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## Paratext, Citation, and Academic Desire in Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### Paratext, Citation, and Academic Desire in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*

*Beth McCoy (bio)*

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If we Blacks came up with something as corny as the Angel of Moroni, something as trite and phony as their story that the book is the record of ancient Americans who came here in 600 B.C. and perished by A.D. 400, they would deride us with pejorative adjectival phrases like "so-called" and "would-be."

We can have you arrested. The building code. I saw 14 violations downstairs myself. We can close down the magazine and your office. We have friends downtown.

Someone once said that beneath or behind all political and cultural warfare lies a struggle between secret societies.

Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*

## 1

What do academics want? Amid budgetary, legislative, and cultural attacks on academics and the academic world, or at least certain parts of it, to ask what academics want might seem frivolous. After all, what academics *need*—full-time work, job security, academic freedom—would seem to be more important. But what do academics *want*? What do they desire? And part of an answer is this: they want to become part of someone else's paratext, the term that Gerard Genette has accorded to typeface, titles, prefaces, and other marginal elements of book culture that nevertheless greatly [End Page 604] influence the reading of the text that they accompany. Most specifically, academics want to be installed in a certain part of the paratext—the material sites of citation, the notes, bibliographies, and acknowledgments (to name a few items) of other academics' texts. In other words, academics want to be cited.

This citational desire is complex. It is professional in that a good portion of the academic rewards system is predicated on the assumption that one's work will not only be published but also cited in other scholars' reviews, notes, paraphrases, and syllabi. Being cited (re)produces the academic, bringing him or her into being and preserving

that being, much in the same way that "citationality" in a more abstract sense has been understood by poststructuralists to bring political subjects into being.<sup>1</sup> And it is personal in that being located in the ostensible margins of citation fulfills a narcissistic desire to be perceived as integral, while at the same time maintaining the illusion of the sense of self-abnegation that academics are [End Page 605] supposed to have, a "supposed-to" that is acknowledged when someone flouts that norm, becomes one of the profession's "stars," and then is inevitably, and jealously, discussed, dissected, and otherwise "dissed." Certainly, there is extreme ambivalence in the citational confluence of these multifaceted desires. Pleasure in becoming part of the paratext—a kind of immortality—mingles with fear of losing one's self to the paratext, a complexity symptomatized by the mixed pleasure and pain that many languages-and-literatures academics report feeling at conventions when they perceive that the badges denoting institutional affiliation become more important than their very selves ("Oh, you're from *Duke* . . ."; "Oh, you're (just) from Oneonta . . . I thought you meant SUNY *Buffalo* . . ."). At such moments, the text—the supposedly autonomous academic subject—becomes merely an appendage to its paratext, the badge that, to borrow Genette's own normative language about the paratext, ought to be subordinate to its text, not the other way around (1).

Such ambivalent citational desires have had particular, peculiar ramifications for members of groups who remain underrepresented in the academy: white women and those who fall into the persistent yet problematic category of "people of color." Indeed, perhaps for these reasons, at the very moment when the profession was beginning to democratize in terms of race and gender, this preternaturally tempting kind of citationality seems to have caught Ishmael Reed's eye in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), his best-known novel. Consonant with the modern civil rights movement's increasing internationalization, Reed's ideas about white supremacy were concerned less with essentialist shorthands of racialized identity embraced by some forms of black nationalism and more with transnational, transhistorical, and, indeed, transracial modes of domination. To this end, *Mumbo Jumbo's* epoch-spanning plot is



BETH MCCOY

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My thanks to Christopher Wesson, who gave careful attention to several versions of this essay.



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