

(Afro-)American History Broke-Down:
Postmodern Parody and the Signifyin' Poetics of Ishmael Reed

Michael D. H. Yates

i am outside of
history. i wish
i had some peanuts, it
looks hungry there in
its cage

i am inside of
history. its
hungrier than i
thot

— Ishmael Reed, “Dualism: in ralph ellison’s invisible man”
Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970

Before this article moves into an exploration of Ishmael Reed’s *The Free-lance Pallbearers* (1967) and an analysis of how this novel figures within the metafictional spectrum of the postmodern ironic mode, it might be useful to begin

by considering the parodic mechanism of the poem above. Featuring prominently in such seminal works of African-American literary theory as Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Figures in Black* (1987) and *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), introducing Reginald Martin's influential study of the author in *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* (1988), and playing an important role in the "Postcolonial Stylistics and Postmodern Logic" chapter of Paul Hamilton's *Historicism* (1996),¹ Reed's poem, "Dualism:: in ralph ellison's invisible man" (collected in *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970* [1971]), not only displays a number of the central elements in Reed's humorously polemical perspective, analysis of this poem also provides a critical point of entry into Reed's deceptively complex, multi-layered method of parodic encoding and citation, or, what Gates (among others) refers to as, "signifying."

In keeping with Reed's "signifying," one response to this poem might be to ask: Does the poem's disembodied voice carry in its cartoon pocket, as it were, the 1,369 matches necessary to resolve this predicament, or, is this the point at which the music surges into its finale and a fanciful "*That's all (black) folks!*" zooms into view? As does the narrator in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Ishmael Reed's narrator leaves the reader in the dark as to how it all turns out, though it certainly does not bode well. Indeed, despite the playful, ludic tone of Reed's treatment of Ellison's novel, the absent object in Reed's poem is no less frightening for its comical disappearance, quite the contrary. Tricked into the voracious maw of history simply by sympathizing with its pitiful state, the narrator becomes one with its appetite, corporeally contained and conceptually absorbed, shifting from raw to cooked (or, perhaps, raw to eaten) in the space of a single prefix.

In these two brief stanzas, Reed's parody not only condenses Ellison's novel into a tight binary system of metaphorical oppositions, it also connects the dualism formed by this construct back to its own rhetorical tradition within African-American poetics. As noted by Gates in *Figures in Black*, Reed's poem caricatures the either/or dualism of W. E. B. Du Bois's "double-consciousness" by metaphorically connecting the existentialist dualism of in-/visibility in Ellison's *Invisible Man* to the essentialist dualism of "two-ness" described by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).² In so doing, Reed's poem draws a direct, parodic parallel between these rhetorical formulations, pitting them against one another and, thereby, subjecting both to an aggressively (self-)mocking critique. As Gates

writes in *The Signifying Monkey*, “Reed’s poem parodies, profoundly, both the figure of the black as outsider [Ellison] and the figure of the divided self [Du Bois]. For, he tells us, even these are only tropes, figures of speech, rhetorical constructs like ‘double-consciousness,’ and not some preordained reality or thing” (238). Avoiding a portrayal of this dialectic of otherness and “double-consciousness” as either concretely real or purely imagined, Reed’s poem warns the reader of the risk of mistaking rhetoric for reality while at the same time recognizing the very real threat of certain formulations of the imagination.

One such threatening formulation confronted by Reed in “Dualism” is precisely the rhetoric of this “divided self” as it is imagined by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 16). In Reed’s poem, this pitying, self-othering gaze is precisely the gaze that annihilates autonomous identity. By sympathizing and ultimately identifying with this sense of division, one becomes divided, surrogated to an incomplete, artificial image of oneself and, thereby, separated from any coherent sense of identity. To Du Bois, it is precisely through this falsely reflexive act of “double-consciousness” that one’s own identity (or, “soul,” in Du Bois’s idiom) is seen to be pitiful, contemptible, and eternally other. Applying this construct as the rhetorical ground for his parody, in Reed’s poem this self-dividing transformation from pitying to pitiful (as in Du Bois), along with its implied shift from alienated exclusion to self-annihilating inclusion (as it figures in the epilogue to Ellison’s *Invisible Man*), is re-cast as a process of historical appropriation.

Replacing Du Bois’s term, “soul” (as it occurs in the passage above), with the figure of “history,” Reed’s poem suggests that a measuring of one’s (invisible) experience by the historiographic tape of an othering, dialectical sense of history (i.e., the totalizing [modernist] sense of historicity created and enforced by the highly visible “cage” of [Western] historiography) effects a destructive appropriation of the outsider’s experience. This experience, defined as the outsider’s history in Reed’s arrangement, sustains the caged beast of historiographic totality by exchanging its alterity for inclusion. As this exchange occurs, the invisible outsider—along with the autonomous identity and distinct history that attend the outsider’s exclusion from the realm of a more visible,

mainstream discourse—is negated by inclusion into its opposite. As Robert Elliot Fox comments in *Conscientious Sorcerers*:

[The] achievements of blacks and other oppressed peoples have been frequently expropriated by whites. History is also ‘herstory,’ *their* story, individual tales of joy and sadness, confusion and survival that constitute the collective narrative of a people. Appropriation of a people’s history, Reed insists, is a denial of their identity. (72, Fox’s emphasis)

For the outsider, identification (whether imagined or material) with such a process of historical appropriation is, in Reed’s poem, sufficient to result in one’s own erasure.

In his discussion of the poem in *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates traces the key element in Reed’s parody of Du Bois and Ellison to a statement made by the anonymous narrator in the epilogue to Ellison’s *Invisible Man*: “Now I know men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health” (Ellison 576).³ According to Gates, Reed’s poem contradicts Ellison’s narrator by exposing the truly destructive nature of the dualism implicit in such a figuration of division. Gates writes, “For Reed, this belief in the reality of dualism spells death” (*Signifying* 238). However, one point that Gates neglects in his study and which highlights the interaction of the rhetorical figures in this poem as absolutely key to an understanding of Reed’s position, both poetically and politically, is the poem’s ironic play on the concept of division.

For, to the extent that the poem argues that the (self-)division inherent in “double-consciousness” results in self-negation, such a rhetoric of division is clearly condemned (albeit comically) by Reed’s ironic arrangement. And yet, in the original context of *Invisible Man*, the division that Ellison’s narrator is referring to (especially in the line from the epilogue quoted by Gates) is not so much a division of one’s self in the sense forwarded by Du Bois, but rather a division from the inherently violent processes of social and racial integration (re-interpreted as historical appropriation in Reed’s poem) which the invisible man’s grandfather describes in the prologue to Ellison’s novel:

I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. (Ellison 16)⁴

Nagged and chastised by his grandfather's dying words throughout the novel, in the epilogue there is a clear sense that Ellison's narrator has finally accepted his grandfather's solution to the question of division (despite his supposition of the relative "health" to be found in division). And by leaving his well-lit underground it is clear that the narrator is making a consciously self-sacrificing (yet sincerely hopeful) decision to emerge from his otherness and re-enter the world as a potential agent of change with a "socially responsible role to play" (Ellison 581). Ultimately acquiescing to his grandfather's logic, Ellison's narrator begrudgingly allows that change can, in all likelihood, only be effected through such a process of self-sacrificing integration (i.e., from within the "lion's mouth"). And so, with this as his chosen fate, he leaves behind the safe, peripheral liminality of his place of "hibernation" and ventures out into the chaos of the mainstream (Ellison 580-81).

As previously mentioned, Reed's parodic interpretation of the invisible man's dilemma clearly indicates this decision to be the narrator's undoing. So where (or what) exactly is Reed's position vis-à-vis the question of division? In order to answer this question it is necessary to return to the concept of "signifying" as suggested earlier.

Through an extended synthesis of earlier socio-linguistic and anthropological studies of "signifying" by scholars such as Roger D. Abrahams, Kimberly W. Benson, and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan,⁵ Gates offers the following (dualistically nuanced) definition in *Figures in Black*: "The Afro-American rhetorical strategy of signifying is a rhetorical act that is not engaged in the game of information giving. Signifying turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendent signifier" (238). With its own highly sophisticated social and semantic rules of play, the game of signifying (also occasionally denoted by Gates and others as "signifyin[g]", and/or "Signifying", as a way of registering its multiple functions both within, between, and above rhetorical and dialogical acts)⁶

can be used to communicate, confuse, interpret, and encode via the physical and/or verbal deployment of an array of rhetorical tropes and dialogical tactics.⁷ As Gates writes:

Signifying is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes), and also hyperbole and litotes, and metalepsis. . . . To this list we could easily add aporia, chiasmus, and catechesis, all of which are used in the ritual of signifying. (*Figures* 236)

While signifying play can be analyzed and explored in terms of its rhetorical structures and tropological interactions (as Gates does quite successfully), Gates is also careful to point out that the rhetorical game of signifying—like the dissimulation, parodic displacement, and intertextual citation that often occur in written and verbal forms of irony—typically takes place in the space between written and verbal events (*Figures* 238). In fact, this unspoken and often strategically unspeakable area of language is precisely the space that signifying play most effectively occupies. As Mitchell-Kernan writes in “Signifying”:

The Black concept of signifying incorporates essentially a folk notion that the dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations. Complimentary remarks may be delivered in a left-handed fashion. A particular utterance may be an insult in one context and not another. What pretends to be informative may intend to be persuasive. The hearer is thus constrained to attend to all potential meaning carrying symbolic systems in speech events—the total universe of discourse. (314)⁸

According to Mitchell-Kernan, the epistemological fluidity of signifying relies upon a constantly shifting interplay of implication and allegation, insinuation and distraction, all of which takes place at the meta-level of discourse.

The signifying use of the word *apple*, for example, does not simply function as a semiotic signifier for the signified object of a phenomenological apple, but exists

at the verbal nexus of every possible connotation of apple and apple-ness: as a food metaphor; as a symbol from and/or for the Bible; as a metalepsis implying sex or virginity; as a potential allusion to Max Apple, Apple Records, or Apple Computers, Inc.; as the makings for a pun on the euphemistic phrase “a pull,” and so on. Each of the items in this chain of dynamic signifiers, in turn, leads to another set of potential semantic relations. The signifying use of *apple* in a hip-hop cipher as an allusion to Apple Records, for example, might yield any of a number of further implications depending on the context of its usage (e.g., as a reference to pop music and/or the pop sensibility, as a reference to The Beatles, as a reference to the “whiteness” of such a record company [in contrast to the “blackness” of record companies such as Def Jam or Death Row], etc.). Furthermore, not only does each signifying reference rely upon the context of its utterance, each instance of that reference also stands in relation to previous similar utterances (i.e., signifying is often done upon well-known, precedent uses of a given trope or metaphor).⁹ This type of playful citation, as both Gates and Mitchell-Kernan attest, is often both a nod of recognition to past players of the game as well as a critical revision of their stylistics and signature rhetorical tactics.¹⁰

In order to successfully navigate the various semantic and rhetorical levels of this complicated game the player must display a comprehension of the double-voiced message (or “left-handed” distraction) masked as information and re-deploy that message. Essential to this process is an ability to decipher the double meaning hidden behind a given code and either continue the signifying play within that code or shift the play to a new rhetorical matrix (e.g., apples to cherries; record labels to labeling). All the while, in order to keep the game moving, each signifying act must be played forward at the same time as it is played back upon the event, trope, or situation that initiated the play. The game of signifying, in other words, can only be successfully played by responding in kind—that is, by responding with equal duplicity and/or by resetting the code—and at every point it is always possible to misread the message entirely by taking it seriously (i.e., following the flow of signifiers in the wrong [purely literal/purely figurative] direction) and, thereby, failing to properly respond to the implicit duplicity of the message.

As suggested by Gates, signifying play typically takes place at the liminal crossroads of the figurative and the factual (*Figures* 236-37). This is precisely why

the signifying relations in Reed's poem cannot be entirely rectified and why any definite sense of the poem's "true" intent remains elusive to the critic. Slippery and elastic, "Dualism" appears mythical when approached from a literal standpoint and literal when approached from a mythical standpoint.¹¹ This indeterminacy, according to Gates, is ultimately attributable to the dual-voiced nature of signifying as a self-reflexive mode of meta-discourse, or, to put it in other (yet, no less circular) terms, the indeterminacy of the signifying speech act relates directly to its medial status as a scripted yet speakerly oral text (*Figures* 249).¹² As Gates explains:

The determinate meanings often sought in criticism often run counter to the most fundamental values of the tradition as encased in myth. In this sense, the literal and the figurative are locked in a Signifyin(g) relation, the myths and the figurative Signified upon by the real and literal, just as the vernacular tradition Signifies upon the tradition of letters, and as figures of writing and inscription are registered, paradoxically, in an oral literature. This is another example of the presence of the dual voice. (*Signifying* 22)

Though obviously rich in a variety of narratological implications, the most significant aspect of this assessment (for the purposes of the following exploration of Reed's early fiction) is the correlation that Gates traces through the duality of voice inherent in the signifying, speakerly text to what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as the "hidden polemic" within the parodic structure of double-voiced discourse.¹³

Quoting at length from Bakhtin's "Discourse Typology in Prose," Gates declares Bakhtin's concept of "hidden polemic" to be absolutely crucial to an understanding of the intertextual relations and critical revisions that occur within Reed's double-voiced, highly vernacular parody (*Figures* 247). Defining this concept, Bakhtin writes:

In hidden polemic the author's discourse is oriented toward its referential object, as in any other discourse, but at the same time each assertion about the object is constructed in such a way that, besides its referential meaning, the author's discourse brings a polemical attack to bear against another speech act, another assertion, on the same topic. Here one utterance focused

on its referential object clashes with another object on the grounds of the referent itself. That other utterance is not reproduced; it is understood only in its import. ("Discourse" 199)¹⁴

As established by Gates, consideration of the double-voiced configuration of this hidden polemic is crucial to an understanding of the type of intertextual parody employed in novels such as Ishmael Reed's *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*. However, while Gates limits the scope of his analyses primarily to the intertextual relationships Reed shares with previous African-American texts and traditions, it is the contention of this article (without in any way arguing against Reed's rightful inclusion within the African-American literary tradition and with a full awareness of the tremendous importance of this canon and its continued development) that the metafictional structure of Reed's parody also presents an obvious case for an analysis of Reed's writing in relation to the postmodern ironic mode. For, the parodic mechanism of Bakhtin's double-voiced polemic, which Gates locates in Reed's fiction, is also fundamental to the intertextual and metafictional structures of postmodern ironic narrative.

By expanding Gates's appraisal of Reed as the latest in a distinguished line of signifying African-American literary parodists (a tradition that Gates follows back through the works of Reed, Ellison, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Jean Toomer, and Zora Neale Hurston to the writers of some of the first "black experience" narratives published in America during the eighteenth century),¹⁵ this article seeks to orient its analysis of Reed's fiction to within the context of his place in the tumultuous American arts scene of the 1960s and early 70s. This is not to say that Reed's writing during this period is in any way a direct product of the influences and theories of those times (whether African-American, Anglo-American, Franco-American, or otherwise). For the most part Gates's placement of Reed squarely within the African-American canon is justified and explains far more about the various forms and functions of Reed's writing than it conceals. Nevertheless, it is impossible (indeed, it would be doing Reed's writing a blatant, critical injustice) to ignore the striking formal and political similarities between the works of postmodern writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, and Ishmael Reed.¹⁶ For as Neil Schmitz contends in his essay, "Neo-HooDoo: The

Experimental Fiction of Ishmael Reed”:

. . . contemporary Afro-American writing is as diverse and generally parodic in its modes as contemporary Anglo-American writing—the milieu and idiom differs, not the fictional tactics. Reed’s . . . [writing] moves finally along the same metafictional angle that Pynchon and Barthelme [and Coover] take in their fiction, probing folklore and myth with the same seriocomic intent, to wrench from them their own truths. (Schmitz 139)¹⁷

As Schmitz notes in his essay, the fictional tactics employed by Pynchon, Barthelme, Coover, and Reed do not merely display a number of formal similarities, their common project of “probing folklore and myth” also indicates a shared metafictional goal of anatomizing precedent narrative forms and exploring the veracity of all textual formulations, especially those purporting to contain or convey notions of “truth.” Indeed, what makes a consideration of the works of Ishmael Reed absolutely crucial to a full exploration of the postmodern ironic mode is the way in which his writing ties together the metafictional forms and abstract re-formulations found in the works of Pynchon, Barthelme, and Coover.

As is readily apparent in the works of these authors, the ironic is a mode of textual revision predicated upon a formally parodic matrix of metaphorical deconstruction, metafictional collage, and an expansion of narratorial agency. While this parodic matrix is not unlike the signifying intertextual relations described by Gates as connecting works such as Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, and Ellison’s *Invisible Man* into a coherent literary tradition (*Signifying* 87-88), it is proposed that Reed’s synthesis of metaphorical deconstruction, metafictional collage, and narratorial expansion is, in terms of form, immediately comparable to that of Pynchon, Barthelme, and Coover. For the question of concern here, in this article, is not one of determining which literary tradition into which Reed’s fiction might best be placed, but rather where his fiction is located in terms of form.

In fact, formal comparison of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, Coover’s *Pricksongs & Descants*, and Barthelme’s *Snow White* to the parodic mechanisms at play in Reed’s *The Free-lance Pallbearers* reveals that each of these works stands at a similar distance to its own tradition, both structurally and ideologically.

Nevertheless, none of these works can be said to be outside of the tradition that it also subverts and critiques. Indeed, Coover's parodic intertextual relations with the fairy tale genre in *Pricksongs & Descants*, with Western myth and legend in *Ghost Town*, and with historiographic forms of narrative in *The Public Burning*, are best viewed as attempts to anatomize the literary traditions from which these forms derive, thereby re-visiting and revising the creative potential of the metaphors upon which these traditions are built. Likewise, Barthelme's fragmented explorations of both novel and narrative in *Snow White* and in the stories collected in *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* and *City Life* (among others) cannot be separated from the forms and traditions being parodied. The works of Coover and Barthelme, like those of Reed, are part and parcel of the very traditions they seek to parodically redress.

It is precisely this gap that postmodern parody most frequently exploits. As specified by Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, postmodern forms of parody are engaged in a repetition with a difference, never a nostalgic return, and a major part of this engagement is a critical investigation of the traditions from which contemporary forms have emerged:

[The postmodern] reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic, it is always critical. It is also not ahistorical or de-historicizing; it does not wrest past art from its original historical context and reassemble it into some sort of presentist spectacle. Instead, through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference. (89)

Like the dual-voiced interactions in signifying play, postmodern parody contains an intrinsic recognition of the influence and historical resonance of the forms and traditions being parodied.¹⁸ As Hutcheon is careful to note in her study, "As [a] form of ironic representation, parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" (97). Hutcheon's approach to postmodern parody highlights one of the unavoidable paradoxes of ironic critique (one shared with the process of signifying): it is always—for better or worse—a legitimization of its target; for it is impossible to attack, revise, and/or subvert

something (even in the most violent, antagonistic terms) without first identifying it and recognizing its influence.

Such a process is clearly at work within the signifying textual relations described by Gates and is also present in the parodic arrangement of Bakhtin's hidden polemic. Indeed, part of the utility of Bakhtin's explanation of the hidden polemic is the way in which it allows the critic to differentiate between the two voices of the parodic text and, thereby, triangulate the terms of the intertextual relationship between the parodic text, the source material, and the referent.

As Bakhtin describes in the passage quoted earlier, the dual voice of the parodic text is engaged with the referent on two levels. On the primary level, the parodic text relates to the referent satirically, often through the tone, style, and the voices of its narration. On the secondary level, what Bakhtin describes as the text's hidden polemic, is the indirect parodic relation of the text to its referent through its intertextual relation to a set of precedent forms (i.e., the ostensible source material of the parody). This relation is often discernable in the structural similarity between the narrative forms of the parodic text and those of its source material. In this sense, the parodic text following this pattern is engaged with the referent on both a direct satirical level, as well as on an indirect, formally polemical level.

This tripartite structure is structurally analogous to the arrangement of the metafictional narrative, because the inherently parodic structure of metafiction typically stands in a critical relation to both the source material—to which it corresponds—and the referent—to which it responds. While Gates is correct in his analysis of the signifying hidden polemic that connects the works of Toomer, Wright, and Ellison (et al.) into a coherent canon (i.e., as a literary repository of texts directly concerning the African-American experience; textually exemplified in the narrative pattern of "the black experience novel"),¹⁹ analysis of Reed's fiction shows that his relation to this canon—like the critical difference that delineates the work of mythopoesis from the work of metafiction—is not one of a direct correspondence (or, in other words, an earnest advancement of "the black experience novel" as handed down from writers such as Hurston, Toomer, Wright, and Ellison), but is instead a self-mocking, parodic attack against the ideological limitations and formal conventions of this canon. While any such attack, as

Hutcheon's statement reminds, is also a critical legitimization, nevertheless, Reed's fiction, like that of his American postmodern contemporaries, is involved in a legitimization that does not take the truths of the canon as self-evident but instead subjects them to intense ironic scrutiny and comic ridicule.

This is especially the case in Reed's debut novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967; hereafter referred to as, *Pallbearers*). In this novel Reed's ironic narrative playfully deconstructs conventional notions of black identity and satirically undermines the intellectual and moral integrity of "the black experience novel."²⁰ In fact, pushing the metaphor of "attack" to its extreme, it might even be more accurately said that Reed's *Pallbearers* takes a Menippean bazooka to "the black experience novel" and re-assembles the scattered pieces into a self-reflexive, carnivalesque narrative collage.

The main parodic target of Reed's Menippean blast, as several critics have pointed out, is clearly Ellison's *Invisible Man*.²¹ And the traces of Ellison's novel are discernibly present in the overall narrative structure of *Pallbearers* as well as (as both Gates and Schmitz also note) in the faux "confessional mode" of the novel's narration.²² However, far from playing it safe with his narration, Reed's novel is peppered with frantic expository sketches, self-consciously surreal dream sequences, and awkward, narratorial code switches between stereotypically Anglo-American and African-American dialects and idioms. And as far as the high ironic expansion of the narratorial power of action is concerned, *Pallbearers* pushes its narration right to the very edge of comprehension, skirting the outer perimeter of the ironic mode like a metafictional roller-derby with a party of HooDoo zombies in a race to the death, rolling wild and wreaking havoc at every turn.

Told from beyond the grave by the novel's protagonist and narrator, Bukka Doopeyduk, the narrative dashes from one tangled verbal exchange to another. However, as Schmitz comments in his study of *Pallbearers*, the result is not a polished assembly of convoluted colloquial episodes (such as in Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* or Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*), nor does the narration ever approach the pathological tone or stylistics of a true confessional narrative (in the mode of Wright's *Native Son* or Ellison's *Invisible Man*), but instead *Pallbearers* more closely approximates a vernacular bedlam of wanton "funkyness," "talltalk," and "roughened discourse" (130). As Schmitz writes:

The language of *Pallbearers* is an orchestration of idiolects, conflicting types of speech that caricature their speakers. . . . Brought back from the novelistic life he so badly lived, Doopeyduk retells [the] novel like a theatrical impressionist, a mimic skillfully doing all its characters. (Schmitz 131)²³

And like the “pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds” that make up the cast of the Menippean satire in Northrop Frye’s definition of the form (Anatomy 309), *Pallbearers* is filled to brimming with cartoon mouthpieces, each of them out to deceive, or, “dupe” the narrative protagonist.

In parodying the company of shadowy apparitions that people *Invisible Man* and that continually attempt to rally Ellison’s narrator to their respective causes (e.g., Mr. Norton, Mr. Emerson, Jr., Dr. Bledsoe, Lucius Brockway, Brother Jack, and Ras The Exhorter/Destroyer, among others), Reed’s novel is crowded with self-serving opportunists and those all too willing to sacrifice Doopeyduk (both literally and figuratively) in order to get ahead. However, while the characters in *Invisible Man* are portrayed with a morally indistinct opacity of intention balanced with an acute lexical precision to their respective characterizations and personalized speech patterns (not unlike the type of characterizations found in Kafka’s *The Trial* and Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*), the caricatures in *Pallbearers* (as in the satires of Swift and Voltaire, as well as in postmodern Menippean satires such as in Coover’s “Panel Game” [from *Pricksongs & Descants*] and Barthelme’s *The Dead Father*) are depthless, inarticulate, and betray their intentions almost immediately—the only mystery in Reed’s novel is the extremity of its madness.

Further accentuating this intertextual lunacy is the impression that several of the characters in *Pallbearers* seem to have been rather unceremoniously wrenched from Ellison’s serious, low ironic narrative and roughly re-installed in the pages of Reed’s high ironic madhouse—Ellison’s Liberty Paint company doctor is recast as Reed’s Dr. Christian, Ellison’s Brother Jack as Reed’s Cipher X, Mr. Norton as Aboreal Hairymen, Reverend Barbee as Eclair Porkchop, Rinehart as Elijah Raven—the appearance of each throwing off signifying sparks of mimicry, symbolic citation, and allusion in every scene in which they materialize.

And caught in the middle of this twisted, parodic miasma of buffoons, bozos, and burlesque charlatans is Bukka Doopeyduk, king of the dupes.

Perpetually hoodwinked and as monotonous in his single-minded response to the world as his aviary, duck-like, quacking namesake, Doopeyduk's posthumous narration follows the course of his fantastic (former)²⁴ adventures in the never-never-land of HARRY SAM. Beginning, as does *Invisible Man*, with a brief prologue of sorts, *Pallbearers* opens with a short biography of HARRY SAM, dictatorial leader (a tenuous spoof of Richard Nixon)²⁵ and eponymous symbol of the Technicolor hallucination within which Doopeyduk and the other characters battle for survival:

I live in HARRY SAM. HARRY SAM is something else. A big not-to-be-believed out-of-sight, sometimes referred to as O-BOP-SHE-BANG or KLANG-A-LANG-A-DING-DONG. SAM has not been seen since the day thirty years ago when he disappeared into the John with a weird ravaging illness.

The John is located within an immense motel which stands on Sam's Island just off HARRY SAM. (*Pallbearers* 1)

It is to this island that the course of Doopeyduk's trials will eventually lead, thus guiding him to the fulfillment of the prophecy foretold at the close of the first section of the novel:

Legend has it that when the fateful swimmer makes it from Sam's Island to HARRY SAM . . . old men will sneeze, swoop up their skiffles and rickety sticks, then lickety-split to rooms of widow executioners in black sneakers. It is at this time that the Free-Lance Pallbearers will take SAM. (*Pallbearers* 4)

That the fulfillment of this prophecy—like the realization of the vague utopian dream of a scientifically perfected, culturally informed, racially integrated future which drives the narrator in Ellison's novel—would involve a radical overhaul of American society and its systems of governance and control is, however, beyond the meager scope of the protagonist. For, although most of the other characters in *Pallbearers* appear to be aware of the imbalances of power and the network of

organizations in place to oppress them, Doopeyduk remains, until the very end of the novel, blind to the reality of his own subjugation (another signifying riff on *Invisible Man*).

Throughout the novel Doopeyduk repeatedly rails against anyone that might dare to question or denigrate what he sees as the pristine purity of HARRY SAM—as a man, a place, and an institution (28, 74, 87-88, 114). And despite his withdrawal from the Harry Sam College, where he was studying as a Nazarene apprentice on track “to becoming the first bacteriological warfare expert of the colored race” (*Pallbearers* 4), he continues to devote himself reverently to his studies of the Nazarene code. This code, like the obscure doctrines of the Brotherhood in *Invisible Man*, becomes Doopeyduk’s shield against the absurd realities that surround him: the abject state of black urban poverty, the poor conditions of the public housing, healthcare, and educational systems, the brazenly racist nature of American foreign policy, and, perhaps most frequently, the brazenly racist nature of American society in general. And whenever he encounters moments of strife or circumstances that he is unable to comprehend (which are numerous), Doopeyduk simply pulls out his Nazarene manual and recites the following set of oaths:

Harry Sam does not love us. If he did, he’d come out of the John and hold us in his lap. We must walk down the street with them signs in our hands. We must throw back our heads and loosen our collars. We must bawl until he comes out of there and holds us like it was before the boogeyman came on the scene and everybody went to church and we gave each other pickle jars each day and nobody had acne nor bad breath and cancer was just the name of a sign. (*Pallbearers* 26, Reed’s syntax)

But despite his rabid piety and his complete devotion to the Nazarene order (a pseudo-Christian worldview of scientific progress and mono-cultural [Anglo-Saxon] supremacy; not unlike the philosophy of the “Wallflower Order” in Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*), his conditions do not improve. In quick succession, Doopeyduk loses his wife (the unabashed Fanny Mae; in many ways a downtown version of Ellison’s uptown Sybil), he loses his position as an orderly at a mental hospital

(for service at which he is awarded an engraved, golden bedpan [57; 92]; an ironic play on the invisible man's briefcase), and thus, being divorced and out of a job, he subsequently loses his apartment in the Harry Sam housing projects (98-99). Doopeyduk ends up alone, unemployed, homeless, and without anywhere to turn, and yet his dedication to HARRY SAM and the Nazarene order is unflagging.

It is at this point in the narrative that Doopeyduk suddenly finds himself an unwitting (in every sense of the term) artist and celebrity. For in his destitution Doopeyduk takes a job as a living stage prop in a theatre production called, "Git It On," organized by a black-acting white artist named Cipher X (93-95). The production (an ad-hoc pastiche of the "battle royale" scene and the final Brotherhood committee meeting in *Invisible Man*) involves Doopeyduk's confinement in a set of stocks, the rapid-fire pelting of his face and arms by a baseball-shooting robot, the screening of Nazi propaganda films, and the broadcasting of anti-white threats from a tape recorder (101-03):

WHITEY YOU DIE TOMORROW RIGHT AFTER BREAKFAST AND
IF YOU DON'T DIE THEN CHOKING ON YOUR WAFFLES DON'T
BREATHE A SIGH OF RELIEF AND SAY THANK GOD FOR BUFFERIN
'CAUSE THAT WILL ONLY MEAN THAT YOU WILL MEET YOUR MAKER
COME THE VERY NEXT DAY. HEAH THAT. HEAH THAT, WHITEY, ON
THE NEXT SUNNY DAY YOU WILL MEET YOUR DEMISE, YOU BEASTS
CREATURES OF THE DEEP. 'CAUSE YOU CAN'T HOLD A CANDLE TO
US VIRILE BLACK PEOPLE. . . . (102, Reed's typography and syntax)

To Doopeyduk's surprise, the all-white audience reacts with a standing ovation (103). He is immediately inundated with requests for interviews and media appearances, and word quickly gets around to HARRY SAM that a powerful new black personality has emerged on the world's stage (with bruises and cuts to his face). Doopeyduk believes that he has finally made it. But as with the unfortunate protagonist in Coover's "The Marker" [from *Pricksongs & Descants*] everything changes drastically when the authorities enter and lights come on. For with his fame comes an invitation to Sam's Island and an opportunity to enter the hallowed precincts of HARRY SAM's "john," a dubious honor it turns out. For although he

is respectfully received and venerated with the title of Nazarene Bishop (with the task of repeating to the people of “Soulsville”: “IT’S GOING TO BE ALRIGHT, BY AND BY IN THE SKY. . . IT’S GOING TO BE ALRIGHT, BY AND BY IN THE SKY” [135]; another oblique reference to Ellison’s Reverend Barbee), that night, in the Harry Sam motel, he finds himself surrounded by echoing screams (135). Doopeyduk follows the screams to their source in the basement and, once there, he not only catches HARRY SAM engaged in acts of sexual debauchery (similar to the famous buggery scene in Coover’s *The Public Burning* involving Uncle Sam and Nixon [650-53]), but he also discovers the putrid, half-eaten corpses of all of the nation’s kidnapped children (137-40). Fleeing the scene in terror, Doopeyduk swims back across the Black Bay to the shores of HARRY SAM, and fulfills the prophecy (141-42).

The final section of *Pallbearers* (roughly corresponding to the “Harlem riots” episode in chapter twenty-five of *Invisible Man*) finds Doopeyduk at the head of a vast army of the disenfranchised (144-46). He leads his army through the polluted waters of the bay back to the Harry Sam motel and, upon arrival, the motel is looted (151), HARRY SAM is killed after being chased down a toilet (151), and a new leader is quickly appointed (152). But instead of being exalted as a hero (or assuming the dictatorship, as he briefly fantasizes), Doopeyduk finds himself dangling from meat-hooks in “Emperor Franz Joseph Park,” babbling aimlessly to a dwarf named Rapunzel (152-54). Doopeyduk now dead and a new regime now in place, however, nothing seems to have changed. The same fixtures remain, the same helicopters bounce and twirl above the urban skyline, and the same sign blinks from atop the motel:

EATS-SAVE GREEN STAMPS-BINGO-WED-EATS-SAVE GREEN STAMPS-
BINGO-WED-EATS-SAVE GREEN STAMPS-BINGO-WED-EATS-SAVE
GREEN STAMPS-BINGO-WED-EATS-SAVE

(*Pallbearers* 155, Reed’s typography and syntax)

While the fate of Doopeyduk’s America remains undetermined, one thing at least is certain, his narrative has left the America of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* in tatters. For although Doopeyduk is martyred to a causeless cause, his triumph is his narration

of the demise of not just a single segment of American culture (i.e., the African-American community), but American culture in general—from the top down.

This America, as Kathryn Hume writes in “Ishmael Reed and the Problematics of Control,” is portrayed in *Pallbearers* as consisting of little more than a rigorously guarded set of social, economic, and political controls. These controls are in place, Hume writes, specifically to ensure continuous consumption:

In the country of HARRY SAM, control manifests itself not just through the hooks of public execution but also through secret cannibalism and sodomy in high places and through the media’s shaping of the public mind. . . . Even when Chinese invaders take over the country, the message for the poor is the same: “EATS-SAVE GREEN STAMPS-BINGO-WED.” In other words, the poor are urged to consume goods, be consumed, and beget more consumers, while comforting themselves with the promise of luck in a game of chance. (Hume 508)

No recourse to any manner of social, economic, or political control is given to this set of brainwashed consumers. The only things offered to these Americans are the inalienable rights and freedoms of perpetual craving, perpetual illusion, and an endless appetite for more. Broadcast across every imaginable media and woven into the fabric of the meritocratic American philosophy of education (satirized via the many *philosophi gloriosi* that populate the pages of *Pallbearers*), this social-Darwinism does not, however, describe the survival of the fittest, but rather the survival of the *fattest*—a gorging of the elite on the (social) blood, (economic) body, and (political) spirit of the financially destitute masses (which happen to be disproportionately represented by African-Americans and other minorities). It is this reality that *Pallbearers* confronts through its parody of Ellison’s novel and its satire of circa 1966-67 America as seen through the eyes of a circa 1951-52 protagonist.

The high ironic critique in *Pallbearers* also involves a condemnation of what Madhu Dubey defines as, “the narrative strategies of texts such as Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* [which] seek to convey an historically specific and materially burdensome reality of social marginalization” (152). According to Dubey, texts

such as *Invisible Man*, “. . . reinforce a cluster of modern Western paradigms and modes of thought, including teleological patterns of historical development, totalized models of social order, rationalist epistemologies, and unitary and centered norms of subjectivity” (154). These are precisely the high Modernist conventions that postmodern metafiction such as *Pallbearers* set out to ridicule and debunk.²⁶ Through radical shifts in idiom, non-linear and/or non-causal narrative progression, and the direct subversion of omniscient third-person forms of narration, Reed’s ironic metafiction in *Pallbearers* strips the “black experience novel” of its concealed ideology and puts it prominently on display.

Like Coover’s anatomy of Western forms myth and magic in “The Magic Poker,” and “J’s Marriage” [collected in *Pricksongs & Descants*], or Barthleme’s playful dismantling of 1960’s American (fairy tale) archetypes in *Snow White* and in stories such as “The Glass Mountain” (in *City Life* 1970), Reed’s *Pallbearers* focuses its powers of revision on the neglected reality of spiritual and cultural marginalization that attends the material circumstances of social marginalization. For Reed’s signifying, parodic take on Ellison’s novel also lays bare the loss of traditional folk-ways, humor and oral culture in the clinical language of social realism, as well as in the clean, scientific lines of the Modernist aesthetic and its consuming logic of totality.

In poems such as “Dualism” and novels such *Pallbearers*, Reed refuses to acquiesce to the American dictate of *eat or be eaten*, and instead offers the reader a third alternative: a philosophy of conscientious objection to the cannibalistic feast of American history that is neither a retreat from an engagement with the past nor in any way a self-negating apology for the fact that the all-you-can-eat American buffet of political imperialism, cultural conquest, and consumerism contains a substantial amount of “dark meat” in its gruesome recipes. In response (to continue the metaphor), *Pallbearers* hi-jacks the textual kitchen where all of these social, economic, and political narratives are prepared and interrupts the process, revealing that the supposedly wholesome goodness of the American apple-pie is actually filled with the gore of the brainwashed millions employed in its preparation.

Notes

- ¹ See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987): 275-76; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988): 237-38; Reginald Martin, *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* (London: MacMillan, 1988): 1; and Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1996): 190-91.
- ² See Gates, *Figures in Black*, 275-76; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903): 16.
- ³ See Gates, *Figures*, 276.
- ⁴ This passage from Ellison's novel, which Reed parodically re-interprets (i.e., signifies upon) repeatedly in his writing, figures in a similar way in the poem, "Crocodiles," published in Reed's 1973 collection, *Chattanooga*: "A crocodile dont hunt / Him's victims / They hunts him / All he do is / Open he jaws." See Ishmael Reed, *Chattanooga* (New York: Doubleday, 1973): 43.
- ⁵ See Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying," in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, Ed. Alan Dundes (Jackson: UP Mississippi, 1973): 310-28; originally published in *Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1971): 87-138; see also Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970): 51-52, 66-67, 264.
- ⁶ In her own study of signifying, Mitchell-Kernan notes: "Since many of the terms are used on more than one level of contrast (i.e., as labels for the game or speech event and as labels for tactics employed in the game) when they are used superordinately (as labels for the speech event) they will be capitalized," see Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying," 312.
- ⁷ As Roger D. Abrahams writes: "Signifying seems to be a Negro term, in use if not in origin. It can mean any number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It

can mean making fun of a person or situation. Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. Thus it is signifying to stir up a fight between neighbors by telling stories; it is signifying to make fun of a policeman by parodying his motions behind his back; it is signifying to ask for a piece of cake by saying, 'my brother needs a piece of cake,'" see Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle*, 51-52.

⁸ This quote from Mitchell-Kernan's "Signifying" also figures in a similar context in the "Black Structures of Feeling" chapter of Gates's *Figures in Black*. See Gates, *Figures*, 240.

⁹ One brief example of this in the context of the hip-hop cipher might be the playful use of the phrase "chamber music." As this phrase has been previously used by several members of the group, Wu-Tang Clan, as a play on the classical music genre and to refer to both the sound of gunfire (i.e., the percussive "music" made as a bullet exits a gun's chamber) as well as to the Wu-Tang Clan's own debut album, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* (1993), any subsequent use of the phrase "chamber music" in a hip-hop cipher will contain an implicit link to these previous uses and their various implications.

¹⁰ See Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying," 314-16; Gates, *Figures*, 244-50.

¹¹ Gates relates this sense of rhetorical indeterminacy to the hallucinated sermon ("The Blackness of Blackness") in the prologue of Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "blackness is . . . an' blackness ain't . . . it will . . . an' it won't . . . it do...an' it don't," see Gates, *Signifying*, 235-37; Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 9-10.

¹² Reed acknowledges the speakerly aspect of his writing in referring to his second novel, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), as: "an oral book, a talking book." In an interview for *Black World* magazine, Reed states: "I based the book [*Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*] on old radio scripts in which the listener constructed the sets with his imagination; that's why 'radio'; also because it's an oral book, a talking book . . . there's more dialogue than scenery or description," see "Ishmael Reed: A Self Interview," *Black World* (1974): 25; see also Gates, *Figures*, 249.

¹³ See Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse Typology in Prose," in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, Ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krytyna

Pomorska [Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1971]: 190); see also Gates, *Figures*, 247-49.

¹⁴ See also Gates, *Figures*, 247.

¹⁵ See Gates, *Figures*, 248-49.

¹⁶ It should also be noted that, while it is not the project attempted here in this article, an entirely justifiable case might well be made describing the significant influence that the African-American canon (e.g., Ellison, Wright, Toomer, Hurston, Du Bois, et al.) has had in the shaping the parodic, Anglo-American literature of the 1960s and 70s (especially as this influence figures in the works of writers such as Barthelme, Brautigan, Coover, Tim O'Brien, Grace Paley, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut). Such a study would offer another very interesting angle through which to view the emergence of the type of ironic metafiction that developed during this period.

¹⁷ "[Coover]" has been inserted here as Robert Coover (as well as *Pricksongs & Descants*) is mentioned in the same context and within the same paragraph that this quote is taken from. See Neil Schmitz, "Neo-HooDoo: The Experimental Fiction of Ishmael Reed," *Twentieth Century Literature* 20.2 (1974): 139.

¹⁸ In many ways echoing Hutcheon's definition of postmodern parody in his *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates writes: "When one text Signifies upon another text, by tropological revision or repetition and difference, the double-voiced utterance allows us to chart discrete formal relationships in Afro-American literary history. Signifyin(g), then, is a metaphor for textual revision" (88).

¹⁹ Gates writes, "Much of the Afro-American literary tradition can be read as successive attempts to create a new narrative space for representation of the recurring referent of Afro-American literature, the so-called black experience," (*Figures* 248).

²⁰ See Gates *Signifying* 218; Martin "FreeLance PallBearer" 36; Schmitz "Neo-HooDoo" 128.

²¹ Robert Elliot Fox writes in *Conscientious Sorcerers*: "On at least one level, *Pallbearers* is an extended parody of *Invisible Man* . . . The advice of Sam's mother to her son on her deathbed parodies the advice given to Invisible Man's family by his dying grandfather; Invisible Man's expulsion from college is paralleled by Bukka's resignation; Bukka's 'crying-the-blues' recalls Trueblood;

his job emptying bedpans parallels Invisible Man's job in the factory basement; Hairymen's recruitment of Bukka on the basis of his speech is a counterpart to Brother Jack's recruitment of Invisible Man into the Brotherhood; I am even tempted to hear linguistic echoes of Ellison's opening sentence, 'I am invisible man,' in Reed's opener, 'I live in HARRY SAM'" (40). See also Hume "Ishmael Reed" 507, 516; Gates *Figures* 242; Schmitz "Neo-HooDoo" 128-29.

²² In his assessment of *Pallbearers*, Gates notes: "*The Free-lance Pallbearers* is, above all else, a parody of the confessional mode which is the fundamental, undergirding convention of Afro-American narrative, received, elaborated upon, and transmitted in a chartable heritage from Briton Hammon's captivity narrative of 1760, through the antebellum slave narratives, to black autobiography, and into black fiction, especially that of Hurston, Wright, Baldwin, and Ellison" (*Signifying* 218). See also Schmitz "Neo-HooDoo" 126.

²³ Although Schmitz is quick to denigrate Reed for his ventriloquism, Reed's characterization in *Pallbearers* actually follows the typical form of the Menippean satire. As Northrop Frye's notes in *Anatomy of Criticism*: "The Menippean satire deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes. . . . The Menippean satire thus resembles the confession in its ability to handle abstract ideas and theories The Menippean satirist sees [evil and folly] as diseases of the intellect, as a kind of maddened pedantry which the *philosophus gloriosus* at once symbolizes and defines" (*Anatomy* 309).

²⁴ In his essay, "Images of Subversion: Ishmael Reed and the Hoodoo Trickster," James Lindroth notes: "Duppy [is] a hoodoo word for the spirit 'who returns from the grave and causes mischief,'" (191). Reed's signifying use of "Duppy," Lindroth also notes, is traceable to Hurston's definition of the term in *Tell My Horse* (1938). See Zora Neale Hurston *Tell My Horse* (54-74).

²⁵ Fox writes: "HARRY SAM is Uncle Sam—America—as well as a cartoon version of various U. S. presidents. It also brings to mind 'Sam's plantation,' an expression used by a minstrel of the Civil War period to describe the Union SAM, however, is identifiable with more than simply the nation or its chief of state; it is a mode of consciousness, characterized by a desire for mastery and control" (42).

²⁶ To a list of contemporaneous "black postmodern" metafiction might be added

texts such as LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's *Tales* (1967), Clarence Major's *All-Night Visitors* (1969), *No* (1972), and *Reflex and Bone Structure* (1975), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), as well as Samuel R. Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* (1967), *Nova* (1968), and *Dahlgren* (1975).

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