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# The Satire of Ishmael Reed

Jiří Šalamoun

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**OPERA FACULTATIS PHILOSOPHICAE**  
UNIVERSITATIS MASARYKIANAE

**SPISY FILOZOFICKÉ FAKULTY**  
MASARYKOVY UNIVERZITY

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ARTS



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# The Satire of Ishmael Reed

From Non-standard Sexuality to Argumentation

Jiří Šalamoun

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UNIVERSITY  
PRESS**

BRNO 2019

## KATALOGIZACE V KNIZE – NÁRODNÍ KNIHOVNA ČR

Šalamoun, Jiří

The satire of Ishmael Reed : from non-standard sexuality to argumentation / Jiří Šalamoun. – First published. – Brno : Masaryk University Press, 2019. – 115 stran. – (Opera Facultatis philosophicae Universitatis Masarykianae = Spisy Filozofické fakulty Masarykovy univerzity, ISSN 1211-3034 ; 493)

České resumé

Obsahuje bibliografii a bibliografické odkazy

ISBN 978-80-210-9366-9 (brožováno)

\* 821.111(=1:73=414)-31 \* 82-7 \* 304 \* 316.64-021.485 \* 82:316.3 \* 304.9 \* 82.07 \* 82.09 \* (73) \* (048.8)

- Reed, Ishmael, 1938-
- African American fiction – 20th-21st centuries
- satire – social aspects
- racism – United States
- literature and society – United States
- criticism of society – United States
- interpretation and reception of literature
- literary criticism and history
- monographs

810.9 - American literature in English (on) [11]

Reviewers: prof. PhDr. Josef Jařab, CSc. (Palacký University)  
prof. Samuel Ludwig (University of Haute Alsace)

Book Cover: Ajegbile, Oladimeji. *Man Reading a Book*. N.d. Photograph. *Pexels*. Web. 26 August 2019.

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ISBN 978-80-210-9366-9

ISBN 978-80-210-9367-6 (online : pdf)

ISSN 1211-3034

<https://doi.org/10.5817/CZ.MUNI.M210-9367-2019>

## **Acknowledgements**

This book attempts to show how a change in the satire of Ishmael Reed is influenced by a change in the American understanding of racism. It examines only this one idea and yet it would never have been written without the encouragement of many. Central among these benevolent individuals is Tomáš Pospíšil, who oversaw this project towards its end with kind support and a critical eye. Parts of this book were presented at conferences in London, Hull, Brno, and Mulhouse, and I would like to thank their attendees and organisers for their thoughtful commentary. I would like expressly to thank Josephine Metcalf and Ilka Saal, whose thoughts made my opinions significantly clearer. I would also like to thank the Faculty of Arts at Masaryk University for its grant awarding process, which enabled me to undertake research at Yale and the John F. Kennedy Institute. Finally, I dedicate this book to my wife, Zuzana, without whom it would never have been completed, and to my daughter, Alžběta, without whom it would have been finished two years earlier and yet without whom my life would have been unimaginably poorer.





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# 1 INTRODUCTION

This book came into existence as a result of an interesting paradox. Although Ishmael Reed is one of the key African American satirists, his satire has not generated as much critical attention as his postmodern texts,<sup>1</sup> his involvement in culture wars, and the key role he has played in the establishment of American literary multiculturalism.<sup>2</sup> Apart from these areas of Reed scholarship, critics often prefer to decipher his complex intertextual works, explain at least some of the plethora of references, and expound on their meaning rather than to comment on his satire. Nonetheless, such scholarship is valuable, as first time readers of Reed's novels are often confused because of their syncretism, synchronicity,<sup>3</sup> and the resulting

1 Even though Reed himself has rejected the label of a postmodern writer because of its Eurocentric emphasis, Dickson-Carr is correct in claiming that Reed's novels "in the 1970s provide excellent examples of both ironic revision and theories of postmodernism at work" (*African American Satire* 169). To an extent, this is a label that keeps accompanying Reed even up to the present day.

2 For example, Ludwig says that Reed is "nowadays in many ways the dean of American multiculturalism" because his writing influenced by African paganism was "in many ways the best representational model to promote a new pluralistic culture of secular variety" ("Ishmael Reed, the Sentimental Heathen" 139). For more information on the matter see Shinn's "The Art of War: Ishmael Reed and Frank Chin and the U.S. Black-Asian Alliance of Multicultural Satire," in which he claims that Reed is "one of the foremost publishers and promoters of multicultural works of literature that have been rejected and dismissed as 'minoritarian' and 'other'" (65).

3 The phrase is borrowed from literary scholar Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure, who summarises the relationship between Reed and his audience in the following way:

Readers and critics have been complaining that Reed's books are difficult to read because of their numerous subtexts, their non-Aristotelian plots (or artistic arrangement of events), and their stock, flat characters – in almost all of the nine novels. Reed returns the favor by having characters either mock the conventional ways of writing novels or proclaim their being in favor of Aristotelian aesthetics and round characters. The point to be made here is that Reed always has many non-related things (Syncretism) going on at the same time (Synchronicity), while

complexity.<sup>4</sup> Monographs such as *The Dark Heathenism of the American Novelist Ishmael Reed* (Mvuyekure 2007) and *Ishmael Reed and the Ends of Race* (McGee 1997) help to enhance the readability of Reed's works – as does Darryl Dickson-Carr's *African American Satire* (2001), which examines Reed's satire more than any other monograph, and yet it also comments more on the why than on the how. Therefore, by choosing to describe what the aims of Reed's cultural wars are rather than to examine how he wages them, these seminal studies touch upon Reed's satire only fleetingly. Paradoxically, Reed is a key African American satirist and yet his satire remains largely undescribed – an omission that this book seeks to address.

The sole purpose of this book is to describe the undescribed satire of Ishmael Reed by answering the following research questions: How has the satire of Ishmael Reed evolved? Which satirical techniques are dominant at which stages of his literary career? Finally, if there are changes in Reed's preferences for satirical techniques how can they be explained? To answer these questions, I examine the satire present in ten novels against Leonard Feinberg's taxonomy of satirical techniques<sup>5</sup> to establish which satirical techniques are most frequently used by Reed and when.

The short answer to the three questions is that Reed's satire has evolved from a stage in which it very frequently ridicules through reference to non-standard sexuality to a stage in which it very frequently ridicules through logical argumentation. I connect this evolution to new social realities emerging in the United States—especially to a closed chapter of American history called post-racial America<sup>6</sup>—whose validity at the time of writing this book is rightly questioned. Nonethe-

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his readers and critics tend to follow a straight line or one thing at a time in their reading. (“American Neo-HooDooism” 203–4)

While this complex relationship seems to be non-problematic in Reed's early works, his later novels (where he attacks exaggerated feminism) remain largely misunderstood. This in turn leads to a questionable understanding of Reed as an anti-feminist which contributed to Reed's less prominent position in American letters (in comparison with his early career, especially the publication of *Mumbo Jumbo* in 1972).

4 The resistance with which Reed's texts are greeted by university students is described in Kalenda Eaton's paper, “‘You Have to Know Way Too Much?': Teaching Ishmael Reed in the University Classroom,” which aptly summarizes the challenges faced by those who read Reed (and teach Reed) at the university level. One can only presume that the reactions of non-university readers who approach Reed's texts without the guidance of instructors might be even more abysmal than the title of Eaton's paper suggests.

5 Feinberg's taxonomy of 22 satirical techniques, which he describes in his seminal work *Introduction to Satire* (1967), is to my knowledge the most detailed taxonomy of satire put on paper. I have therefore chosen it over other descriptions of satire as I believe its usage leads to more nuanced results.

6 According to the *Random House Dictionary*, a post-racial era is “characterized by the absence of racial discord, discrimination, or prejudice previously or historically present” (n. pag.). This hopeful vision of American social life was especially common during the nation's first election of an African American president. As sociologists McAdam and Kloos claim, “when Barack Obama captured the White House in 2008, many heralded his victory as marking the long overdue onset of color-blind politics in America” (3). Yet, the reality of political life soon revealed that the concept of a post-racial