

LITERARY Meditations

Ishmael reed

By Dr. Brenda M. Greene

Greetings Friends and Colleagues,

Welcome to the third edition of Literary Meditations, a newsletter reflecting my thoughts on writers and their work. Literary Meditations provides a preview of my book project which contextualizes the interviews that I have conducted with Black writers throughout the African diaspora on the radio show and podcast Writers on Writing. In this issue, I feature Ishmael Reed, poet, novelist, essayist, playwright, editor, publisher, songwriter, and composer: the formidable and masterful author of many works, the embodiment of a Renaissance Man. My interview with this Renaissance man of letters focuses on his view on the role of the writer and his motivation for producing and writing *The Haunting of Lin-Manuel Miranda*, a response to Miranda's *Hamilton*, An American Musical.

About Ishmael Reed

Reed is well-known for his satirical novel, *Mumbo Jumbo* written in 1972 and nominated for a National Book Award. His other works include *Conjure: Selected Poems 1963-1970* (1972) which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize; *Flight into Canada* (1976); *Juice!* (2011); *The Plays* (2009); *The Complete Muhammed Ali* (2015); *From Totems to Hip-Hop: A Multicultural Anthology of Poetry Across the Americas, 1900–2002* (2002); *New and Collected Poems 1964–2007* (2007) (which won the Gold Medal in Poetry at the California Book Awards); *Japanese by Spring* (1996); *The Haunting of Lin-Manuel Miranda* (2019); *The Slave Who Loved Caviar* (2023); and *The Shine Challenge* (2025). He is also the founder of The Before Columbus Foundation, a nonprofit educational and service organization dedicated to promoting, disseminating, and recognizing contemporary American multicultural literature and writers. The Foundation presents the American Book Award in literary categories at an annual program each year.

Ishmael Reed

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We staged the play and got terrible, hateful letters in the *New York Times* and *Broadway World*. I was mocked on NPR's "Wait Wait Don't Tell Me," and I enjoyed it. That's what I live for - writing is fighting. Finally, the *New York Times* came out and said *Hamilton* was a slave trader and owned a slave, which changed the whole discussion.

I am excited. It is 2001 and Ishmael Reed is coming to a book signing at Nkiru Books, at that time the oldest independent Black bookseller in Brooklyn. I am responsible for hosting the prolific author of the acclaimed *Mumbo Jumbo*, a satirical and political novel that recounts the story of how a plague named Jes Grew took over the country, causing bedlam and propelling white supremacists into action, a prophetic foreshadowing of a fear that Black artists and musicians would cause the destruction of Western civilization as envisioned by "America." The symbolism of Ishmael Reed's appearance at Nkiru Books, bought by the socially conscious hip hop artists Talib Kweli and Mos Def (now Yasiin Bey) was not lost on me. These artists had made an intentional and deliberate move to save an independent Black bookstore and used the funds from the sale of their album *Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star* to purchase the bookstore. They then went on a tour to promote the album. I subsequently took a sabbatical and set as a primary goal, the management and restructuring of Nkiru Books into an

educational and cultural center. Nkiru Books had become nationally known as a required stopping place for Black writers and numerous literary enthusiasts. The community would come to Nkiru to meet writers, listen to readings and discussions, purchase books, and get their books signed by both well-known and emerging authors.

As I prepared for the book signing, I mulled and agonized over who I could get to interview the famed author Ishmael Reed. Who had read and knew the breadth of Ishmael's work and who had the expertise to sit down and have a conversation with this literary icon?

And then it came to me! I would just let go and trust the guidance stemming from my inner spirit. All I had to do was to introduce Ishmael Reed. He did not need anyone to interview him. His body of work, his intellectual thought and wit, and his critique of American culture were legendary. I had observed him at literary forums and on panels at the National Black Writers Conferences envisioned by the late novelist, literary activist, screenwriter, and teacher John Oliver Killens.

My instincts were affirmed. Ishmael walked into Nkiru Books, the persona of the free-spirited and politically conscious Black writers and artists who participated in and attended the National Black Writers Conferences and other literary forums and performances. He was a relatively tall, brown-skinned man with a short grey Afro and wore a slightly crumpled grey sports jacket, dark blue slacks, and sneakers. I introduced him to the small and enthusiastic group of people who had specifically come to the bookstore to meet the consummate writer, poet, and publisher. As he began to speak, I quickly understood that if I had asked someone to interview him, the interviewer would have sat there, listening, smiling, and trying in vain to interject questions. I will never forget that moment as he sat in a simple black chair, a wooden table in front of him piled with his books: talking, sharing his stories, and telling and laughing at his own jokes. He was both the speaker and the listener. Ishmael Reed was the center of an audience that included himself and others. He mused over whatever came to his mind: the way the media portrayed Black writers, the trends in Black literature, the politics of publishing, and the challenges of his continual quest to support Black writers and independent publishers in this country and abroad.

The last time I saw Ishmael Reed was when I went to San Francisco to receive the American Book Award for literary criticism in October 2024. It was now 2025 and after waiting over 20 years, I was finally going to conduct a personal interview with him. I have always been captivated by his 1998 book of essays, *Writing Is Fighting: Forty Three Years of Boxing on Paper*. Thus, I was eager to have him talk about his premise for *Writing is Fighting* and how he viewed the role of the writer.

Greene

Much of the philosophy guiding your work is depicted in your book of essays, *Writing is Fighting*. Talk to us about your views on the role of the writer. Does the writer have a social responsibility for the reader? How have your philosophical views shaped you as an essayist, poet, playwright, novelist, and composer?

Reed

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Reed's response demonstrates how he approaches his critique of American culture, books, plays, music, and theater. Rather than vigorously debate his stance from one point of view, he offers a complicated critique of popular culture. For example, in his critique of *Hamilton*, he does not personally attack Lin-Manuel Miranda, the writer of the hip hop musical based on the life of Alexander Hamilton. Reed's argument is that Miranda's depiction of Hamilton as an ardent abolitionist is not true. Rather

than providing a full portrayal of all aspects of Hamilton, Reed argues that Miranda bases the play on Ron Chernow's biography of Hamilton which ignores the flaws of the founding fathers. In doing so, Miranda fails to acknowledge that Hamilton was in the slave trade all of his life and married into a slave-trading family. Hence he does not acknowledge that Hamilton inherited slaves from his mother, got involved with Thomas Jefferson and other slavers, and had the job of grooming Africans for resale while he was in the Caribbean.

Reed expounds on this criticism by staging, in January 2019, *The Haunting of Lin Manuel-Miranda*, a short commentary of the play. The production is strongly criticized by the media. Reed notes:

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Holding fast to his determination to criticize the play, Reed stages a full production of the play in May 2019. His criticism of the play finally pays off when the *New York Times* comes out and confirms that Hamilton was a slave trader. In my interview, Reed states: "Finally, the *New York Times* came out and said Hamilton was a slave trader and owned a slave, which changed the whole discussion."

For Reed, it is important that he present a full picture of the implications of creating plays or literature which are based on half-truths. The characters in *The Haunting of Lin-Manuel Miranda* send subliminal images to Miranda about the effects of his creation of a play that does not acknowledge the horrific experiences of men, women, and children who were subjected to the Middle Passage and to life as enslaved people on plantations throughout the south. Told from the perspectives of historical figures (think about Dicken's ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future in his novel *A Christmas Carol*), Reed erects ghosts who haunt Lin-Manuel Miranda about Hamilton's complicity in "slavery." In short, Reed's play offers a counternarrative to American history.

My Tribute to Ishmael Reed

You peer into the body of our culture and examine its many shapes and dimensions.

You force America to look at its racism, at its greed, at its exploitation.

You capture the world with humor, turning our images, our history, our icons inside out and upside down.

Unearthing and exposing our hypocrisy, dismantling our stereotypes, and causing us to laugh at ourselves, you relentlessly satirize our culture.

About Writers on Writing

Writers on Writers is a radio show that I created and produced at Medgar Evers College in 2003. The show airs every Sunday over the airwaves of WNYE, 91.5 FM. As the host of the show, I have interviewed writers about their lives, their craft, and their work. During COVID, I expanded the format of the show and began to host podcasts and post the interviews of the writers on the Center for Black Literature YouTube page. (122) Center for Black Literature Medgar Evers College - YouTube.

Contact Me

These literary meditations represent a window into the world of my book project. I would love to hear from you. Please visit my website at www.drbrendamgreene.com.

Sincerely,

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