

Multiculturalism and Ishmael Reed

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I. Multiculturalism

My major is American literature with an emphasis on African American writers. I have written papers on Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), an African American leader, Frances Ellen Harper (1825-1911), a Black American feminist, and James Baldwin (1924-1987), an African American writer. I am interested in racial and ethnic discrimination in American society. In the United States, the topic of "What is American culture?" is now controversial in various academic fields, such as multiculturalism and culture wars. Multiculturalism is discussed throughout the world. The word "multiculturalism" first appeared in Canada and Australia as a national policy for immigrants in the early 1970s.

Canada is now the world's second largest country and a dynamic multicultural society. Canada has opted to promote cultural pluralism through government policies, which supported Bilingualism and Biculturalism of the French and English speaking populations, as in the Official Language Act of 1969 (1). "Biculturalism" between French- and English-speaking Canadians was first promoted by Quebec born Prime Minister Pierre E. Trudeau. Quebec is a focal point of the French-Canadian nationalist movement. However, German and Ukrainian Canadians, as well as other ethnic groups and Native Canadian people, were repelled by the policy of dualism or biculturalism. (2) As a result, in 1971 Canada became the first country in the world to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy, which recognizes ethnic and racial diversity as a fundamental and valuable characteristic of the Canadian identity and national heritage. In 1988, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act was passed to eradicate racism and discrimination in federal institutions. The Canadian Government tried to enhance the country's multicultural heritage, but the policy remains controversial with some Canadians.

Australia was first explored by the Dutch in 1606 and then colonized by the British in 1788 as a destination for the transportation of convicts. By the end of the 1960s Australia had become famous for its "White Australia Policy," which excluded non-European immigration. In the 1970s, the government introduced multiculturalism because of an increase in the number of immigrants and refugees from Asia and the Middle East. In 1979, a coalition government established the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs (AIMA), the objectives of which are to raise the awareness of cultural diversity and promote social integrity, understanding, and tolerance. (3) The Labor Government

created the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) in 1986, repealing the former Institute (AIMA), to reaffirm non-discriminatory policy on the grounds of race and make efforts to redress some of the wrongs done to the Aborigines. Today, the number of people who were either born overseas or had one or both parents born overseas is increasing. The number of bilingual families is also increasing. Australia is literally becoming the most multicultural society in the world. However, some Australians are opposing the tendency. Pauline Hanson, elected to represent the people of Oxley in 1996, said in a speech to Parliament, "White is good. White is pure. Not like all those other inferior skin types. That's my motto. I want all those asians out of my country and back to Woop Doop Land where they came from." (4) After the speech she established the One Nation Party.

The Sydney Olympic Games are to be held this summer from September 15th to October 1st. Some angry Aborigines plan to protest during the Olympic Games because the Australian federal court rejected compensation to the "stolen generation," who, from 1910 to the 1970s, were taken from their parents under a law based on the premise that it was humane to save the children of a doomed race.

Every country has conflicts between multiculturalists and monoculturalists (5) in political, economical, social, educational, and cultural fields. Such racial or ethnic conflicts are occurring all over the world and will have a great influence on the shape of the 21st century. And Japan, which remains pre-multiculturalism, is no exception. Recently, a split between those favoring pro-internationalization (pro-globalization), which supports racial or ethnic diversity in Japanese society and those favoring anti-internationalization (nationalism) has developed.

Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara made controversial remarks during a ceremony at the Self Defense Force on April 9th 2000. Mr. Ishihara spoke of the prospect of using SDF troops against "*sangokujin*" -- a word that means a person from a third-country, but that is also regarded as a racist slur. (6) The derogatory term was coined to refer to resident Koreans and Taiwanese after World War II. South Korean residents in Japan visited Tokyo Metropolitan Government Office to protest Governor Ishihara's remarks. They say that the use of the word *sangokujin* was based on prejudice and discrimination against Korean permanent residents and other foreigners. Later, Mr. Ishihara recognized that the word was not politically correct, however, some politicians have continued making problem statements repeatedly.

In 1986, moreover, former prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone said, "a one-race society like Japan is superior to a multi-racial society like the United States." There are many old and conservative politicians not only in the governing Liberal Democratic Party but also in business circles. Such comments do not contribute to multiculturalism and understanding between people from different cultures. Furthermore, I don't think that these machine politicians represent the thinking of the majority of Japanese people. Of course, I am not a Japanese traditionalist.

Europe provides us with a good example of the on-going effort to improve multiculturalism. The European Union consists of 14 different countries and is based on democratic principles and values. I think that many people supporting the ideals of integration and a multicultural society enable Europe to function as a union. On the contrary, Japan is geographically isolated from the rest of the world by oceans. As a kind of homogeneous society, the Japanese people must learn the notion of multiculturalism from other countries in order to cope with our aging population and declining birthrate. According to population statistics, by the year 2050, the U.S. population will increase by 0.15 percent, while the Japanese population will decrease by 0.40 percent or 109,546,000 people.

In addition to the European model, the history and development of multiculturalism in the United States provides a comprehensive study of conflict and harmony between different races and cultures.

II. Multiculturalism and Multicultural Education in the United States

Since the United States began as a multi-ethnic country and “a nation of immigrants,” the development of multiculturalism was inevitable. From the founding of the country to the present, people from different countries settled in the United States. This has resulted in a very heterogeneous society.

The movement to preserve the ethnic identities of European immigration while participating in mainstream of American society arose at the beginning of the 20th century. It was called “cultural pluralism.” The idea of cultural pluralism, introduced by a Jewish philosopher Horace Kallen, didn’t include Native Americans, African Americans or Asian Americans. (7) Multiculturalism is an outgrowth of cultural pluralism.

During the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the Women’s Liberation movement, and the consequent, sweeping social changes, African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans and social minorities claimed their rights and equal educational opportunities as American citizens. Their continuous struggles led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which made it illegal to discriminate against anyone on the basis of race in public places like schools, restaurants, hotels, bus stations, and other such places and institutions. These events forced Americans to reflect on and reconsider their Eurocentric standard and recognize other values and beliefs that may be limited to certain subgroups within the culture.

As a result, traditional America seems to be changing drastically. The notion of the “melting pot,” in which immigrants were expected to give up their identity, language, and cultural values and fuse into one ideal American culture, has been replaced by that of the “salad bowl” or “American mosaic” in which racial and ethnic groups try to keep their identity and preserve their original culture. In the 1970s, American university campuses were filled with many racial and ethnic minorities under the

influence of the ethnic heritage revival. Many colleges and universities set up ethnic, women, and gay studies and revised their curricula and changed their syllabi to reflect the interests of minorities.

By the mid-1980s, multiculturalism had become the term for the celebration of American cultural diversity. This term proclaims freedom and equality to all members of American society, all ethnic and religious groups, women and all others, including such diverse yet forgotten groups such as the disabled and homosexuals, who had previously been marginalized.

These models of multiculturalism provide a historical study of diverse groups living together and an opportunity for the rest of us to learn about other cultures, their conflicts, and points of harmony. Finally, the concept of multiculturalism seems ultimately to derive from Western Democracy, which advocates equality and freedom. However, some Americans, who are sometimes referred to as “angry white men,” feel seriously threatened by such tendencies because racial and cultural diversity removed the privileges and opportunities that these white men always enjoyed. Some scholars, especially Western traditionalists, monoculturalists, or universalists (8) complain that multiculturalism is disregarding European civilization and the thread to the individual rights. For example, Arthur Schlesinger: argued in his book, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*, 1991, “multiculturalists threaten the American way of life and disunite America.”

The mass media clamors that the dispute is “culture wars” between multiculturalists and Western traditionalists over the pursuit of group-interest and political power. The mass media are exaggerating the differences and consider it to be a conflict between two ideologies but these are not contradictory. Multiculturalism is an extension of the progress of Western Civilization. On the other hand, Western traditionalists don't intend to increase discrimination toward minorities and divide the ethnic communities but they hold fast to a common Anglo culture and they are overly patriotic.

Multiculturalism, in fact, is what makes America so fascinating and it is working very well on university campuses. The audience of multicultural education is mostly young people. Now, I want to talk about my multicultural experience in the United States. I attended a multicultural education course as an auditor at the University of Virginia when I was a Fulbright research scholar in 1994. In his syllabus, Prof. R. Covert challenged students by placing an emphasis on “the process of understanding their own bias and prejudices and how they affect the school and classroom learning environment. Students will learn through readings, class discussions, field projects, journal writing and other methods of directed self-explorations.” I had a great interest in this course and attended night classes every Tuesday from 7:00 PM to 9:45 PM. At first I was surprised to see that the number of students exceeded the classroom capacity. Many came to the room to register for the course, which proved that multiculturalism was popular among students. Two-thirds of the students were African

Americans, Asian Americans, or Hispanics.

During school hours, Dr. Covert spoke on such topics as prejudice, racism, sexism, and homophobia, and later the 68 students were divided into 6 groups and each group discussed the topics in a small room for an hour and a half. After the discussions, the students returned to the main room, and each group leader reported the contents of their discussion. All of the students had to turn in reaction papers for each class.

I attended this interactive class and enjoyed my many discussions with American students. The topics and questions that left lasting impressions were, "How did you first come to understand that prejudice/racism existed?" and "Describe how you feel when you interact or think about interacting with someone from another ethnic/racial group." Before entering into the class discussion, students introduced themselves and expressed their opinions on the topic. I was surprised when one white woman first told us her ethnic identity like, "I am Jewish," and her comment was very logical and one black woman complained about their powerlessness in American society and asked who received the benefit of racism most.

It was first time for me to interact and discuss various topics with white Americans, including Jews, and African Americans, Chinese and Korean descent all at once. It was a precious experience that I would not have been able to experience on a Japanese university campus. Multicultural education classes encourage students to become aware of their ethnicity and background and to understand the nature of discrimination and racism in order to get along with other people.

Later, the students and I participated in a lecture sponsored by the Native American Student Union and the Education School educational studies department instead of the multicultural education lesson. Paul Chaat Smith, an American Indian writer and activist, complained "Twenty years ago, Native Americans were thought of as primitive, and now they are seen as masters of the environment." He offered the popular film "Dances with Wolves" as an example of the romanticization of American Indian culture. (9) His speech highlighted the need to get truer images of American Indian culture and to make up for the centuries of unfairness against the Native Americans.

III. Ishmael Reed and His Fight

I take a general view of multiculturalism; from racial or ethnic conflicts, bilingual education, cultural wars, to redress for past wrongdoings committed by racial prejudice and war hysteria in the world. We should seek to reconsider the neglected chapters in American history and make up for past injustices against minorities. What is the biggest injustice in American history? It is American slavery and Frederick Douglass said it was "the great sin and shame of America": making men brutes, robbing them of their liberty, beating them with sticks, and selling them at auction. (10) We can not avoid the topic of racism against minorities when we discuss multiculturalism in the United States.

A good introduction to study of multiculturalism are the works of Ishmael Reed (1938~), a major African American novelist, poet, essayist, and playwright. Reed was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and grew up in Buffalo, New York. During his high school years, he discovered Nathanael West (1903-40), whose surreal style and biting vision of America influenced him. (11) He has written several essays, plays, an opera, and songs as well as novels and poetry. He is one of the most controversial writers and a significant feature of his writing is to treat political and social issues sarcastically. His motto is 'writing is fighting' and he made his attitude clear in an essay, titled *Writin' Is Fightin'* in 1988. Reed said in an interview; "So, even the works that are considered masterworks have a political or religious point." (12)

In his best-known novel, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), he elaborated his own mythology based on African culture and neo-Hoodooism, which evolved from Voodooism, in his early period of his writing. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a satirical and influential novel about the progress of a metaphysical plague, Jes Grew, during the 1920s and is an all-out assault on Western civilization. I will not discuss such an experimental and complicated novel here.

Ishmael Reed moved to California in 1967 and, in 1976, cofounded the Before Columbus Foundation, dedicated to the celebration of multicultural literature. (13) In the same year, he published his fifth novel, *Flight to Canada*, which is a story of a fugitive slave during the Civil War. Reed wrote it without being trapped by a traditional methods and ridiculed American literary tradition and slave narratives. A leading character in the novel, a slave-poet flees to Canada on a non-stop jumbo jet and the plantation mistress lies in bed watching TV. According to the novel, Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-96) borrowed the story from Josiah Henson (1789-1883), an ex-slave, and wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to get money to buy a silk dress. (14) Reed explains the reason that slaves escape from plantations: *Dysaesthesia Aethipica*, a disease that causes Negroes to run away. (15) The novel strengthened Reed's reputation and aroused controversy about his portrayal of female characters. (16)

Ishmael Reed has taught English at University of California at Berkeley for the past 20 years. Reed's most recent novel is *Japanese by Spring* (1993), which is a parody of the power games of campus politics and ethnic studies on an American campus. At first I wondered why Reed took a lot of material from Japan: the atomic-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the humiliating postwar occupation by a white shogun (p.210), the Yakuza, the Ainu, the Japanese smile, Japanese writers (Shintaro Ishihara, Yukio Mishima, Nagai Kafu), the Greater East Asia War, Pearl Harbor, comfort girls, Sakanoue Tamuramaro, Isoroku Yamamoto, Hideki Toujou, and Kokuryukai (a right-wing group). One of the reasons is the economic advance of Japan into the United States in 1980s especially when the Japanese took over the Seattle Mariners and famous golf courses. Reed has been studying Japanese and Yoruba, the language of his ancestors, since 1989 and gave another reasons in this interview:

“I am very interested in introducing the African-American literary style to Asia in the same way that James Baldwin introduced the African-American novel to Europe.” (17) “You were fighting against the Eurocentrism by expanding your interest in other non-European cultures including the Japanese culture.” (18)

Reed is satirizing American society’s tendency to advocate multiculturalism or the importance of all languages and cultures reversing the mainstream, that is, the English only movement or Anglo-Saxon superiority. The topics of this ninth novel are those matters that are affecting America today: culture wars, political correctness, racism, feminism, affirmative action, sexism, homophobia, sexual harassment, Eurocentrism, Afrocentricism, faction on campus, the argument over curriculums, and so on.

A leading character of *Japanese by Spring*, is Benjamin “Chappie” Puttbutt, a black part-time lecturer at the Jack London College, which was named after the apostle of Anglo-Saxon superiority. As for the ratio of the racial diversity on campus, 48% are white and 30% are Asian-American, 10% are Hispanic, 8% are black, and 4% are “others”. (19) The black lecturer, Puttbutt, is regarded as an ‘Uncle Ben’, which means a submissive old black man with bald head, one of negative stereotype of black people, and he tries to adapt his beliefs to the ideological climate at the school to become tenured in the Humanity department. When the Black Power thing was in, Puttbutt was into that, and he has been a feminist when they were in power (20) and opposed Affirmative Action to cater the superintendents (president, dean, and chairperson) at the school. The black lecturer seems to become an opportunist or a conformist to get promoted and survive on campus even though he is the target of the attack for white students and they called him “Chappie,” not Professor or Mr. (p.12) This is the way that white people called black men during the slavery period in the 19th century.

Other college staff members in the novel are hypocrites rather than opportunists even if there is a great argument between those who believed Europe to be the center of all culture and those who said that the center of culture was Africa. (21) The President of the university, Bright Stool, who runs the school, donates a check for a thousand dollars to Mr. Termite Control anonymously. The man, a candidate for the Presidency, claims that those who don’t like a Western Christian civilization can hit the road. (22) The president is a racist and an ignorant who believes that the Humanities are a bunch of soft hands and that the Humanity people are losers. (p.42) The White dean of Humanity, Robert Hurt, who has a poster of Bob Dylan on his office wall, is a 1960’s liberal and supports Puttbutt and multiculturalism. The dean decided to suspend a racist student from school because he threatened to kill “Chappie” and wrote KKK on his car. (p.56) However, when the Japanese took over the Jack London College, he became a nationalist and describes the Japanese advance as “this is about civilization and barbarism.” (p.78) He is a liberalist as long as he can enjoy his privileges as a white professor. The White chairperson of the Humanities department,

Jack Milch, is an expert on black feminist literature and wears a T-shirt with Anita Hill's picture on it. (p.23) However, he was arrested for keeping his wife and child in prison for ten years and putting them a leash. (p.190) The chairperson was really a hypocrite on college campus because there was a big gap between his academic research and his real life at home.

Puttbutt's dream to get tenure is rejected by these hypocritical bosses who have a great interest in power games and he is replaced by a radical lesbian ecologist activist, April Jokujoku. African American Studies department expects her to fight against homophobia, sexism, and racism, but, as soon as she arrives the airport, she demands a chauffeur-driven limousine and police escort to bring her the university. The radical black feminist is depicted as one of hypocrites in the novel. Ishmael Reed, who is famous for misogyny, describes white or black feminists critically.

A black feminist said that Ishmael Reed was "the ringleader" of black men who were opposed to black women writing about black male misogyny and that he was calling such black women traitors to the race. (p.24)

Ishmael Reed, himself, often appeared in the novel and argued against the comment of the black feminist. Puttbutt is in favor of feminism and makes every effort to receive tenure but he is denied. The story of the university campus seems to be based on Reed's bitter experience when he applied for tenure at University of California in 1977 and rejected. (23) Reed put his feelings into his essay, "The Great Tenure Battle of 1977" in *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*. The novel is a parody of college politics and reflects Reed's idea against monoculturalists or traditionalists.

Puttbutt has been learning Japanese from a Japanese tutor, Dr. Yamato, because he believed that if he could grasp Japanese, the future belonged to him. (p.48) After he was denied tenure, the Japanese took over the Jack London University and Dr. Yamato became the new president. Dr. Yamato appointed Puttbutt to be a special assistant to the acting president and closed the Department of Humanity and moved it into Ethnic Studies. (p.90) Moreover, Dr. Yamato changed the Jack London University to Hideki Tojo Daigaku, named after a Japanese war criminal, and the Student Hall was called Isoroku Yamamoto Hall, named after a captain of the Japanese navy, and Ethnic studies was called "Bangaku" (barbarian studies). Dr. Yamato openly criticized Americans in his office like Mr. Yasuhiro Nakasone, an old Japanese politician:

"They are beginning to say that Americans have smaller brains than those belonging to people of other nations. Look at their test scores." (p.145)

Puttbutt first used the drastic educational reforms to settle old scores, but later tolerated the big humiliating reform and finally handed in his resignation. He said to Dr. Yamato, "you're insane" and left his office. (p.149) After his resignation Dr.

Yamato, a member of the Kokuryuu-kai (a right-wing group), was arrested by American soldiers because he plotted to assassinate the emperor and the prime minister of Japan in order to return the Tokugawa Shogunate to power.

Puttbutt was called "Black fang" and became the most powerful man on the Jack London campus. Even after the arrest of his Japanese teacher, Puttbutt is still enthusiastic for Japan and he decided to go to Japan with his parents to work at the American embassy. The story of *Japanese by Spring* is humorous and has a happy ending in which multiculturalists won on the college campus. Most characters in the novels are conformists who change their attitude according to the ideological climate and situation. Reed said that it was always important to remain open to facts, ideas, and other perspectives. (24) Nonconformists who don't change their attitude are called bigots. Ishmael Reed said, "the Black Nationalists are mono-cultural." (25)

IV. A Problem of Japanese Society

Let's think about Japanese or Japan in the novel, which is an interesting topic for us. Ishmael Reed learned Japanese because he might be able to find a few advantages in Japanese or Japanese society. Reed describes that Japanese people are a hero among nonwhite nations because the Japanese stood up to white people and weren't colonized by them. (p.62) Puttbutt's grandfather was recruited to the Kokuryu-kai in Detroit and believed that Japan would become the leader of pan-colored solidarity against whites. He may even believe that the twenty-first century is going to be a yellow century. (p.131) Does Japan take America's place as a multicultural country for nonwhite nations? The answer is no.

Two characters in *Japanese by Spring*, Dr. Yamato, the new president and Muzukashii, a Japanese American student of the school, show typical Japanese behavior in multi-ethnic society. Dr. Yamato, one of ancient names for Japan, is a member of the Kokuryu-kai and had tried to eradicate Western influence in Japan. He changed the name of the school to Hideki Tojo Daigaku and evaluated students and faculty with IQ tests designed by a Japanese education firm. (p.142) He is a nonconformist and monoculturalist with little respect and considerations to other languages and cultures just as Western traditionalists.

Muzukashii is a smart student and shows off his wisdom in class and follows powerful right-wing white students. Muzukashii despises a powerless black teacher but he calls Puttbutt "Professor" when he asks his help with an expulsion decree of Chinese and Japanese-Americans by Dr. Yamato's. He is a good example of banana, which means yellow skin and white content. Some Japanese believe that there is no contending against a man in power.

Reed describes Japanese people as "the most racist people in Asia" (p.115) because "everybody knows how they treat their minorities, the Koreans, the Pakistanis, and Okinawans". (p.77) Becoming a great economic power, Japan is acting like a white

nation but the whites never see the Japanese as equals. (p.206) Ishmael Reed seems to give a grave warning to Japanese society when he sees “signs of trouble for Japan’s continued prosperity.” (p.205) Japanese should not make the same mistakes as the whites did. Since the Japanese have a long monocultural history that is a habit of weeding out opponents from a community and people from other countries, Japanese should adopt the idea of multiculturalism on language education, racial and ethnic discrimination and compensation for the past wrongdoings during World War II.

According to the Epilog, Reed recognizes himself as a Yoruba-American who had Irish ancestry (p.220) and participated in the Yoruba traditional religious ceremony of Olódúmaré, which was polytheistic like Shintoism, not monotheistic like Christianity and Islam. The Yoruba worship about 400 deities and believe that gods dwell among the living. He has little hope that worshiping the omnipresent Olódúmaré will overcome today’s troubles in the United States.

* This article is a revised version of “Multiculturalism and Ishmael Reed,” presented to Akita American Literature Association on September 2nd 2000.

[Notes]

- (1) Susan Auerbach ed., *Encyclopedia of Multiculturalism*, Marshall Cavendish, 1994, p.1187
- (2) 西川長夫編、『多文化主義・多言語主義の現在：カナダ・オーストラリアそして日本』、人文書院、2000、p.80
- (3) <http://www.immi.gov.au/facts/08multi.htm>
- (4) <http://members.tripod.com/~pleaseexplain/main..html>
- (5) Ishmael Reed, *Multi America: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Pease*, Penguin Books, 1998
- (6) *The Asahi Evening News*, April 13, 2000
- (7) 示村陽一、『異文化社会アメリカ』、研究社出版、1999、p.33
- (8) Christian Joppke & Steven Lukes ed., *Multicultural Questions*, Oxford U. Press, 1999, p.19
- (9) *The Cavalier Daily*, March 23, 1994
- (10) Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?: An Address Delivered in Rochester,” New York, July 5, 1852
- (11) Patricia L. Hall ed., *The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*, Houghton Mifflin, 1998, p.1653
- (12) “The Writer as Pioneer: An Interview with Mr. Ishmael Reed”, *The Rising Generation*, November, 1996, p.35
- (13) *The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*, p.1654
- (14) Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada*, Simon & Schistre, 1976, p.8
- (15) *Flight to Canada*, p.18

- (16) Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Norton, 1997, p.2286
- (17) Rebecca Carroll, *Swing Low: Black Men Writing*, Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1995, p.194
- (18) *The Rising Generation*, November, 1996, p.37
- (19) Ishmael Reed, *Japanese by Spring*, Atheneum, 1993, p.15
- (20) *Japanese by Spring*, pp.48-49
- (21) *Japanese by Spring*, p.4
- (22) *Japanese by Spring*, p.39
- (23) 大塚清恵、「イシュマイル・リード『春までに日本語を』考」、『黒人研究』67号、1997、p.3
- (24) Rebecca Carroll, *Swing Low: Black Men Writing*, p.195
- (25) Hazel Arnett Ervin, *African American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000*, Twayne, 1999, p.235