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Fiercer Words

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# MULTI AMERICA

ESSAYS ON CULTURAL WARS AND CULTURAL PEACE

Asians, Blacks  
Brawl at S.F.  
High School

Beating victim Vincent Chin.

Near Wounded Knee

# ISHMAEL REED

EDITOR

"An exhilarating mix of unpredictable points of view . . . there's real vitality in this anthology's crazy-quilt vision of America." —*Kirkus Reviews*



# Multi Am erica

Essays on Cultural Wars and  
Cultural Peace

Edited by Ishmael Reed



PENGUIN BOOKS

*In memory of Toni Cade Bambara  
and Kathleen Chang*

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:

Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published in the United States of America by Viking Penguin,

a division of Penguin Books USA Inc. 1997

Published in Penguin Books 1998

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Multi-America: essays on cultural wars and cultural peace / edited by Ishmael Reed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-670-86753-5 (hc.)

ISBN 0 14 02.5912 0 (pbk.)

1. Pluralism (Social sciences)—United States. 2. Multiculturalism—United States.

3. United States—Ethnic relations. 4. United States—Social conditions—1980–

I. Reed, Ishmael. 1938–

E184.A1M8 1996

305.8'00973—dc20 96-9130

Printed in the United States of America

Set in Bembo

Designed by Junie Lee

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“Multiculturalism means that in order to understand the nature and complexities of American culture, it is crucial to study and comprehend the widest possible array of the contributing cultures and their interaction with one another.”

—*Lawrence W. Levine*, *The New York Times*, August 21, 1996

“... History denied or distorted takes on a power that poisons and eventually becomes the cancer at the heart of personal, family, and group survival.”

—*Lois Mätt-Fässbinder*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Thanks to Sun Ra and “Poison” Junior Jones Ishmael.

For help with this book, my thanks to Don Fehr, Michael Hardart, and Beena Kamlani at Viking Penguin.

## INTRODUCTION



The response of the northeastern media, punditry, Beltway political community, and corporate-financed think-tank intellectuals to the Los Angeles riots in 1992, which followed the Simi Valley jury's decision acquitting four policemen who had been charged with beating Rodney King, a black motorist, was convincing proof that the traditional establishment is blind to the multicultural realities of American society. Since it has become the field theory of some segments of the media to explain all of America's social problems and disruptions as being the result of the breakdown of the black family, this predictably became the response to the riots by the northeastern intellectuals who dominate the discussion of social issues in this country. This explanation, however, ignored the fact that the typical person arrested during the riot was of Latino background and probably from a two-parent family. It also ignored the participation of whites in the riot, a typical attitude of the media toward white social deviant behavior, which doesn't get as much play as that of blacks and Latinos.

The response to the riots is one more indication that the analysis, driven by a post-civil rights thinking which divides the society into hard-



working whites and blacks whose problems are a result of their personal behavior, is inadequate. As a contributor to this anthology, Elaine H. Kim, has said, the black/white paradigm of American race relations is obsolete.

But this paradigm is difficult to dislodge, due to the generous access that its advocates have to the media and the huge sums of money that back their point of view. Moreover, the media have made little progress in integrating their personnel, and so those who might contribute fresh points of view on social issues are denied the opportunity to engage in a fair debate with those who have a dated, monocultural view of American society.

African Americans and Latino intellectuals who mimic the politically correct line promoted by conservative newspaper publishers and television producers are brought in to deflect their critics' charge that some of their arguments smack of racism. These Talented Tenth intellectuals, who serve the right, and who are now engaged in a power struggle over which ones will benefit from "progressive," neoconservative, and right-wing patronage, are rewarded for denouncing the black populist writers of the 1960s, or for opposing Afrocentricity (though they know very little about African civilization). They win praise from their sponsors when they locate all of America's hedonism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, and homophobia among the African American population.

But as an example of how biased the media are when discussing multiculturalism and race, rarely do you see an Afrocentric scholar brought in to debate their critics (this book, however, includes essays by two prominent Afrocentrists: Haki Madhubuti and Maulana Karenga, the founder of Kwanza).

The McIntellectuals and their black and brown Talented Tenth auxiliary insist that we embrace a common culture, and their consensus seems to be that this culture is Yankee, or Anglo. A genuine Englishman and scholar, A. Robert Lee, of the University at Kent, might dispute the notion that the culture of England is an Anglo culture. Anglos were only one tribe, he would claim, but the Anglo model for the American common culture persists, and it is the model that Latinos, Asian Americans, African Americans, and even European Americans are required to embrace. Contributor Daniela Gioseffi quotes Richard Robertiello: "Although a nation of ethnics, our established ethic is WASPishness, the standard by which assimilation is judged, while WASP conduct, for its part, was early on patterned on the model of the British upper class. Altogether, this has proved to be a very bad thing, making Americans WASP-worshippers, with an atten-

dant devaluation and dilution of ethnic pride.” One might add that the WASP ideal is also unfair to those Americans with Anglo heritage. They must abide hurtful stereotypes and suffer the resentment of those who resist the Anglo model, even though they had very little to do with the establishment of the WASP ethic.

Some would suggest that the invocation of the glories of Greece, Rome, and Britain as models for the common culture merely masks an effort to Keep America White, and that just as a past glory of common culture is romanticized, the same has been done for white history (though the defenders of the common culture often accuse Afrocentrists of creating a false history, they never challenge bogus European history). So vast are the media resources for what amounts to a white nationalist point of view of American culture that a non-historian, Lynne Chaney, who reaches millions through her regular appearances on entertainment television talk shows, was able to overturn new standards for teaching American history established by a committee of qualified historians. Eric Foner, DeWitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University, in a letter to the *New York Times* dated January 30, 1995, detected the implicit McCarthyism in the criticism made by the new standards’ opponents: “Evidently, historians who draw attention to instances where the United States contributed to the increase of tyranny (such as the growth of slavery in the 19th century or the military occupation of numerous Western Hemisphere nations in the 20th) are to be declared lacking in patriotism.”

Monoculturalism, then, is essentially an anti-intellectual coalition. It says that we shouldn’t learn this, we shouldn’t study that, we should only speak English, we shouldn’t study the African continent. Though Portuguese, Spanish, British, German, Dutch explorers, capitalists, scholars, and students have been studying the African continent for generations, when African Americans do it, they are accused of engaging in self-esteem exercises. Monoculturalism says that we should revere and study Plato, though monoculturalists seem to be against a dialogue with their adversaries, and that the Enlightenment should be our model for pristine intellectual standards when the Enlightenment promoted at least as much intellectual rubbish as that promoted by some of the Afrocentrists with whom they seem obsessed. Dr. Leon Poliako, author of *The Aryan Myth*, suggests that the bizarre racial anthropology of the Enlightenment thinkers may have prepared the way for the scientific racism of the next century. Voltaire in his *Traité de métaphysique* (1734) wrote of “fuzzy negroes, the long-maned yellow races and beardless men [who] are not descended from the same man.” In the same work, he wrote that whites were “superior to these Negroes, as the Negroes are to the apes and the

apes to oysters.” Voltaire and Diderot would have called their contemporary champions on the black ultra right, monkeys.

Obviously, as long as white supremacy is the goal of the monoculturalists, there’s going to be a fight. Not only from Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, but from a growing number of “whites” who are beginning to challenge that designation and to disavow the privileges that go along with white supremacy, and from Europeans who are now beginning to realize that abandoning ethnic cultures for whiteness was too high a price to pay.

Though the critics of multiculturalism may suggest that resistance to the white supremacy standard is something new in North America, something that began in the 1960s, the resistance in fact began very early.

One of the reasons for the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, which took place in New Mexico, was a feeling on the part of the indigenous peoples that the friars and the Spaniards were depriving them of “their idols, their dances, and their beliefs.” This resistance continues. The novelist Rudolfo Anaya writes in an essay in this book: “Our first declaration of independence was from Anglo-America, that is, we insisted on the right to our *Indohispano* heritage.” On May 1, 1996, it was reported that the Mayan Indians had seized a radio station in Mexico as part of the Indian war against the Mexican government. The African resistance to Westernization began as soon as the first African captives fell into the hands of their Portuguese captors. After centuries of repression, African-derived culture in this hemisphere is stronger than ever, and with the arrival of Caribbean peoples and peoples from South America, African-based religion is burgeoning within the United States, attracting adherents of all races.

Again in this book, Haki Madhubuti, a leading Afrocentrist, responds to the one-sided depiction of Afrocentrism; but lest the reader believes that Afrocentrism is a lonely outpost in a sea of political incorrectness, his views are similar to those of other contributors to this anthology. Using Juan Felipe Herrera’s image, Madhubuti shows how one community is dealing with, in Herrera’s words, the shattering of its cultural vertebrae. Mr. Madhubuti has been a member of the Independent Black School movement for twenty-five years, which is his way of dealing with the condition of blacks being “caught between a hurricane and a volcano when it comes to the acquisition of life-giving and life-sustaining knowledge,” as he puts it here.

Ana Castillo echoes Madhubuti’s frustration, saying: “The feminista also wanted a bicultural and bilingual system of child care that would validate their children’s culture and perhaps ward off an inferiority complex

before they had a chance to start public school; traditionally, monolingual and anglocentric schools had alienated children, causing them great psychological damage.”

The resistance to the common Anglo culture isn't merely happening among coloreds, which is what the critics of multiculturalism claim, the kind of black-obsessed people who see blacks as responsible for every social and cultural evil from illegitimacy to hip-hop. Because of my Irish heritage, I've been invited to Irish cultural events. In March 1995, I attended an Irish American writers conference at New College in San Francisco. During the question and answer period, I asked the Irish American audience, had assimilation been worth it? To my surprise, not a single member answered in the affirmative. They complained that they had to change their names to Anglo names, and that they had to marry Anglos in order to get a good job. They all agreed that they had lost something. Perhaps James T. Farrell was correct when he said that when the Irish left Chicago for the suburbs, they left Ireland.

The Irish Americans are not the only restless European American group. On February 24, 1994, I attended an exhibit organized by the American Italian Historical Association, entitled *Una Storia Segreta*, described in the program accompanying the exhibit as a “special exhibit of photographs, posters, internment letters, government documents, artifacts, and news articles which for the first time gather together details of the time when thousands of Italian Americans were subject to registration, curfews, and evacuation from coastal areas, while still others were interned or excluded from California entirely.”

This exhibit exposed one of those hidden and shameful episodes in American history when naturalized Italian Americans were rounded up and placed in internment camps in the West; when the Italian American community was harassed for their alleged disloyalty by J. Edgar Hoover and a congressional committee, and defamed by the liberal President Roosevelt, who used provocative and insulting imagery in speaking of Italian Americans.

Not only was I surprised by this exhibit, but I could tell that this information was new too to some of the Italian Americans who were there. Since then, I've talked to Italian Americans who'd never heard of the internment. I was struck especially by a passage from a letter from the Italian Cultural Society. Speaking of Italian Americans, it said, “We are a people that has not only lost our way, we are a people that has forgotten where we come from.” This sentiment reminded me of one expressed by Malcolm X, who in the pre-African American Studies period of the 1960s described African Americans as “lost in the wilderness of North

America.” Clearly, the revolt against the white supremacist Anglo standard of common culture is wider than public McIntellectuals would have us believe, and no amount of free advertising from the media or millions of dollars of corporate sponsorship through non-profit monocultural fronts will change this.

Another revisionist myth promoted by common culture advocates is that as soon as American Europeans passed through Ellis Island, they abandoned their heritages and rushed into the suburbs. American European contributors to this anthology argue differently. They write about American Europeans who were coerced into assimilating away their identities, sometimes because of extra-national considerations. It was not a good idea to be a “hyphenated” German American during World Wars I and II, when Germany was considered the enemy, writes Lois Mätt-Fässbinder, nor was Irish American chauvinism desirable when the United States policy was pro-British, or Italian American when Mussolini—who was a darling of segments of the American establishment until he invaded Ethiopia—became the enemy. But the white ethnics could be considered lucky. Native Americans in Alaska and in the Southwest were sometimes beaten if they persisted in practicing their language and customs. Some people argue that the differences between white ethnics have disappeared, and that identity is an obsession of Asian Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans. Eugene Genovese, an ex-Italian American, has said that Italian America is dead. Is European America dead? Lawrence Di Stasi, Helen Barolini, and Daniela Gioseffi engage in a debate with those who believe that an American European literature is nonexistent. They are part of a new European American ethnic Renaissance. And they insist that European American traditions, which have been denied by those who insist upon a common culture, are still intact.

Americans, even the public intellectuals, also believe that American whites are the descendants of an uninterrupted line of white ancestors. Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum challenges this myth.

As a result of the militancy of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans, the universities of the 1960s instituted ethnic studies programs, the rocky history of which are covered in this book by William M. Banks and Stephanie Kelly, as well as by Gerald Vizenor—who in the only fiction piece in the book lends us one of his Tricksters to assess the state of multiculturalism on campus. Because of new interest in white ethnic studies, pioneered by the MELUS movement, universities have begun courses in Irish American and Italian American history and culture.

The Italian Americans at City College invoked Affirmative Action to institute Italian American courses. The renewal of white ethnicity is a response to the growing discontent with what has been touted as the common culture.

Today's immigrants are not under the same kind of pressure to assimilate as those white ethnics of a former period. In 1995, as a guest of Quebec's Writers Union, I was struck by how similar the nationalism of the French Bloc Québécois was to those of the Chicanos of the Southwest, who view that part of the country as northern Mexico where indigenous people are united in language and culture. In Montreal, I sat through a reading of French Canadian poets during which not one single word of English was spoken. One can experience the same thing in Albuquerque, where the language is Spanish.

Just as a definition of the common culture, or monoculturalism, seems to depend upon the definer, so a precise definition of multiculturalism seems to have been lost in the din of sound bites of performance intellectuals. Gerald Horne speaks of a "superficial multiculturalism," which for him means a conservative president appointing two black cabinet members with corporate connections, in order to give the appearance of a rainbow administration. Manning Marble has referred to a "radical multiculturalism," which means people of different backgrounds cohering around left-wing political causes. Diane Ravitch distinguishes between "pluralistic multiculturalism" and "particularistic multiculturalism." The pluralists seek a richer common culture; the particularists insist that no common culture is possible or desirable.

In his essay "American Literature and Language" in *To Criticize the Critic*, T. S. Eliot wrote:

When we read a novel of Dostoevski, or see a play by Tchekov, for the first time, I think we are fascinated by the odd way in which Russians behave; later we come to recognize that theirs is merely an odd way of expressing thoughts and feelings which we all share. And though it is only too easy for a writer to be local without being universal, I doubt whether a poet or novelist can be universal without being local too. Who could be more Greek than Odysseus? Or more German than Faust? Or more Spanish than Don Quixote? Or more American than Huck Finn? Yet each one of them is a kind of archetype in the mythology of all men everywhere.

Another example of a “local” endeavor, that of Alex Haley’s *Roots*, became an archetype for men everywhere, because Haley tapped into the anxiety of American Europeans, based upon their not knowing where they came from.

If Bharati Mukherjee is right when she says that the mosaic theory of multiculturalism means an American culture divided by separate cultural entities, then this certainly doesn’t describe the intellectual experience of this anthology’s contributors. They don’t write in Cantonese, Aztec, or Yoruba, but in English, a language which though having Indian origins is considered a “white” language. As Rudolfo Anaya says, “While my parents’ generation still communicated only in Spanish, my generation converses almost completely in English, a function of our professional lives.”

I am a typical multiculturalist. I studied European history, art, and politics formally for the first fifteen years of my life and often did better than my white classmates. In high school, I performed in a string quartet devoted to the works of European composers. Like most African Americans of my generation, whatever efforts I made in discovering African and African American history were extracurricular. Asian American, Latino, and Native American contributors to this anthology can make the same claim.

So multiculturalists are by no means separatists. As Sam Hamod writes in a forthcoming issue of *Konch* magazine, “Our dual vision as ‘ethnic’ and American allows us to see aspects of the U.S. that mainstream writers often miss; thus, our perspectives often allow us a diversity of visions that, ironically, may lead us to larger truth—it’s just that we were raised with different eyes.” Those who say that the standard of an American common culture should be European are in fact the separatists. And few of them know the European culture which they champion, for anybody who has traveled to Europe will discover that there is no monolithic European culture. Although historians like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., discourage the learning of African Amerindian cultures, it is quite possible that Americans can benefit from some of their examples. The English introduced racism in New England, but it was the Spanish who introduced racism into the Southwest with their strict color guidelines, which placed whites at the top and blacks at the bottom. Before their arrival, the Pueblo people, according to Leslie Silko in her book *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, “looked at the world differently; a person’s appearance and possession did not matter nearly as much as a person’s behavior. For them, a person’s value lies in how that person interacts with other people, and how that person behaves toward the animals and the earth.” The Pueblo people believed that all creatures emanated from Mother Earth.

The singling out of black Americans and sometimes Latinos as the unassimilables serves to limit the discussions of the divisions within the American society. Not only do divisions exist between ethnic and racial groups, but within. Fractures between foreign-born and American-born Asians have led to violence in San Francisco high schools. K. Connie Kang develops this theme in her essay about conflicts between American-born Asians and foreign-born Asians. There are similar conflicts between American-born Chicanos and Mexicans. The northeastern media and some African American and Jewish literary mercenaries may cast the conflict between blacks and Jews as the major ethnic conflict of the moment, addressed here by Martin Kilson. But this hyperbolized conflict seems like a lover's spat in comparison with the fight between African Americans and Latinos. As Roberto Rodríguez and Patricia Gonzales put it, "The violence over the past few years between the two groups in Los Angeles—particularly in Compton, the mid-city area, and Venice—has been particularly deadly. It has ranged from random drive-by shootings to full-scale gang wars. There have also been dozens of racial brawls at area middle and senior high schools, and hundreds of violent incidents in one jail facility alone, including upward of one hundred full-scale racial riots between the two groups."

The fact that the media sensationalizes a quarrel between blacks and Jews while ignoring a much more serious fight between blacks and browns indicates the value that the media place upon black and brown life.

Brenda Payton, Amiri Baraka, and Maulana Karenga all address this ethnic conflict. William Wong talks about a redistricting fight in Oakland during which Latinos and Asian Americans were pitted against African Americans and Latinos. Ana Castillo tells of divisions within the Latino community. "There is a universe of difference, for example, between the experience of the Cuban man who arrived in the United States as a child with his parents after fleeing Castro's revolution and the Puerto Rican woman who is a third-generation single mother on the Lower East Side. There is a universe of difference between the young Mexican American aspiring to be an actor in Hollywood in the nineties and the community organizer working for rent control for the last ten years in San Francisco." And she cites a study by the University of Chicago which she says shows that "deep divisions based on race exist between black Hispanics and white Hispanics in the United States."

Not only are there inter-ethnic, interracial, internecine conflicts, but gender, class and sexual conflicts as well. Though Hollywood, television, National Public Radio, and *The Village Voice* have ordained the black



male as the universal symbol of sexism, a sort of effigy figure for women of different ethnic backgrounds and a source of billions of dollars of revenue reaped from his scapegoating, Hoyt Sze writes about sexism in the Asian-American community.

Elaine H. Kim describes the fears of Asian immigrants and explores the myth of the model minority—a myth that has led to Asian Americans being subjected to hate crimes, the typical perpetrators of which are young white males. This must come as a surprise to readers of the *New York Review of Books*, who were told by the two-nations theorist Andrew Hacker that American whites don't engage in violence—a remark that might be interpreted as Eurocentric myth making.

But despite these differences, there *are* some mutual experiences that Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and other colored minorities can identify. We have all been subjected to hostility and rudeness from anonymous whites, of the kind that Frank Chin and his son Sam encountered while traveling through certain western states. As another example of how the media hides white pathology while playing up that of other groups, it was only when blacks came into conflict with Korean Americans in Los Angeles, during riots in which no Korean or black killed one another, that the media discovered hate crimes against Asian Americans. Meanwhile, Helen Zia is one of many Asian American intellectuals who complain that year-round hate crimes against Asian Americans are ignored. Maybe it's because the typical perpetrator is a white male.

We can identify with the humiliation meted out to Leslie Silko and her companion Gus, as they were hassled by white law enforcement officials. Many Latinos and African Americans can endorse Ms. Silko's remark that "injustice is built into the Anglo-American legal system." Though the kind of white public intellectuals who get their information about multicultural people from other whites may dismiss these experiences as paranoid, whites who've actually done empirical research produced the same results.

Recently, Joshua Solomon, a student at the University of Maryland, used a chemical to change his skin color and was received with such hostility by whites that he curtailed the experiment. He was following an experiment by the late John Howard Griffin, author of *Black Like Me*, who was also struck by the hostility that he'd received from whites.

Though frictions do exist within the multicultural community, the thing that unites these various factions is an opposition to white supremacy and to the one-sided discussion of ethnicity and multiculturalism by the national media. These monoculturalists must feel right at home when