

“Black(ness) No More: Academia and the Culture Wars in Ishmael Reed’s *Japanese by Spring*.”

Ishmael Reed’s *Japanese by Spring* (1993) is a satirical take on the period of intellectual debates in the 1980s and 1990s that we have come to call “The Culture Wars.” In this novel about a neo-conservative black literature professor at a California college in the early 1990s, Ishmael Reed analyzes the different positions taken up by black intellectuals during this contentious time and examines how black intellectuals have confronted the study of race and culture in higher education. In particular Reed focuses on the concept of multiculturalism, and the particular issue of language in the multicultural project. As the literary critic Daryl Dickson-Carr wrote in his study of black literary satire: “*Japanese by Spring* represents Ishmael Reed’s concatenation of the intensely fierce debates over the meaning of multiculturalism in U.S. academia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, offering in novel form Reed’s vision of what a productive, transcendent multiculturalism should be, as opposed to what it has become in the face of American cynicism.” (196-197). In the novel Reed practices what David Palumbo-Liu calls a “critical multiculturalism.” According to Palumbo-Liu “critical multiculturalism explores the fissures, tensions, and sometimes contradictory demands of multiple cultures, rather than (only) celebrating the plurality of cultures by passing through them appreciatively” (5).

Japanese by Spring is set on the campus of a fictional institution, Jack London College, located in Oakland, California. The location is critical as the state of California and its universities hold an important place in the culture wars. The former Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan became the Governor of California in 1967. He presided over the state during the end of the 1960s when student activism began to explode on the state’s college campuses, especially at the University of California-Berkeley. It was Reagan’s vigorous response to student activism at Berkeley, including calling in the National Guard to quell student protests on the campus, which earned him a reputation as the ultimate culture warrior, a conservative politician willing to fight against the unruly left and establish law and order in the U.S. From the student activism in the UC system in the 1960s, to the *Regents of the University of California v. Allan Bakke* Supreme Court case on affirmative action policies, to the 1980s controversy over incorporating Ebonics as a method of teaching standard English to elementary school students, California became known as one of the most important battlegrounds for educational policy in the culture wars.

In the 1980s the concept of multiculturalism in higher education was analyzed by a range of journalists and scholars. Two of the earliest conservative commentators in this field were William Bennett and Allan Bloom. Bennett was the Secretary of Education in the Ronald Reagan administration, and published *To Reclaim A Legacy* in 1984. Allan Bloom was a philosophy professor at the University of Chicago, and his book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, made the New York Times bestseller list in 1987. Some of the works that followed include books by Charles J. Sykes (*Profscam*, 1988), Lynne Cheney (*Humanities in America*, 1988), Dinesh D'Souza (*Illiberal Education*, 1991), and Shelby Steele (*The Content of Our Character*, 1991).

In 1995 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar produced one particularly inventive left-leaning response to the culture wars. Their book *Masterpiece Theater: An Academic Melodrama*, is a play based on the culture wars written in the form of a soap opera. In the work they splice together several of the most quoted and controversial statements about higher education at the time from various public figures. In the introduction to the work Gubar and Gilbert refer to the William Bennett and Allan Bloom position on higher education as the “Back to Basics” school. They write, “This contingent tends to use words like *excellence, universality, transcendence, disinterestedness, and greatness* to argue that the writings of Plato and Shakespeare, Milton and Keats embody core truths of Western civilization, truths that teachers should transmit as a legacy to students. In the view of these thinkers, the villains who have threatened to splinter and politicize the humanities are obscure specialists or politically correct, left-wing ideologues, all of whom speak to each other in incomprehensible jargon” (xiv). Yet, in this new assault on the multicultural project Gilbert and Gubar identify a curious strain of anti-intellectualism. “Where the originators of the Great Books concept usually wanted students to read, say, Plato so that they could learn to think for themselves, the Back to Basic Training army wants students to read Plato so that Plato can think *for* them. In other words, rather than defining *The Symposium* as a work to be challenged, engaged or studied for its historical significance, these warriors consider it a sort of sermon in stone, a monument of unaging intellect to be unquestioningly worshipped as a source of timeless ideas and values” (xvi).

One could say that “The Culture Wars” as the dominant metaphor to describe these debates is inherently troublesome because it uses the language of combat to describe what is basically the process of reconciling linguistic and cultural differences, a process that is essential in a pluralistic society. Reed confronted this idea

in the clever title of his edited anthology *Multi-America: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace*. One could read *Japanese by Spring* as an extended riff on the concept of “culture war.” In the novel Reed engages this idea by making his protagonist a black academic intellectual who also has a strong military background. Benjamin “Chappie” Puttbutt is a third generation military man. In the novel we find that his father named him after two black military icons, General Chappie James Jr. and General Benjamin O. Davis, and Puttbutt received his undergraduate education from the United States Air Force Academy (182). Reed also incorporates a story line that emphasizes the many U.S. wars of the 20th century, particularly the wars waged in the Asian nations of Japan, Korea and Vietnam. In the novel Reed writes, “The language of warfare was being used by both the monoculturalists and multiculturalists. David Kirp described this war as the Battle of the Books, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. mused, ‘How did we come to appraise works of cultural criticism in terms appropriate to combat,’ and George Will, who in 1990 received more space to write about black literature than any black writer, critic or scholar, said that while Secretary of Defense Cheney was a general of the Gulf War, his wife Lynne Cheney was a general in the war against diversity” (128). Reed goes on to write that “The diversity movement would win the Battle of the Books because it included artists. The other side was made up of education bureaucrats, critics and historians” (128). The statement is indicative of Reed’s belief in the transformative power of art, which is also a motif in his famous novel *Mumbo Jumbo*. In that novel the “Jes Grew” overtakes America precisely because its power comes from the realm of spirit and myth and not from the cold, rational world of politics and bureaucracy.

In *Postwar Academic Fiction* Kenneth Womack reads *Japanese by Spring* and other works of academic fiction through the lens of ethical criticism. Womack’s study particularly focuses on the themes of “Satire, Ethics and Community” and he shows how Reed employs the mode of satire to ridicule certain examples of unethical behavior in the academic community. Examining Reed’s multicultural project Womack writes: “By acknowledging such a vast range of cultural differences, multiculturalism addresses the notions of individuality and autonomy that distinguish our experiences. Interpreted in this manner, multiculturalism seems particularly ethical. Like ethical criticism, it attempts to provide readers with a means for establishing vital interconnections between texts and the heterogeneous community in which we live” (111-112). When it comes to the contest

between Monoculturalism and Multiculturalism, Ishmael Reed is clearly on the side of the multicultural project, but in *Japanese by Spring* he also pushes those who support multicultural education to carefully consider what such a project means.

Japanese by Spring follows the story of literature professor Benjamin “Chappie” Puttbutt III and his quest for tenure at Jack London College in Oakland, CA. Puttbutt is a former black nationalist turned neoconservative, and a vocal critic of black militancy on campus. His most famous book is titled *Blacks, America’s Misfortune*, and it earns him an appointment in the ironically named Department of Humanity. The title of the book is reminiscent of an essay by black satirist George Schulyer, “Our Greatest Gift to America.” In the essay Schuyler sarcastically argues that the greatest contribution of blacks to America is the gift of “flattery” which has helped whites of all socioeconomic classes feel better about themselves in relation to blacks, and has been the key to galvanize the support of lower class white ethnics to support the interests of wealthy white supremacists. In an early description of Puttbutt in the novel Reed writes: “Puttbutt was a member of the growing anti-affirmative action industry. A black pathology merchant. Throw together a three hundred page book with graphs and articles about illegitimacy, welfare dependency, single-family households, drugs and violence; paint the inner cities as the circles of hell in the American paradise...and you could write your way to the top of the bestseller lists. Get on C-Span. It was the biggest literary hustle going and Puttbutt decided he was going to get his” (10). Reed creates Puttbutt as a comic figure in the novel by portraying him as a shrewd opportunist who only half-believes the things that he is saying.

Puttbutt started taking Japanese lessons as a college student, not just out of a sincere love or interest in the language but to position himself for future political gain. “As a military brat Benjamin knew the techniques of survival and so, after reading that Japan would become a future world power, Puttbutt began to study Japanese while enrolled at the Air Force Academy during the middle sixties” (3). These days much of the talk about Asian political power centers around China, but in the 1980s conspiracy theories were rampant that the Japanese were developing fast and plotting to eclipse American educational and economic dominance. Because of this Puttbutt decides to give the Japanese lessons another try. He signs up with a private tutor named Dr. Yamato whose listings for a “Japanese by Spring” course he spotted in a local newspaper. In the spring of 1990

he starts taking the classes, “hoping that by spring of 1991 he would know enough to take advantage of the new global realities. He was talking that way now. Sounding like a student in political science. All about global realities. Geopolitics this. Realpolitik that. Weltanschauung this. He was sounding like an edition of *Foreign Affairs*” (5).

Puttbutt begins the novel optimistic about his career opportunities. *Blacks, America's Misfortune* was a success and he had also published some well-received articles in literary criticism. Despite the assurances from the chairs in African-American Studies, Women's Studies, and The Department of Humanity that he would be awarded tenure in one of these departments Puttbutt ends up being turned down for tenure in all three. He is further humiliated when he learns that the administration has decided to hire and grant tenure to April Jokujoku, a black feminist literary scholar. Earlier in the novel Puttbutt had scoffed at the fact that Jokujoku had only one article to her name, “Something having to do with Clitoridectomy Imagery in the Works of Black Male Novelists” (57). She ends up being hired and is appointed full professor in the departments of Women's Studies and African-American Studies at the outlandish sum of \$150,000 per semester. (This plot development is indicative of a long running feud between Ishmael Reed and black feminist intellectuals.)

The major surreal turn in the novel comes at the end of its second section, when overnight Jack London College is purchased by a mysterious Japanese corporate faction. When he is called into the new administration office Puttbutt finds Dr. Yamato, his Japanese language instructor sitting there. Yamato wants to hire Puttbutt as his special assistant, an appointment in which he will act as a liaison between the new Japanese administration and the college's faculty. “When he said that, Puttbutt knew that the \$245.00 he paid to learn Japanese by Spring had been worth it.” The second half of the novel plays out as a revenge fantasy as Puttbutt begins to exact payback against the faculty who had wronged him before.

One particularly delicious bit of revenge comes against one Dr. Crabtree, a literature professor from the Department of Humanity who was one of the “Back to Basics” type conservatives touting the superiority of the Western tradition. Under the new administration courses in Japanese language history and culture became the dominant courses in the curriculum, and the Western based Department of Humanity was downgraded to a

subdivision of the Ethnic Studies department. Crabtree and other professors had been demoted and were now required to teach freshman composition, a task usually left to low-ranking adjunct professors. Crabtree comes to Puttbutt to ask him about the “freshman English” courses they were to teach. Puttbutt replies, “Who said anything about freshman English? We want you teach freshman Yoruba.” Reed writes: “Putbutt lifted a copy of a local magazine that had carried an article by Crabtree denouncing Afrocentricity and multiculturalism. It was full of the usual neoconservative cusswords. Balkanization this. Quotas that.” In one of these articles Crabtree had written that “if Yoruba would produce a Turgenev he would be glad to read him.” Puttbutt quoted that passage to him then said, “In order to have made such a statement you would have required some knowledge of the language...Being the scholar that you are, you wouldn’t comment about a language of which you had no knowledge would you?” Later in the novel Crabtree is seen by “Ishmael Reed” going into a popular African bookstore and the owner tells Reed that Crabtree has been studying African history and taking Yoruba lessons. Here, Reed is intentionally playing with his monocultural and multicultural paradigm, placing the “Back to Basics” defenders of Western civilization in the position of just another minor intellectual field in the world run by a different set of monoculturalists. At one point in the novel Reed provides an extended analysis of Yoruba language and grammar (120-121). The reader is to assume through the insertion of “Ishmael Reed” as a character and the inclusion of passages about Japanese and Yoruba grammar and thought reflects his own interest in these languages and cultures. This is another example of the way in which Reed constructs *Japanese by Spring* as a multilingual and multicultural text in its very structure. Here Reed puts his theory of multiculturalism into practice by creating an academic novel that intensively confronts America’s multicultural heritage and traditions. He does this not by superficially alluding to different cultures, but through incorporating the critical study of languages into the narrative itself. In explaining his perspective on the language issue, Reed uses the metaphor of the human body, imagining the English language as a body which lives off of the sustenance of other languages flowing into it. “Chappie knew that if he couldn’t learn Spanish and Japanese he’d be obsolete in the 1990s United States. Unless they expand and absorb, languages die, and already English was hungry for new adjectives, verbs and nouns...The black and Hispanic writers were doing their part, helping the patient walk around the room. The English Only people and the monoculturalists were like the religious fanatics who didn’t believe in blood transfusions” (50-51).

“Ishmael Reed” as a third-person character appears at various points throughout the novel. He makes his most dramatic appearance during a visit to Jack London College when he shows up to read some of his work for a friend’s course. By that time Puttbutt was settled into his powerful position as the special assistant to Dr. Yamato and was enjoying his revenge on his enemies. “I’m not taking sides anymore,” he tells Reed. “From now on my policy is one of enlightened self-interest.” Toward the end of their conversation Puttbutt reaches into this bag and pulls out a copy of the *Japanese by Spring* textbook. “This is the book that got me to where I am now. You’d better get with it brother. The twenty-first century is going to be a yellow century” (131).

Soon the Japanese administration required all faculty and students to take an IQ test designed by a Japanese educational firm. Puttbutt examines some of the questions on the exam: “Who was the first novelist and name her book? Name the monk who introduced Zen Buddhism into Japan? What was the former name for Tokyo? For Kyoto? Name three Kabuki plays and their plots? So as to deflect the criticism that the test was Nihon-chu-o, they had included some questions about European thinkers. What famous philosopher said that Indian literature was more imaginative than Homeric literature?” Obviously, the questions were designed to upend the concept of Western intellectual hegemony. But the Japanese administration also anticipated that there might be some complaints about the questions. Dr. Yamato went on to explain about the last question on Homeric literature: “We included that question and others like it so that they wouldn’t complain that the test wasn’t multicultural, that awful word you use. The whites are complaining because, let’s face it, they want easy questions so as to mask their inferiority. They want questions that will allow them to continue to mythologize about the greatness of Europe. They like the SAT tests because they can afford to provide their idiot children with coaches. They’re even claiming that the ancient Egyptians were white when everybody knows that they were members of an Asiatic race. Besides, if the ancient Egyptians were white, what happened to them? They all move to Cairo, Illinois?” (143). The administration also proposes some additional tutelage to help the American faculty along: “We’ve decided that the student body and the faculty will have to attend courses in order to remedy their intellectual deficiency. If that doesn’t work, then we will bring in a Japanese faculty. Maybe Americans should be put to work at things that will not strain their capacities. Wrapping packages and opening doors for their betters, or ladling out ice cream, taking hotel reservations lest they become a permanent

underclass among developing nations. The advanced nations can no longer carry their tremendous debt. They will have to do more to earn their way. To work for relief. Workfare. And another thing, Ethnic Studies will now be called Bangaku.” Bangaku. Puttbutt wrote the word down. He looked it up when he got home. It meant ‘barbarian studies’” (144). Reed underscores the ethical dangers of monoculturalism by illustrating how Puttbutt cynically goes along with Yamato's cultural program in exchange for his own political power and enhanced standing. However, the Japanese administration begins to push the conversion even further by removing the giant statue of Jack London from the center of campus. They also decide to change the name of the Student Union building to Isoroku Yamamoto Hall in honor of the mastermind behind the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. And in perhaps the most sinister turn they start to expel American-born Chinese and Japanese students saying that they are agents of the foreign devils and cannot be trusted (146).

By the end of the novel it is our “Back to Basics” scholar Dr. Crabtree who becomes the most outspoken critic of the Japanese administration’s efforts to turn the college into a monocultural institution, and he is reborn as a passionate advocate of multicultural education. In a faculty meeting he stands up, lashes out at them using Yoruba phrases and gives one of the novel’s big speeches. “For years we’ve been saying that our tradition and our standards are universal, but Dr. Yamato has taught us that two can play that game. And Puttbutt, I want to thank you. Thank you for opening my head. I thought it was dead. But you know, it wasn’t dead. I was starving it. I was depriving it of intellectual nutrition. I needed a new head on. We can always learn something. We don’t have to stop learning.” He goes on to say that, “We should be the ones to lead out students and our country to new intellectual frontiers. Instead we’re like the archaic Dixiecrats of the Old South, but instead of yelling segregation forever, we’re yelling Western culture forever” (155).

In the introduction to *Multi-America* Reed brings up a point that is central to *Japanese by Spring*, that while the monoculturalist touts the idea of Western thought as the standard of intellectual rigor, it can in fact have a curiously anti-intellectual undercurrent to it. He writes, “Monoculturalism, then, is essentially an anti-intellectual coalition. It says that we shouldn’t learn this, we shouldn’t study that, we should only speak English, we shouldn’t study the African continent. Though Portuguese, Spanish, British, German, Dutch explorers, capitalists, scholars, and students have been studying the African continent for generations, when African-

Americans do it, they are accused of engaging in self-esteem exercises” (xvii). While Reed is clearly on the side of the multicultural framework he rejects the simplistic idea that the Western tradition is the sole property of white males, while also challenging the idea of an innocent multiculturalism that always speaks truth to power.

In a 2004 *MELUS* article about the novel, literary critic Crystal Anderson celebrates Reed’s ingenuity, but also raises some skepticism about his depiction of the Japanese characters. She writes that “[Reed] creates an innovative way of exploring US ethnic literature by focusing on the dynamic among US ethnic groups. By placing Blacks and various Asian and Asian American groups in conversation with one another, he joins such African American writers as Octavia Butler and Paul Beatty and Chinese American writers as Maxine Hong Kingston, Frank Chin, and Gish Jen in exploring elements of racial discourse that go beyond the black-white continuum” (379). However, she goes on to point out that “Reed’s critique uses the Japanese as an object...He consistently casts the Japanese as Other in order to underscore the conflict between Blacks and whites” (393). Reed is simultaneously validating Japanese and Japanese-American history and culture while also objectifying that history and culture, making it difficult at times to tell whether he is criticizing Asian xenophobia or merely reproducing it.

In the years since the 1980s the marketplace has adapted to (or perhaps co-opted?) the language and images of multiculturalism. Advertising is full of multiracial images. Ethnic, gender and sexual diversity is also represented in television and film. However, what Reed is suggesting in *Japanese by Spring* is something more difficult than mere superficial images of multiculturalism. What he suggests is a multicultural understanding that comes through the discipline of education. The multiculturalism he touts in the novel is one that is accomplished through the arduous process of learning about the history of these varied cultures and through the intensive study of languages. In recent years much has been made of the concept of America as a “Post-Racial” society. In *Japanese by Spring* Reed suggests that the way forward is not in racelessness, and not just in token images of representation, but through the discipline of education and through the effort to speak and write across cultural and linguistic differences.

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