

REINVENTING HISTORY AND MYTH  
IN CARLOS FUENTES'S *TERRA NOSTRA*  
AND ISHMAEL REED'S *MUMBO JUMBO*:  
STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING POSTMODERN  
FICTION IN THE AMERICAS

*La reinención de la historia en Terra Nostra, de Carlos Fuentes  
y Mumbo Jumbo, de Ishmael Reed. Estrategias para la enseñanza  
de la ficción postmodernista en las Américas*

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**Abstract**

This essay explores the paradoxes of both Latin American Boom authors' and U.S. American writers' penchant for writing what came to be known as "total" novels by looking at two texts that are representative of the postmodern fiction produced in the 1970s: Carlos Fuentes's *Terra Nostra* (1974) and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). By analyzing one of the most influential late-Boom novels (*Terra Nostra*) in the context of contemporary historical fiction, students will be able to understand the impact of the Boom beyond its Latin American borders and in connection with other literary traditions. Although the focus of the essay will be on reading the postmodern writers from an inter-American perspective, it will address issues that will be relevant to other pedagogical approaches as well: How does the Latin American Boom relate to the current postmodernism debate? What is its relationship with other subaltern traditions? How have the Boom novels impacted our concepts of history and myth? How can they be perceived from a transnational perspective?

*Keywords:* postmodernism, comparative literature, inter-American fiction, total novel, history, myth, pedagogy of literature.

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## **Resumen**

Mediante el análisis de dos casos representativos de la ola postmodernista de los años 70 en las Américas (*Terra Nostra* [1974], de Carlos Fuentes, y *Mumbo Jumbo* [1972], de Ishmael Reed), se estudia aquí la paradójica tendencia entre algunos autores del *boom* latinoamericano y del postmodernismo estadounidense a construir novelas “totales”. El estudio de una de las más influyentes novelas del *boom* (*Terra Nostra*) en el contexto de la narrativa histórica contemporánea, permite entender el impacto de la nueva novela hispanoamericana más allá de sus fronteras y en conexión con otras tradiciones literarias. El trabajo intenta dar respuesta a algunas interrogantes cruciales en relación con las prácticas postmodernistas en las Américas, al mismo tiempo que sugiere estrategias para su didáctica dentro de los cursos de Literatura General y Comparada: ¿Qué relación tienen los escritores del *boom* con el debate en torno al postmodernismo? ¿Cuál es su relación con otras tradiciones subalternas? ¿Cómo pueden haber impactado sus novelas nuestros conceptos de la historia y el mito? ¿Cómo pueden percibirse desde una perspectiva transnacional?

*Palabras clave:* postmodernismo, literatura comparada, narrativa inter-americana, novela total, historia, ficción, didáctica de la literatura.

Among all of Carlos Fuentes's writings, *Terra Nostra* (1975) represents the culmination of his formal and historical pursuits. In most of his previous works Fuentes had explored the Mexican past and had experimented with self-reflexive forms, but never before had he undertaken such a vast project. In fact, *Terra Nostra* stands out as the epitome of the Boom writers' totalizing tendencies. While the 1960s witnessed a long series of monumental novels, none came closer to the purpose and massive scope of Fuentes' novel. *Terra Nostra* is, among many other things, an allegorical interpretation of the Iberian experience from the time of the Roman Empire to the end of the twentieth century and of its impact on the New World, an exploration on the problems of absolute authority in Spain and Latin America, and a meditation on the redeeming power of culture.

By the time Fuentes was writing his magnum opus, African American novelist Ishmael Reed was involved in an equally ambitious project, the writing of a novel where he sought to deconstruct Western tradition as a means of displacing the dominant assumptions about the role of Africans and African Americans in history. In *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) Reed envisioned a new mythology that undermined stereotypes of African-

American cultural inferiority while vindicating the value of fiction as performance. Like Fuentes, who deemed to rewrite the history of Spain from the perspective of the colonized, Reed inverted the dynamics of cultural imperialism by imposing a peripheral and marginal perspective upon the hegemonic Judeo-Christian tradition.

A comparative analysis of these two texts can help students understand the new forms adopted by historical fiction in the Americas during a decade, the 1970s, that marked the peak of postmodernist fiction. In fact, the significance of *Terra Nostra* and *Mumbo Jumbo* exceeds their respective cultural heritages. During the 1980s both were frequently cited to exemplify different (and even dissimilar) concepts of postmodernism. In 1987 Brian McHale referred to Fuentes' novel as "one of the paradigmatic texts of postmodernist writing, literally an anthology of postmodernist themes and devices" (16) and as "the most grandiose postmodernist revision of official history" (92). McHale also used repeatedly *Mumbo Jumbo* to typify postmodern use and abuse of apocryphal history to deconstruct our received versions of the past. Similarly, one year later, Linda Hutcheon would resort to the same two authors (Fuentes and Reed) to illustrate her own concept of postmodernism, and particularly what she considered to be its most paradigmatic literary expression: historiographic metafiction (narratives that blend self-reflexivity and historiographic meditation).

While few question the ambition and relevance of *Terra Nostra* for understanding the evolution of the Latin American new novel, it is a text rarely used in the classroom. The reasons seem obvious to those familiar with the novel. Its length (nearly 800 pages) and panoramic scope (it pretends to revise most of the history of Spain and Latin America as well as many pre-Cortesian myths and the hermetic tradition) has consistently mystified students and professors alike. The fact that several critics regarded the Fuentes' novel as cryptic and almost unreadable has contributed to keeping the book away from the readings lists of most courses. The novel has thus been relegated to an eccentric position in our curricula. However, as I will show in this essay, *Terra Nostra* can productively be used in the class as a tool to explore the totalizing trends among many writers of the period. What follows is a proposal for rereading *Terra Nostra* from an inter-American perspective and in connection with the postmodernism debate. My reflections are mostly based on my own experience teaching *Terra Nostra* as part of a comparative seminar on historiographic metafiction in the Americas. By analyzing one of the most influential late-Boom novels

(*Terra Nostra*) in the context of contemporary historical fiction in the Americas, students would be able to understand the narrative practices of the Boom beyond the Latin American borders and in connection with other literary traditions, particularly US postmodern fiction.

### **1. *TERRA NOSTRA, MUMBO JUMBO,* AND THE POSTMODERNISM DEBATE IN THE CLASSROOM**

*Terra Nostra* and *Mumbo Jumbo* are paradigmatic of the most dramatic paradoxes faced by postmodernism in the Americas, a key element of contemporary fiction that students need to be familiar with for any course dealing with American (in its broadest sense) narrative. Both fluctuate between self-reflexivity and historical revisionism; between multi-vocal open forms and totalizing projects of representation; between democratic invitations to the reader's participation and doctrinaire intentions; between an increasing historical relativism and the concomitant need to preserve the past in our memories. This ambivalence is frequently the result of the coexistence of different styles and conflicting ideologies within the works themselves; hence the terms "double view" (Hassan), "double talk" (Hutcheon), and "double coding" (Jencks), used to define postmodernism's ambiguous repertoire. Fuentes and Reed rather than conceal such paradoxes, bring them to the foreground. Their texts often become forums in which conflicting aesthetic and political ideas are debated.

Both novels respond to what Ihab Hassan considers postmodernism's deconstructionist thrust. Hassan regards the disarticulation of all forms of authority—and especially of all central principles of literature—as the governing principle behind postmodern texts. These works are transgressive in their frequent use of narrative points of view that shatter the basic assumptions of realism. They utilize intrusive narrators who openly discuss the arbitrariness of novelistic conventions and the limitations of any historical perspective. They make use of multiple narrative voices and mobile vantage points that contradict the monologic power of conventional representations, producing a polyphonic effect. This formal openness is the product of an ideology that is opposed to hegemonic cultural systems and celebrates plurality as a supreme value. Rather than the elitism, monolithism, and centralization that characterize institutionalized culture, these authors foster a difference-based ideology that honors the role of marginal groups and local cultures.

There is, however, one important postmodern feature that these novels problematize: the rejection of all forms of totalization. Although the assault on organicism in both fiction and history constitutes one of their central motifs, in these two novels there is a tendency toward macro-historical representations, toward encyclopedic and all-encompassing views of the cultural history of the Americas. In fact, *Terra Nostra* and *Mumbo Jumbo* may be described as novels searching for a utopian global synthesis of the Indo-Afro-Iberoamerican and African-American cultures, respectively. This inclination, of course, assumes a postmodern stance due to its ambiguous, plural, and fragmentary nature. However, it would be inappropriate to speak of any synthesis as the “ultimate opprobrium” for these authors, as Hassan claims for all postmodernist works.

As for Brian McHale’s concept of postmodernism, the texts analyzed contradict his theory of an “ontological dominant” in postmodernist fiction. In addition to their concern with the materiality of narrative artifacts and their relationship to other discursive universes, these works address with equal (or superior) intensity key epistemological questions that I pose to my students: What is the nature of the past? How is our knowledge of the past produced? How is that knowledge transmitted? How does a particular vision get sanctioned? How can we produce alternative versions to these visions? How can we make them politically effective? These are questions that go much farther than merely implying an ontological exploration of the text and the world. In the novels of Fuentes and Reed epistemological problems actually dominate the narrative. *Terra Nostra* and *Mumbo Jumbo* explore, above all, the process of production and transmission of historical knowledge, as well as the moral demand placed upon intellectuals engaged in their own political reality. Although these two issues might relate indirectly to ontological questions (any philosophical exploration involves a certain amount of study of the nature of the elements implied by it), they escape what McHale considers to be the specific realm of postmodernism.<sup>1</sup>

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1 McHale’s analysis is helpful, however, when examining the historical and literary revisionism that he attributes to postmodernism. Through apocryphal and fantastic historical narratives, these authors seek both to question the problematic borderline between fiction and reality, and to revise the historical register—if not to replace it all together—with a more flexible and multifaceted vision. As in much contemporary historiography, official history is conceived of as a construct that has traditionally served the interests of the powerful. In removing the focus from official historiographic discourse and bringing it to bear on those groups previously excluded or silenced by it

## 2. *TERRA NOSTRA* (1975): TEACHING CARLOS FUENTES' MONUMENTAL THEATER OF MEMORY

Written during a period in which Spain and much of Latin America suffered the repression of totalitarian regimes (1968-1975), Fuentes's novel explores the archeology of the historical condition experienced by the Hispanic world during the second half of this century. To that end, Fuentes probes into the origins of what he refers to as the Indo-Afro-Ibero-American civilization, focusing on the confrontation between imperial Spain and pre-Cortesian Mexico.

*Terra Nostra* is divided into three major parts: "The Old World," "The New World," and "The Next World." It begins and ends in the apocalyptic Paris of 1999, but most of its narrative segments are set in sixteenth-century imperial Spain and in its spheres of influence (America and the Mediterranean). While the first part explores the totalitarian power that surrounds El Señor (a composite of Philip II and all Spanish monarchs), the third revolves around the oppositional movements that threaten his power. The central part of the triptych, on which I tend to focus in my classes, rewrites the myths and chronicles of the Encounter and the transposition of those two world views to the New World. In order to introduce the students to the details of the novel's convoluted plot and structure, Michael Abeyta (2006) offers one of the most comprehensive English accounts of the novel that can be successfully used in class.

Once the general framework has been outlined, it is important to clarify for students the two opposed metaphors controlling the novel's meta-textual dimension: El Señor's El Escorial and Valerio Camillo's Theater of Memory. These two reflexive constructions serve Fuentes to expose his view of two cultures at war: the monolithic and somber Escorial and Valerio Camillo's dynamic and open theater. Through these metaphors, the novel, while reflecting upon its own condition as an artifact, explores two antithetical traditions that have had an impact on Hispanic history and culture. El Señor's mausoleum and Camillo's theater function as the aesthetic embodiment of the projects Fuentes respectively attacks and supports.

Historiographic reflection in "The Old World" probes into the failure of an Escorial-like view of history. In his frustrated attempts to comprehend

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(radicals, heretics, visionaries, "Third World" artists, craftsmen, "minorities"), these works try "to redress the balance of the historical record."

historical reality El Señor makes use of the same aesthetic notions used in the construction of El Escorial: univocal view of reality, intolerant orthodoxy, oppressive monumentality, rigidity of forms, and dogmatism of contents. While on an aesthetic level his project becomes a monument to death, and therefore denies the function of art as a vital expression, from a historical perspective his work turns out to be a highly selective register in which those events threatening his power are denied existence.

As for the so-called Theater of Memory, in Part III of *Terra Nostra* Camillo himself describes it in terms that help us to understand both Fuentes's use of history and his concept of a total textual utopia. His theater projects images from memory, not just memory of the past, however, but "the most absolute of memories: the memory of what could have been but was not" (559). The goal of this utopian machinery is to show a way out of the fatalism of history, an alternative to the endless repetition of the permanent catastrophe that has come to be associated with Spanish American history. Camillo's theater thus functions as the counter-metaphor of El Escorial and as a *mise en abyme* of the novel. However, some critics have pointed out the striking similarities between El Señor's longings for absolute control and Fuentes' novel as an exercise in authorial power (Coover 1976, Kerr 1980, González Echevarría 1985). El Escorial may thus be perceived as the novel's unintentional synecdoche of itself; rather than an antithesis of Fuentes's aesthetic and historiographic view, its unconscious embodiment. This perspective will allow students to critically reconsider the novel's intended message as well as its ultimate limitations.<sup>2</sup>

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2 It was Robert Coover who first pointed to the novel's most striking irony: "In mass, rigidity of design, hostility toward individual character, doctrinal devotion and seigniorial hubris, the making of *Terra Nostra* parallels the laborious construction of El Escorial, and like Philip's necropolis, the book seems largely to have been a labor more of duty than of love" (30). The fact is that this was a project Fuentes had cherished for many years. An early short novel such as *Aura* (1962) already shows symptoms of its author's interest in gigantic designs. Its protagonist, Felipe, is a historian obsessed by the creation of a total work: "A work that sums up all the scattered chronicles, makes them intelligible, and discovers the resemblances among all the undertakings and adventures of Spain's Golden Age, and all the human prototypes and major accomplishments of the Renaissance" [my emphasis] (34). This impossible novel is, in many senses, *Terra Nostra*, a historical novel that seeks a difficult synthesis between dispersion and monumentality. As happens with other encyclopedic novels, such a global synthesis reveals itself to be unattainable, hence the tension in which both elements (fragmentation and totality) coexist. For a detailed analysis of this tension, students should be referred to Mark Anderson's "A Reappraisal of the Total Novel." (2003).

Once established the oppositional view of the novel through the discussion of its two central metaphors, a close reading of the second part of *Terra Nostra* would be useful for allowing students to understand Fuentes' manipulation of the myths and chronicles of the Encounter. "The New World" focuses on the conflictive clash between Judeo-Christian culture and the Aztec world, an encounter that Fuentes anachronistically places one century after it really took place. This entire section is filled by the so-called Pilgrim's account of his voyage of discovery and conquest. Unlike the radically non-linear narrative of the first and third parts of *Terra Nostra*, the events described in "The New World" conform to the rather precise chronological pattern of initiation and discovery journeys, making it more suitable for being explored in undergraduate classes.

Through a comparative analysis of Fuentes' novel with its mythical and historical intertexts, students can thus analyze the way the novelist produces a fictional account that closely follows the dynamics of mythmaking. Of particular relevance is Fuentes' re(-)creation of the narratives of Quetzalcoatl (the Nahuas' god-hero and one of the most complex figures in Mesoamerican religion). Apart from minor details, Fuentes's account substantially follows the most "literary" versions of this legend, especially those contained in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia General*, which were popularized by Miguel León Portilla in *Visión de los vencidos* (1959). The use of video clips from Fuentes' TV series *The Buried Mirror* (1992) and excerpts of its book companion can be used here to summarize for students the author's own interpretation of the conquest of Mexico, as well as his messianic view of Quetzalcoatl as a cultural hero. He builds an amalgamating narrative in which the elements of Quetzalcoatl the god (Ehecatl) and of Quetzalcoatl the hero (Topiltzin) are fused (and intentionally confused). His inclusive collage is fed from the numerous versions of the myth and the legend, a strategy that affords him a great functional flexibility in the fictional application of both. Among all the values attributed to Quetzalcoatl, Fuentes shows a particular preference for his demiurgic and cultural aspects, ignoring those attributes that do not fit in his redeeming view of culture.

The vision of the conquest that follows from "The New World" exalts the concept of *mestizaje*. The conquest is presented as a catastrophic phenomenon that nevertheless had a positive outcome: the creation of a new multiethnic and pluralistic civilization. In dealing with the protagonists of this historical moment, Fuentes opposes Cortés's power of will to



Moctezuma's power of fatality. Both leaders are portrayed in a negative way. The anti-epic Cortés is presented as the "cruel father," hence Fuentes frequent borrowing from Bernal Díaz's *Historia verdadera* and Sahagún's *Historia General* rather than from Cortés's *Cartas de relación*. From the indigenous perspective, Moctezuma is presented in a marginal way, to the extent that he is not even directly mentioned. On the other hand, "The New World" idealizes both common people (especially the indigenous communities that were subjected to Aztec rule) and Nahua craftsmen and artists. To that effect, Fuentes makes a free use of Sahagún's work, which includes the vision of the vanquished.

Fuentes's novel proposes fragmentation and multiplicity, rather than linearity and monologism. However, the novel's design seems quite rigid: three parts ("The Old World," "The New World," and "The Next World") correspond to three different realms (El Señor's medieval Spain, the discovery and conquest of America, and the oppositional movements that emerged in the wake of Renaissance) and dramatize a teleological view of historical progress. Thematic cycles, complex symbolic webs, and recurrent images and episodes tend to stress this tendency toward building a grand narrative. If we add to this unifying tendency the long series of binomials that cause characters and situations to be defined in relation to their opposites, the result is a general impression of absolute order and hierarchical structure, an order and a hierarchy that rather than creating an endless constellation of perspectives, as the novel purports to, ultimately favor its author's world view.

### **3. MUMBO JUMBO (1972): A CLASSROOM DISCUSSION OF ISHMAEL REED'S REVERSAL OF WESTERN TRADITION**

Most critics consider *Mumbo Jumbo* Reed's masterpiece. Its pages contain a vast array of discursive modes, including, among many others, history, mythology, religion, fantasy, detective fiction, movie scripts, and popular culture. Literary elements coexist alongside an array of visual materials, such as photographs, posters, drawings, graphics, symbols, Tarot cards, telegrams, leaflets, headlines, and newspaper clippings. *Mumbo Jumbo* conveys the impression of a vast collage and, in this way, informs its potential reader that the novel does not only refer to the literary tradition, but also includes a multifarious cultural context. This complexity in the novel's nature and scope requires a clarification of its structural level and story line. This may be especially necessary in a comparative course where

not all students are familiar with the historical and cultural contexts that are addressed by the texts under discussion.<sup>3</sup>

*Mumbo Jumbo* is organized into fifty-four narrative segments of very different lengths, ranging from a simple paragraph to a chapter of over thirty pages. In terms of the story line, the action is set mostly in the New York of the Harlem Renaissance during the roaring twenties. An epidemic called Jes Grew has broken out and is spreading dangerously throughout the United States. The infection's most obvious symptom is a frantic desire to dance. This inclination toward spontaneous frenzied dancing is often described in terms similar to those of "possession" in voodoo. From the beginning, the origin of this outbreak is identified with the reemergence of the "Text," which refers to the Book of Thoth, a sacred anthology that recounts the mysteries of ancient Egypt. However, the Text soon acquires a metaphoric value and is ultimately identified with the code of the new African American aesthetics that Reed was seeking at the time of writing his novel. The central plot deals precisely with the search for the Text, a search that has two antagonists: a hoodoo detective, PaPa LaBas, trying to find it in order to unleash the beneficial effects of Jes Grew, and Hinkle Von Vampton, a Knight Templar who wants to ritually destroy the Text and in this way stop the epidemic forever. Parallel to this central story line, the novel develops several subplots whose mutual relationship is revealed as the reading progresses. Reginald Martin (1988) and Reed himself (2000) have commented extensively on many of these subplots. Their observations could be used in class to complement the analysis of specific passages from the novel.

In *Mumbo Jumbo* Reed rewrites myth, history, art, and religion from an African American perspective. In this way, he refutes the traditional charges that blacks in the Americas have always lacked a tradition and that their "high" cultural manifestations have been modeled after those of the white world. Reed radically inverts this vision and portrays black culture

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3 There are several bibliographic sources that can ease the approach to such a difficult novel. Reed's own summaries and interpretation of the novel, as expressed in his articles and interviews, Henry L. Gates's "The Blackness of Blackness" (1983), and Reginald Martin's *Ishmael Reed & the New Black Aesthetic Critics* (1988), offer useful points of departure to explore not only to the novel, but also Reed's Neo-Hoodoo Aesthetics in general. Theodore O. Mason, Jr offers a convincing critique of the novel's totalizing elements that could complement a class discussion of Gates' and Martin's eulogistic approaches.

as the real victim of the plunder and piracy of whites. In the novel, the cradle of Western civilization should not be found in Greece, but rather in the black world. A superficial reading of the novel could lead to the conclusion that Reed is simply replacing the dominant perspective with an alternative world view that represents the same kind of essentialism and racial chauvinism that he wants to displace. However, far from advocating a dominant civilization, Reed creates an African-based multicultural aesthetic through which to negotiate the historical and cultural conditions of the Africans in the New World (Mvuyekure 350). His attitude must be understood within the postmodern context of the “homeopathic” fight against the dominant forms of representation.<sup>4</sup> This combative attitude is ever present in the novel, as well as in Reed’s essays and interviews. Moreover, Reed seems to be particularly interested in blurring such a distinction as much as possible and mixing the discursive realms of history and fiction. To this end, he seeks to present a historical counter-vision, but without completely abandoning some of the formal procedures of history writing. In fact, the narrative of *Mumbo Jumbo* combines even the most extravagant fantasies with traditional forms of historiographic documentation.

Three temporal levels are used to articulate the historical discourse in *Mumbo Jumbo*: the narrative present, which—with the exception of the epilogue—is set in the US twenties; the present of the novel’s creation (1969-1971); and the genealogy of these two presents that dates back to ancient Egypt. The backward and forward movement among these three levels allows Reed to exemplify his necromantic concept of history, according to which the past is evoked to interpret the present and to prophesy about the future.

The mythical and historical core of *Mumbo Jumbo* is found in chapter 52, in the form of PaPa LaBas’s long speech about the origin of civilization (what has come to be known as “the Egyptian legend.”) This chapter is ideally suited for a classroom discussion on the history of religion and culture from an Afro-centric point of view within the parameters of the inter-American postmodern debate. Although allusions to key moments in history appear throughout the work, and although myths and rituals of

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4 As Jameson points out, one of the few forms of political action within reach of the contemporary intellectual is to undermine the dominant cultural logic from within, that is, to neutralize it using its own forms of expression. (Kellner 59)

African American folklore play a crucial role in the novel's complex intertextual framework, it is only through PaPa LaBas's digression that many of these references and allusions are satisfactorily explained.

Although the details of this story are usually the result of Reed's manipulation, the general thesis does not lack supporters both in and outside of academia. Indeed, the last decades of the twentieth century witnessed a thorough revision of the Eurocentric myth of the autonomous origin of Western civilization. An increasing number of scholars have explored ancient Europe's intellectual indebtedness to Africa and Asia as well as the subsequent repression of such awareness. In *Black Athena* (1987), Martin Bernal has, for example, has exposed how the paradigm of racial purity—a topic that I often propose for classroom discussion—was a construction of the Neo-Hellenist and Romantic traditions and how it would have been the result of the wave of ethnocentrism that dominated European thought by the end of the eighteenth century.

What is Reed's position in this debate? Obviously, we cannot expect the goals and ambitions of academic history from a work like *Mumbo Jumbo*. Like Fuentes', Reed's novel is, above all, a fictional text that rejects the restrictions of any genre, beginning with the traditional restrictions of the novel itself. The function of LaBas's Egyptian legend is significant in relation to the rest of *Mumbo Jumbo*, but it is also provocative in relation to conventional versions of history and religion. This defiant—and sometimes offensive—attitude regarding most hegemonic cultural myths leads Reed's characters to sympathize with the most radical views of Afrocentrism. Hence the intensity with which LaBas's account insists on the Negroid character of all that is good in Egyptian civilization and, especially, of that which has most influenced the creation of Classicism.

By rewriting the Egyptian myths of Osiris and Set, Reed depicts a utopian world in whose origins there was no conflict between the spheres of art and power. Like Fuentes' Quetzalcoatl, Reed's "Osiris is the creator, Human Seed who represents the possibilities of regeneration and aesthetic growth." (Mason 101) However, this cultural paradise was subverted by the manipulative action of Set, who embodies the antithesis of Osiris's values. Set is described as the archetype of the ambitious, intolerant, monotheistic, dogmatic, militaristic, anti-intellectual, and an imperialist man of power. His violent enthronement introduced a schism between art and political power. As in Fuentes' vision of the myth of Quetzalcoatl, in *Mumbo Jumbo* Osiris's narrative is the narrative of a fall: the fall of art as the structuring element of society.

A discussion of the mythical dimension of *Mumbo Jumbo* would not be complete without briefly talking about the symbolic dimension of its main character. Students should be encouraged to contextualize the figure of PapaLabas in light of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s theory of the Signifying Monkey. LaBas (a composite of the Yoruba, Fon, and Haitian Legba) is the archetypal interpreter linked to the myths of origin. He is portrayed in the novel as a reader who seeks to decipher the identity of African American culture. As Gates points out, "PaPa LaBas is the figure of the critic, in search of the text, decoding its telltale signs in the process." (705) The entire novel describes this search (and learning process), where knowledge is gained through the textual experiences of its characters. The possibility of a definitive Text that could account for the origin of all types of blackness is finally presented as an implausible literary utopia, but one which may be partially attained through multiple and heterogeneous discourses. Throughout its pages, *Mumbo Jumbo* favors a dynamic and performative conception of the aesthetic object. The literary work is not, in Reed's aesthetic proposal, a closed object of worship, but rather an amalgamating artifact that is enriched through its contact with new cultures and traditions.

As I have shown in this essay, Fuentes and Reed provide a comparative model for teaching the Boom beyond the Latin American literary tradition within the historical context of race (*mestizaje*) that has for centuries dominated the configuration of the American identity. The inter-American historiographic model that I have proposed here will provide students across the humanities with a much broader understanding of the political and aesthetic transformations we encounter in the late twentieth-century Latin American and US fiction.

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