envisioning the individual in control over his/her destiny and conceiving an order of the world which ‘makes sense,’ even at the cost of assuming a global conspiracy to be at work repressing its evidences. Andrew Ross has traced these tendencies back to nineteenth-century pseudoscientific vogues, which gained new significance and cultural power in the wake of 1960s countercultural developments, so that today “the influence of these ethical principles is quite main- stream and middle class, permeating suburban life and corporate philosophy alike.” Just like McClure, Ross argues that an analysis of these tendencies, which he subsumes under the heading New Age, might be “crucial for anyone who wants to understand the ideological shape of North American culture today” (Ross: 1991, 20-21).⁹

⁹ Recent theoretical reflections have concentrated upon the implications of these developments in a post-

As Ross has shown, the new spiritualities emulate the dominant rationalist discourse of established science. Modern science and technology, their logic runs, need to adhere to 'meaningful' frameworks, as soon as they are no longer immediately applicable and functional they become dangerous as they are prone to run out of human control:

[According to New Age proponents] modern science, in its dependence on large-scale technology, has developed certain "bad attitudes" that stand in the way of that goal [of taking control over evolution]. In this respect, New Agers want to avoid the Faustian mistake of making a pact with externalized technology, even if it means demonizing what might, under controlled circumstances, be liberating. The object, as Berman has suggested of the alchemists, is not necessarily to make gold, but to become golden. (Ross: 1991,21,33)

By dint of this logic, one of the fundamental tenements of modern science, the assumption of a contingent order of things, of potentially unrelated, meaningless or self-sufficient structures, is inverted. The object 'to become golden' expresses the desire to reintroduce agency into the modern world, to maintain a belief in personal relevance and individual responsibility, a more immediately functional logic of cause and effect which promises orientation and stability.

Just like postmodern fiction postcolonial literatures face an "uneven and syncretistical reality," which can no longer be subjected to monolithic and homogeneous patterns of explanation and rationalization (Veit-Wild: 1996, 83, 85. My translation). As I meant to show by correlating my readings of a postcolonial and a postmodern text, one way of coming to grips with this experience of fragmentation and alienation consists in a turn to a spiritual 'subtext', a magical 'code' which provides meaning and orientation after all. Both *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Famished Road* reverberate contemporary intellectual provisions against modern science and contemporary fantasies of agency and control, and both novels aim at correlating 'ancient' African knowledge and 'modern' Western achievements. In both instances, this correlation is brought about by means of a revision of the concept of history —circularity replaces linear progression: "Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around." (Reed: 1972a, 218) writes Ishmael Reed, and "Time is not what you think it is. [...] [Things] keep recurring, keep coming back, and in themselves partake of the spirit child's condition," (Okri: 1991: 484/487) writes Ben Okri. Time, it seems, oscillates, veering between the old and the new, magic and modernity.

This oscillation is acted out not only on the level of plot, but suffuses the narrative perspective of both novels, if by way of totally different narrative strategies. In Okri's novel the "spirit child's condition" brings about a point of view which combines an utterly naive, innocent, and subjective perspective with all the attributes of an omniscient narrator, as Azaro is capable of penetrating not only other peoples' minds but also the superficial layers of space and time. In Reed the same oscillation between extremely limited personal accounts and an omniscient narrative voice is accomplished, but here

colonial context of global interaction, exchange and appropriation. Thus Deborah Root has investigated the increasingly faster circulation of 'exotic' spiritual and religious references in the Western world (Root: 1996) and Michael Taussig just like Donna Haraway and Homi K. Bhabha reflected upon the constructive implications of these processes of hybridization which adapt and radically transform indigenous systems of meaning making (Taussig: 1993, Haraway: 1991, Bhabha: 1994).

these diverging perspectives are clearly marked as discordant - ironically epitomizing each other rather than blending into a magical transcendence of everyday reality.

This comes to the fore in the conclusion of the above passage about time's circularity: "(Locomobile rear moving toward neoned Manhattan skyline. Skyscrapers gleam like magic trees. Freeze frame.)" (Reed: 1972a: 218) As the epitome of modernity, the skyscraper, fuses with natural magic, and this scenario is further 'irrealized' by evoking its being an (artificially staged) filmic image, the earlier insight that "[t]ime is a pendulum" is simultaneously disrupted and corroborated. The very change to filmic terminology and the very distanciation from Papa Labas to an omniscient and detached point of view for once points to the constructedness of the literary text, but also envisions a larger, not yet realized context: the film that could be made, the omniscient eye/I that is capable of editing, freezing, penetrating the image(s) of history, indeed the curious character "I. R." that concludes the narrative by locating it in time and space: 'Jan. 31st, \971 3:00 P.M. Berkeley, California" (Reed: 1972a, 218).

Employing postmodern strategies of parodic disruption and distanciation, Reed still ends on a similar note as Okri who celebrated the photographer's art of freezing a fleeting impression and expressing a truth beyond subjective perception, a truth of magic and myth, a larger truth. If Africa is presented as a highly evanescent space in both *The Famished Road* and *Mumbo Jumbo*, by the same token it becomes the very source of visionary insight in these novels: a condition or experience you have to pass through in order to gain "the Know." Thus, Azaro's mother tells a story about a white man with blue sun-glasses who approaches her on the market and asks her "how to get out of Africa." As he won't accept her indirect answer—"[a]ll things are linked"—he has to learn the hard way. Some time later, she comes across a "strange Yoruba man" who seems weirdly familiar:

He was the white man. His face and his nose and everything was exactly the same except that now he was a Yomba man with fine marks on his face. "I met you five hundred years ago," he said. "I discovered the road." "What was it?" I asked. Then he told me his story. "When I left you," he began, "I became feverish in my head and later in a fit of fury over a small thing I killed my African servant. They arrested me. I sat in a cell. Then they released me because I was a white man. Then I began to wander about the city naked. Everyone stared at me. They were shocked to see a mad white man in Africa. Then a strange little African child took to following me around. He was my only friend. All my white colleagues had deserted me. Then one day my head cleared. Five hundred years had gone past. The only way to get out of Africa was to become an African [...]" (Okri: 1991, 482-483)

'Becoming' an African does not imply a process of acculturation but a mystical transformation, fuelled by the very desire to merge with the Other, to "become golden" rather than make gold as Ross has it. If this insight is exemplarily realized in Africa, both *The Famished Road* and *Mumbo Jumbo* do not limit it to the African context, evoking a universal subtext of magic which, once accessed, reveals a new logic and order of reality, promising orientation and meaning against all odds.

Works Cited

- Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992a). "Old Gods, New Worlds," *In My Father's House. Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 107-136.
- Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992b). "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern," *In My Father's House*, 3-27.
- Zygmunt Baumann (1992). *Intimations of Postmodernity*. London: Routledge.
- Homi K. Bhabha (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Robert S. Ellwood, Jr. (1994). *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP.
- Robert Elliot Fox (1984). "Blacking the Zero: Toward a Semiotics of Neo-Hoodoo," *Black American Literature Forum* 18: 95-99.
- Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1989a). "Between the Living and the Unborn." *The New York Times Book Review* (13 August) 3, 20.
- Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1989b). "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," *Figures in Black. Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self*. New York: Oxford UP, 235-276.
- Donna J. Haraway (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Donald L. Hoffman (1994). "A Darker Shade of Grail. Questioning at the Crossroads in Ishmael Reed's MumboJumbo," *Callaloo* 17.4: 1245-1256.
- Günter Lenz (1986). "'Making Our Own Future Text': Neo-Hoodooism, Postmodernism, and the Novels of Ishmael Reed," *Theorie und Praxis im Erzählen des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*. W. Herget, K. P. Jochum, I. Weber, eds. Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 323-344.
- Reginald Martin (1988). *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Theodore O. Mason, Jr. (1988). "Performance, History, and Myth: The Problem of Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo," *Modern Fiction Studies* 34.1: 97-109.
- Ruth Mayer (1995/1996). "Mythifying Africa," *Connotations* 5.2-3: 187-207.
- John A. McClure (1995). "Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality," *Modern Fiction Studies* 41.1: 141-163.
- Christoph Miller (1985). *Blank Darkness. Africanist Discourse in French*. Chicago: Chicago UP.
- Ben Okri (1991). *The Famished Road*. London: Vintage, 1992.
- Ishmael Reed (1972a). *Mumbo Jumbo*. New York: Atheneum, 1988.
- Ishmael Reed (1972b). "Neo-Hoodoo Manifesto," *Conjure. Selected Poems, 1963-1970*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 20-25.
- Ishmael Reed (1974). "The Writer as Seer," *Black World* 23.8: 20-34.
- Deborah Root (1996). *Cannibal Culture. Art, Appropriation, & the Commodification of Difference*. Boulder, Co.: WestviewPress.
- Andrew Ross (1991). *Strange Weather. Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits*. London: Verso, 15-74.
- Edward Said (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage, 1994.
- Eric Sundquist (1993). *To Wake the Nations. Race in the Making of American Literature*. Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard UP.
- Flora, Veit-Wild (1996). "Karneval und Kakerlaken. Postkolonialismus in der afrikanischen Literatur," *family nation tribe community SHIFT. Zeitgenössische künstlerische Konzepte* (exhibition catalogue). Berlin: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst.