

An Interview with Ishmael Reed¹ · Peter Nazareth

PN: When I introduced you the other day, I said you made the abstract concrete in your fiction. One example is the ritual of the Western capitalist loving his property in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. You make property concrete in the form of a green horse, and Drag Gibson goes out and loves it. Now that focuses one's imagination.

IR: Yeah, to treat forces the same way you would treat characters. So that forces become characters. That is an old tradition in Afro-American culture where abstract forces are referred to as though they are real or as if they were people. A good example is the blues. Some of the songs seem to be personified that way. For instance, a song called "Jailhouse Blues"—blues knocking at my door—that kind of thing. I think this notion is deeply rooted in the Afro-American view of the world. And I use it in my work. But I also use the trappings of the Western novel in *Yellow Back Radio*. In a Western, the macho male hero always prefers his horse to women.

PN: When that particular scene ends, it's so absurd that the horse is embarrassed and puts his hand over his eye as in a strip cartoon.

IR: Yes. I think there is an influence of California culture in Walt Disney. The early Shoshonee were totemic. And it is interesting that some of Walt Disney's characters are based on blacks. For example, Mickey Mouse is based upon a black style. Blacks were supposedly jittery, always moving. I have a paper on the influence of blacks on cartoons.² And also the use of black music in cartoons, Fletcher Henderson and people like that. Whenever people think about cartoons and then listen to Fletcher Henderson they think: oh, this is cartoon music. But I think the cartoon is an ancient form and I draw from cartoon ideas consciously. In fact, I studied the history of cartoons and comic books when I was working on *Pallbearers* and *Yellow Back*. Cartoons are not considered a profound form—that's because of snobbery—although there is a split in academia now: some say these are works of art.

PN: Some people have argued that Walt Disney has made everything antiseptic. You don't subscribe to that, it seems.

IR: No, I don't, I don't at all. I think Disney was a genius. I think intellectuals didn't particularly like Walt Disney's political views—nor did I, but I think as an artist he is undeniably a genius. When I was a kid I used to see all his cartoons.

PN: Yeah, so did I, so did our generation all over the world. We grew up on these things. I notice your novels have lines like, “So-and-so walked in looking like Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*.” I thought at first you were kidding but then I began to feel that you were taking our whole mythic frame of reference from films.

IR: Right. Gary Cooper’s awkward Lincoln, or Richard Widmark or somebody like that with a maniacal grin in *The Kiss of Death*. I look at films and I feel these characterizations are types we can relate to all over the world because the films have been shown all over South America, Africa, all over. When I say “Gary Cooper,” a whole set of images immediately comes to your mind. It’s like humming the first few bars of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony . . . ta ta ta daaaa—you know the whole Fifth Symphony is brought to mind by that. It’s a short cut to characterization.

I’m thinking now that normal characterization in this country, naturalistic, traditional, is more akin to journalism. Now this is putting me on a limb, but if I read an inventory of a character’s possessions, his clothes and all that, this doesn’t necessarily tell me about the character. Often it is excessive and redundant. But if, as in African art, I focus in on the prominent features of the character, which is what happens also in cartoons, like the Gump family—they don’t have chins—or Nixon’s five-o’clock shadow, I don’t have to belabor that and it tells more of the character than exhaustive details, an inventory, a Macy’s window display. In *Flight to Canada*, for example, a few features can tell the character of Cato. His monocle dropping. That’s the way it’s done, I believe, in art all over the world—oceanic art, art in Africa, art I’ve seen in museums.

PN: A lot of American writing, particularly journalism, builds up the idea that something is real just by describing every single thing that’s around. I’m not sure whether that comes from nineteenth-century realism or whether it suggests some deep uncertainty in America about whether Americans really exist. Do you have any theories?

IR: Well, I think that a good deal of journalism is fiction. I worked in journalism: you make things up! American journalism is prone to that.

I’ve tried to develop new forms of journalism. For example, I think new journalism originated in the East Village in the sixties. They got the credit for it uptown because they have these huge publicity machines, you know. But new journalism originated in the underground newspapers in New York because poets and novelists were writing

journalism. And what I've tried to do recently is to take the actual techniques of fiction and apply them to real life, which is where a certain kind of novel is heading. It mixes up the fictional with the real. The ancestor, the American antecedent author whose work precedes or prefigures this work, is a Black writer named William Wells Brown, 1853. Now you won't read that in the fancy journals because the average American critic knows very little about other traditions of American writing. William Wells Brown used newspaper clippings, interviews, travelogue material, autobiography, fiction, all in the same book, more like a painter's form. I told Charles Davis, who's an expert on William Wells Brown, that if a certain critic had read his other work, like his travelogue, *My Three Years in Europe*, or his plays, he could have seen that Brown could have written a conventional novel if he had wanted to. His descriptive powers were excellent, his ideas, his ear, his characters—white, black, whatever—were excellent and convincing. What I try to do is to take the techniques of fiction and apply them to a real event where the plot is given. Like boxing, the Muhammed Ali and Leon Spinks fight (in *God Made Alaska for the Indians*, New York, 1982). But I don't write this way when I submit to newspapers.

PN: When you were discussing existentialism, you talked about emotion. You said that when you read Camus, you were made to feel it was very hip for a guy not to show any sentiment, whereas the Afro-American tradition is full of sentiment. In your novels, you suspend the reader's emotional involvement, as in the comics; through laughter, you make him think. Not to say there is *no* feeling; for example, one of the powerful emotional scenes is in *Mumbo Jumbo*, when the white guy betrays his colleagues who have been re-stealing stolen Third World art to send it back. But on the whole, you suspend the emotion.

IR: That's true. I guess that's the disposition I have. But there *are* poignant scenes in the novels. In *Flight to Canada*, for example, where Quickskill finds that it's just as bad in Canada as it is where he came from. I use humor but I use other forms too. People would like to dismiss me as a humorist or a satirist or a parodist. These are just a few techniques I use in my work. I don't use them exclusively. Some people said "Swift" so much that I went out and re-read *Gulliver's Travels*. Maybe the tone is similar to Swift's and some of the early Latin satirists, but his work is more expository.

PN: You said in one of your interviews that people could learn a lot about the South from Poe.

IR: He has a lot of dungeons and torture chambers and incest; you know, a society that's rotten to the core.

PN: My point is that when the wolf howls in Poe, the blood is supposed to curdle, but in your novel, one feels you've dragged the wolf onstage to burlesque his howl.

IR: Right! I know that Poe didn't intend to be funny, but when you read his work now, his work is so period it's amusing. I'm sure he did not mean a lot of his work to be funny but sometimes you can't read his work without smiling or being amused at some of his dramatic scenes and heroines. You can satirize something like that. What I do is parody some of Eddie Poe's poems in his language. I've done the same thing with Tennyson.

PN: I want to go in two directions here, one modern, the other ancient. The modern track: looking at the development of your novels, it looks as though you have moved on to a shorter unit in your work. I mean a unit of concentration. We can call it a paragraph, but I'm thinking of timespan. The shorter span from *Yellow Back Radio* onwards makes it easier to read for Americans used to watching television. When I first came to this country, I found it a little hard to jump around with the novels, just as I found it hard to concentrate on television because it had so many commercials. Now I find it easier. Was this a conscious development?

IR: Sure. We are influenced by television and by jazz. Discontinuity. In jazz one can make associations that on the surface do not seem to have anything to do with anything, but when you think of the entire process, it makes sense. It is unified. I think that's what I do in my work. The reader has to pay attention, has to keep up with it, but it's no different from someone starting off with a melody or tune and then improvising on it or merely alluding to it. That's what I try to do. That was conscious, yes.

PN: Let's take up the music later. Now the other track: you've talked of your writing as being in an old tradition. You said that art is also fetish. You've talked of Neo-Hoodoo. There is a suggestion that in your work, you're putting a hoodoo on somebody or something. Sticking pins into a doll.

IR: Well, I don't know. I think writing can often be prescient: you write these events and they happen in the real world. That's happened to me a number of times. I think that's one of the elements in African religion, the seer, the prophet, the necromancer. One almost feels as though one

is receiving a vision or revelation in this work. I think the books can be seen as amulets. An amulet, you know, is something you carry around and people say they carry my books around. With *Mumbo Jumbo* I advise if you don't read it, put it over your door! That comes out of the idea of the holy book, the sacred book. There are powers that really influence people in strange ways in those books. I'm not even aware of them all. I want to do some stage things where I can immediately see the audience's response to something instead of guessing about how people will respond.³ But people do respond to those books in strange ways and there may be powers that we unleash in the books, in the words and language rhythms, which affect people in ways we don't know about.

PN: You said about "D Hexorcism of Noxon D Awful" that you actually, consciously, through this work put a psychic fix on Nixon.

IR: Yeah, it was a primitive piece which resembles more the dolls that you see in religious ceremonies. I had read something in African witchcraft, which is not really a good name, "witchcraft," that there was such a thing as "the breath of men," where an enemy could be destroyed or fixed merely by the idea one put out. More and more people concentrate and transmit telepathic evil upon an enemy of the nation or the clan. This is where the "Hexorcism" came from. It knocked me out to do that because we all, the Afro-American intellectuals, felt that Nixon was going to set up concentration camps here. Maybe he would have done that if he had had a few more years to play around with things. So that was the aim of that piece: a psychic attack on Nixon.

PN: But sometimes when you say that, you're like the wolf. You're standing on the side and laughing. Let people decide for themselves whether to believe or not to believe.

IR: Yeah, well, I was the first to do this. All these novelists now have Nixon as a character doing this and that, but in "Hexorcism," you could see the beginnings of *Mumbo Jumbo*. LaBas appears, and you can also see Louisiana Red and Minnie the Mocher. There are sketches of several novels in that one piece. It was a crowded piece, a packed piece, and published in 1969.

PN: In *Yellow Back Radio*, young kids rebel because they want their own fictions—again, the abstract made concrete. You are suggesting that it is important for people to have their own fictions. This is contrary to the American idea that fiction is okay but what you need are your own facts.

IR: When I say "own fictions," I mean that one can speak more

accurately of the psychological history of a people if one knows the legends, the folklore, the old stories which have been handed down for generations, the oral tales, all of which tells you where you came from, which shows the national mind, the way a group of people looks at the world. I think you can ascertain that by going and reconstructing a past which I call Neo-Hoodoo in my work. I call it Neo-Hoodoo because you can have your own psychology rather than someone else's. In other words they are trying to make us Europeans in this country, and we don't think that way. We are different; people are different. I'm not a social biologist, but I think that although we can go to science to prove our common ancestry—the one-cell amoeba or some distant primate or whatever—we are different and it's wrong for one group of people to impose their psychology on another. Blacks don't think the way Europeans think. The techniques of analyzing the European psyche do not work with the African psyche, as Africans are discovering in the United States! That's what I mean when I say we have to create our own fictions.

We've been lied to in this country. One of the reasons the political leadership is so bad is the educational system. All these people who committed these atrocities in the last war against the Vietnamese—the Vietnamese were committing atrocities too, let's not leave that out—had teachers. They were educated in American schools which are mere exercises in chauvinism—Euro-American chauvinism. The treatment of Indians has been distorted; the treatment of blacks has been distorted. A few hundred years of American history have been given wrong interpretations so now what we have to do is to provide another side, another viewpoint. And that's what I try to do in my novels.

PN: You do it so humorously that one sometimes pulls back and says, "Is this true or not?"

IR: I know, I know. Well, I think we'll keep it that way! Nobody knows when I'm serious.

PN: Yet at the end of *Mumbo Jumbo*, you have a long list of books for people to read.

IR: Those are books which influenced the writing of *Mumbo Jumbo*. Those are all the books that I'd taken out of the library. I think the older works help. Zora N. Hurston is mentioned there. Some of the black feminist writers are saying that none of the males says anything about Zora N. Hurston: I certainly mentioned her in *Mumbo Jumbo*, which was published in 1972. I mentioned her in a complimentary way and used some of her research. I was very conscious about people not knowing

these things: but they should know these things because millions of people all over the Americas are acquainted with these ideas. People in Puerto Rico and Cuba and Argentina and Brazil and other places understand those books—they've been translated into Spanish. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a big seller in Spanish countries, South American countries because they understand and they can relate to aspects of the Afro-American experiences here.

PN: I would have thought your ideas would have made you a black nationalist, but you use Afro-American traditions as a means of linking up with other peoples and traditions. As a publisher and editor, you have fought for Asian-Americans and Indians, among others, and have even been the first to publish them. How do these things connect?

IR: The Afro-American material I use is part of an international aesthetic that blends in with other cultures very easily. It's absorptive. You cannot discuss these ideas in the United States without a lot of unclear thinking because of the racial paranoia and traditions of racism in this country, which may exist in other parts of the world but in a different way. In this hemisphere there are whites who are members of syncretic religions, Afro-American, Native American, Euro-American religions in Brazil and other places. You have pictures of whites running temples or whites who have become possessed by black loas. African mythological systems get along very well with Euro-American ideas and Native American ideas . . . Indians, black gods, the saints. So what I'm dealing with is a multi-cultural aesthetic of which the Afro-American part may be the strongest part because that is my strongest heritage, which is Native American and Irish-American as well.

PN: Tell us about *Yardbird*.

IR: We lost the *Yardbird Reader* magazine. We got into a court fight with members of our corporation who didn't do all that much for the company and a president of the company who didn't pay taxes, who wasn't paying bills, and we were threatened with a lawsuit. Al Young and I had to put in our money to rescue the company. We were the ones who put up the money. I edited five issues of the *Yardbird Reader* single-handedly and Al Young did one and I did the layout for most of the issues. Art directors we had chosen who were in the company couldn't do the paste-up. They just had no skills in paste-up or layout so we had disaster after disaster. That caused a lot of tension in the company. Finally, we dismissed the president and he went out and got a couple of art directors, one who was inactive and the other who was not

re-elected to the board of directors in 1975. One judge agreed with them. Gave them all our inventory, books and everything. They wanted more. It took me three years to put out *Calafia*, for which I had a grant from the California Arts Council. They wanted that too. They were just incapable of doing things on their own. They were running a parasitic game on us. We put together a thing called *Yarbird Lives!* to pay off some debts and to pay contributors. The judge gave them the money! So the white judges were actually encouraging parasitism. That's one problem with socialism: what do you do about parasitism?

So we lost the magazine. We tried to start a magazine called *Y-Bird* on the advice of our lawyer and we had to give that up because of a court order. In the United States, you know, if there is a conflict—this is historical—if there is a conflict between Afro-Americans, the white male court apparently will side with those who are incapable of producing. In three years,⁴ these people haven't brought out a single book. I brought out eight books in three years. They weren't capable. The former president described writers as an endangered species and he had no background in writing at all. He tried to say, on the basis of two paragraphs he wrote on Makonde sculpture, questionable paragraphs, that he was a writer. That came out in court. White male courts and banks seem to be dead set against Afro-American enterprise. Yet when we are on reservations and on welfare, we get criticized for that too. So you can't win. If this had been a white company like Ford or General Motors and the directors hadn't brought out a car in three years, I don't think the court would have made the same decision. Anyway, we lost that magazine because of what I consider the vindictiveness and malice of one man who was a former president and who set out to destroy the company. We don't have that magazine anymore.

PN: I didn't know that. I liked the magazine: it was really multicultural.

IR: I think it accomplished its purpose: it brought in writers who had never been published before. I selected those writers, and Al Young and I brought all the revenue in. These people really vamped out on that—they didn't do anything. Anything they did just interfered with the work and damaged it. That was a conflict we couldn't resolve. It's not over yet. Eventually, we will deal with these people. They have to be dealt with. We can't have this happen. I mean, what would black children think? They will look at this case and say: "We can get something for nothing. We can be pimps." It just encourages pimping

as far as I'm concerned, and I'm dead set against that. So we will deal with these people and we will have our supporters in this community deal with these people. We feel they should be ostracized. The court sided with parasites.

PN: That's something very old in America.

IR: It's in Africa too. You see what happens in Africa when the British and French go in—white men select their stooges who rob the country blind and who are not progressive. This happens all over the world. All the writers we know, all people from the arts should have some kind of common answer to this thing because it's going to continue. They are always going to try to manipulate us. And I want to tell you another thing that happened. These blacks on the other side were always speaking of their devotion to blackness; yet they hired a white lawyer who was very vicious to us. For example, the lawyer broke into our warehouse and damaged our books, knocked over books—white men hired by black men. They kept my personal mail and opened it. Which is a crime! They received no punishment for this. They interfered with our liberties.

PN: But that didn't stop you as a publisher.

IR: No! That's not going to stop me! That was only one company I was involved in. I also have I REED BOOKS. I have a very good relationship with my partner in Reed & Cannon Communications. We're doing video films and are going to keep publishing books. But the really difficult part is that I was getting really discouraged when I heard this first decision handed down by this judge, whom I later referred to as a hanging-cowboy judge, which came up at another trial. "Why did you call this man a hanging-cowboy judge and why did you call this black plaintiff an idle café negro and a self-styled oppressed genius?" I said, "Well, it's my reading of history, man!"

Washington, DuBois and Garvey had the same problems. Knowing that really gave me strength, to know that this is a problem one has to deal with if one attempts to build something and to construct something: in other words, to go out of one's place. We got this magazine, we published whites, we published Native Americans, our magazines were handsome and good-looking. I did *Yardbird Five* myself and yet these people want a part of everything I do! Anything I want to do they want to go to court and get a part of. It seems I've got these leeches on me. Maybe parasites, as Al Young says, is too elegant a term to describe these people.

PN: The Before Columbus Foundation seems to be more powerful.

IR: The Before Columbus Foundation is more powerful than this other project. We have been together since 1976 and we are from different backgrounds: Jewish-Americans, Irish-Americans, Native Americans, Asian-Americans. Our chairman is Shawn Wong. Victor Cruz and I founded it in 1976 and we took on Bob Callahan, who was a great help to us. We have a warehouse and we distribute books and have international recognition. We get orders from all over the world.

PN: Do you see the control of business operations as very important to the writer?

IR: Sure it is, because then we can determine the kind of images. We have control over our images and ideas and scripts and everything. Like our soap opera. There are black people working in my soap opera.

PN: *Your soap opera?*

IR: Reed & Cannon Communications. We've produced a film already. These people were selfless, they sacrificed: Bill Gunn, Carman Moore, Walter Cotton, Verta Mae Grosvenor, Jim Wright.

PN: Isn't soap opera too light a form for you to use?

IR: I think that remains to be seen. Remember the Western elements in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. And I think the same thing is happening with the soap opera. We really want to use forms that Americans are acquainted with. Then we can get across to them. All forms can be shaped by the artists who use them.

PN: The other day you said you read the business section of the news first. In your essays, you criticized some black Americans who think they can push their ideas without having financial power.

IR: That's what I hear all the time—debates between black intellectuals about politics, and they have no organizations nor financial power nor institutions nor technology to see these ideas through. So these become empty ideas. The average Afro-American intellectual lives in an ideological cloud. What's happening in New York and New England is a power struggle—it's very interesting to look at this stuff from Oakland, California because I can see clearly what's going on. There's a big struggle now, a big power struggle over liberal patronage among Afro-American writers and intellectuals.

PN: You're saying, as you implied in *Flight to Canada*, that the old patterns of slavery never really ended.

IR: Of course. As a matter of fact, Al Young and I, when we heard the Yardbird decision, the Sparrow Decision, quoted from *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

where it said that the freed negroes were encouraged after slavery to re-enslave themselves. There's also a book called *Been in the Storm So Long, the Aftermath of Slavery*⁵ where it is said that after the Civil War, what they wanted to do was to have blacks go in and sign contracts which said the conditions would remain as they were before. That's what they are doing here. We are in the position of the so-called freed negroes. We are trying to build our own institutions. We get some jackals who go out and get the white male planters and plantation people and the white male judicial system to stop us. That's what happened in this case. Our attorney, Howard Moore, saw this. It was a godsend to get a man like that who has argued before the Supreme Court and was one of the people who got Julian Bond his seat back on the Georgia Legislature. We went to him and he knew EXACTLY what was going on, the historical and cultural ramifications. He predicted what would happen, that in a conflict between competent and incompetent, the white judicial system would side with the incompetent as a way of keeping us in our place, keeping us on the reservation. But they can't do this any longer. The international situation is different from what it was in the nineteenth century. We know intellectuals in Africa, South America. We are in correspondence with people in Turkey and all over. We're writers. So we're going to the community now. You can't get justice in the courts. I mean, the last decision was better than nothing—we got half our money back for *Yardbird Lives!* and they didn't get *Calafia*, which is what they wanted, like vultures.

PN: In *Flight to Canada*, three slaves escape and one of them tries to earn enough money to buy his freedom. When it comes to a critical point, it is revealed that he cannot actually buy his freedom.

IR: The slavemaster didn't want him to buy it, he didn't want any money, he wanted HIM! That's what we have here. Al Young and I have been slaves. What these decisions say is that slavery is legal. These two decisions came out in California and I think these are historic decisions, though, in passing, they didn't get media attention. This Sparrow Decision is a very important decision. It says if you get into a corporation with people who are incompetent, they can take your books, they can take your money, they can take your energy, they can take your effort—and that's slavery.

PN: If you had to write this in your fiction, you'd probably have a court case over some strange animal, perhaps a racoon. . . .

IR: I know, I know. Give me time! (Laughter) Maybe a rat!

PN: I don't know whether I should ask this kind of question because I know the perils as a writer. When you create a character, you've created a *character*. But there are many characters in your work who resemble or are parodies of people from real life.

IR: Yes, sure.

PN: In *Louisiana Red*, there is a character, Minnie the Moocher, who looks very much like Angela Davis. In fact, I bought the book and Angela Davis' autobiography simultaneously: they were published simultaneously by the same publisher. I was a great admirer of Angela Davis. I was very struck at the first reading of the novel that you put characters, who would in real life be regarded as diametric, ideological opposites, on the same side. You put on the same side as Moochers Minnie, Street (who seems to be based on Eldridge Cleaver) and the President. They didn't work but were parasites on those who did work; and ultimately Minnie and Street were being manipulated, it turns out, by sinister figures, one of whom was disguised as a Mammy. In *Flight to Canada*, there is a character who goes to the Congo as an anthropologist and gets thrown to the crocodiles, coming back to haunt his parents. One thinks of Nelson Rockefeller's son. And the father, like Nelson Rockefeller, suffers from dyslexia. How do you deal with this kind of comment: "Oh, that's so-and-so"?

IR: I think I had better keep that to myself.

PN: You had a lot of white students in the audience the other day when you read. In fact, they were in the majority.

IR: That's right.

PN: They seemed to enjoy it and to catch every reference. It's as if you're saying that if the mind is cleared of prejudice. . . .

IR: I'm very pleased with the reception I've gotten from people all over, from all different nations and from all different backgrounds, all different races and all different classes. I think that's what Vodun is, that's what Vodun does: bring people from all different nations and backgrounds together. That's what it's all about. That's what it's all about in Haiti and in Brazil.

PN: In your fiction and poetry, you have a kind of psychic counter-gunman: characters who track people down and make them pay. You use the phrase, "making a psychic arrest." You also punish the exploitative "experts" by the subject over which they claim to be expert. You make it work on their minds until they get swallowed up. For example, the expert on the dung beetle in *Pallbearers* who rolls his own dung, and

the expert on Wright's *Native Son* in *Louisiana Red* who dreams he is Mary about to be raped by Bigger and then, dreaming that he is Bigger, kills his co-conspirator. It seems like a great joke. But in another way, you put a hex on a person so that he gets punished by what he is doing.

IR: Right. I talk about the Ghede-Ghede, a loa who shows each man his Devil! So each man bears the possibility of destruction by his own obsessions.

PN: Like Nixon keeping tapes on himself?

IR: Oh, yes.

PN: One more striking thing about the fiction. You have an amazing number of twists and turns of the plot.

IR: Like jazz. I am influenced by jazz. I used to play the trombone in jazz bands and nightclubs. When I was going to university I would do that. That's the way the solos go. That's the way you improvise and that's what I do, twist and turn. One phrase calling another phrase to mind. I think it's orderly, though, and I think it makes sense; it's connected. There's more variety and surprise, it's more entertaining and more interesting to the serious reader. And not just the professional reader. Kids read my stuff, you know, and get a great deal of enjoyment from it. There's a whole generation that's on *Pallbearers*, which is a book for which I still get caught with the whip. I wrote it when I was twenty-four or twenty-five and I've changed a lot since then. I wasn't exactly a prodigy.

PN: How do you think you've changed?

IR: I think I'm getting better. I think maybe in ten years I'll be a good writer.

PN: What drew you to the novel form?

IR: I think it's because I'm long winded. I can't write a short story. By the time I write a short story, I say, "Man, this could be a book." Or a poem. *Flight to Canada* came out of a poem. I wrote a poem called "Flight to Canada." I kept looking at that poem and thought, "Man, there is a good plot in here. Let me develop this." And before you know it, I had a novel.

PN: I'm interested in the Indian connection because the Indians were the original inhabitants here.

IR: They're not the original inhabitants. There were people here when they came.

PN: Who was here?

IR: Well, we don't know. But some describe them as stone-age people,

which is no longer a derogatory term. Stone-age man lived 150,000 years without a nuclear war.

PN: Do you have Indian ancestry?

IR: I think so. I just don't know which tribes. I'm doing more research. There are definitely Native Americans in our family.

PN: Do Native American beliefs come to you through the family? Or have you had to research them?

IR: Research. There was a lot of intermarriage between blacks and Indians in this country, just like intermarriage between blacks and whites. In fact, William Wells Brown says that only one out of four slaves was a true African. The African race disappeared after the first generation. Abraham Lincoln talked about all the mulattoes in the south in his election campaign.

PN: But if you go far back enough into history, everybody's mixed.

IR: I know. That's why any discussion about pure race is absurd. I think the Americans are Creole from the Arctic down to Argentina. And anybody who doesn't understand that just isn't looking at the situation clearly. I'm trying to get more information about my heritage. I came in contact with Native Americans in the west and I publish them, and their ideas have influenced my writing. I think that will be clear in my next novel. I found an amazing parallel between the way the Native Americans and Africans look at the world. It's very interesting. I wonder if there was a link-up a long time ago.

That's what interested me about the Native Americans. I thought I was really a hot shot Neo-Hoodoo writer going back to folklore and everything, but there is a whole body of material I missed. Learning about the Native Americans—this is multi-culturalism at the highest level, learning about another group in order to discover your own background. There probably was a world-wide culture at one time.

PN: Is this what you're trying to establish?

IR: I think so. I think it's lost. There are fragments of it we can use. From these fragments perhaps we can reconstruct it. That's why we have Before Columbus.

NOTES

1 Iowa City; October 13, 1979

2 Since published in *Quilt 1*.

3 Ishmael Reed's first play, "Hell Hath No Fury," was presented at Actor's Studio in New York, June, 1980, and at Dartmouth College, July, 1981. A musical version of *Flight to Canada*, scripted by Bill Cook and presented by the American Folk Theater, opened in New York in April, 1982.

4 Now more than six years.

5 By Leo Litwack, New York: Knopf, 1979.