

A CASEBOOK STUDY OF ISHMAEL REED'S
YELLOW BACK RADIO BROKE-DOWN

EDITED BY PIERRE-DAMIEN MVUYEKURE



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Introduction

“Scatting Arbitrarily” and Blowing Hoodoo [Western]
Like Charlie “Bird” Parker:
Loop Garoo’s Be-bop/HooDoo Improvisations in
Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down

PIERRE-DAMIEN MVUYEKURE

Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down (1969) is a pivotal novel in Ishmael Reed’s fiction insofar as it represents a major shift from *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, not simply as a Western novel, but also by the way it moves away from a Hollywood-type idea of Voodoo to a well-documented concept of Hoodoo as a North American version of Haitian and Dahomean Voodoo. At the same time, it transforms an oral form of Voodoo folklore into a written form of a Hoodoo Be-Bop Western novel; that is, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* illustrates Neo-Hoodoo Aesthetics and its application to the cultural character of the American West and the Western genre. The very syncretic and synchronistic nature of Neo-Hoodooism allows Reed not only to question the cultural character of the American West and the Western, but also to reappropriate and to reinvent the American West and the Western through Loop Garoo Kid, a black Hoodoo cowboy, as a hero of the Western. As Reed has noted in “The Tradition of Serious Comedy in Afro-American Literature,” his abrogation and appropriation of the Western hinge upon his premise that the Western is traceable to both African Voodoo and African American Hoodoo insofar as when in Voodoo and Hoodoo

spirits ride/possess human beings (who become their hosts), they become horsemen and horsewomen. Therefore, Reed “would naturally write a western, here again using the traditional styles of Afro-American folklore but enmeshing such styles with popular forms with which readers could identify” (137). Equally important is the fact that *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* sets the tone of literary Neo-HooDooism for Reed’s subsequent novels: *Mumbo Jumbo*, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, *Flight to Canada*, *The Terrible Twos*, *Reckless Eyeballing*, *The Terrible Threes*, and *Japanese by Spring* not only contain character versions of the Loop Garoo Kid, but they also show how African-based religions and religious beliefs have survived alongside Christianity despite its conspiracy to obliterate them.

Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down is a HooDoo Western novel, the first of its kind, with Loop Garoo as an African American cowboy who threatens the American Wild West, Protestantism, and Catholicism with his Voodoo and HooDoo forces. Through HooDoo, Loop Garoo not only questions the character of the American West and the Western but also reappropriates and re-invents the Western, the result of which is a multicultural and multiethnic Western. More specifically, the novel comments upon the absence of black cowboys in the written history and fiction of the American West, the extermination of Native Americans, and demonstrates how multiculturalism can work through the collaboration between Native Americans and African Americans. Its plot and subtexts are solely based on HooDoo and Voodoo metaphysics, the Western, and science fiction genres.

By analyzing the character of Loop Garoo and his challenge to the hegemony and monoculturalism of the American Wild West and Catholicism, one can see how Reed makes the Western

genre bear “his ancient Afro-American oral traditions” by turning a traditional Western into a Hoodoo and Be-Bop Western, scattin’ like Charlie Parker, that accommodates Blacks, Native American, women, children, Chinese, Germans, and Christians, with their differing linguistic and cultural views. It is in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* that Reed begins to theorize about how, despite the Catholic Church’s efforts to wipe them out, Voodoo and other African traditional religions have survived in the African Diaspora by, among other means, mixing with Catholic saints and Native American mythologies—the syncretic and synchronistic nature of Voodoo and Hoodoo is the crux of Reed’s Neo-Hoodooism. In other words, the abrogation and appropriation of the Western occur through Voodoo and Hoodoo forces, forms of African spirituality, which oppose not only gunfire but also world Catholicism.

Through the process of abrogating and appropriating the American West and the Western genre, Reed bridges the gap between Africa and its African Diaspora insofar as Loop Garoo is connected to the Haitian and Dahomean Legba. More precisely, Reed has recently indicated in *The Reed Reader* that Loop Garoo was “inspired by the Loup Garou legend of Haiti and the Louisiana Bayou.” Reed adds, “As I was cutting and pasting characters in those days, the character also recalled a cowboy icon of my youth, Lash Larue, who disciplined his enemies with a whip. In Buffalo, black kids like me learned about good and evil from cowboys like Roy Rogers” (xv). As a postcolonial discourse and a narrative technique, Neo-Hoodooism allows Reed to achieve a poetics of multiculturalism and Hoodoo, a North American version of African and Haitian Voodoo, and functions as a metaphor for African Diaspora reconnection in his writing. In

The Free-Lance Pallbearers, for example, Reed introduces Voodoo and HooDoo in his fiction through the back door of Hollywood when Bukka Doopeyduk is hoodooed by his wife's grandmother, in which case HooDoo is perceived as a bad thing. In her eyes, however, she wants to get rid of an already alienated black man. It is also suggested that Bukka Doopeyduk's ignorance of HooDoo amounts to Reed's ridiculing Voodoo and HooDoo, though it becomes clear that at the time Reed was still researching and learning about these African-based religious systems and how they evolved in the African Diaspora. In a recent interview, Reed has talked about how he was miseducated about black and American history (personal interview). In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* Jake the Barker tells the story of the Seven Cities of Cibola and how a sixteenth-century delegation that included Estvancio was enslaved by the Indians. Then he interrupts the story to complain, "Stupid historians who are hired by the cattlemen to promote reason, law and order . . ." (24). In this novel Reed corrects himself and begins tracing the origins of Voodoo and HooDoo from Africa via Haiti in order to demonstrate what happened to Africans and their deities when they crossed the Middle Passage into the "New World." This self refashioning of African-based religious beliefs continues overtly and with much energy in *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* and more subtly in later novels.

***Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* as a Talking Book**

Concerning the title of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, Reed reveals in "Ishmael Reed—Self Interview" that the title was inspired by Lorenzo Thomas's poem "Modern Plumbing Illustrated" and that the novel was based on "old radio scripts in which

the listener constructed the sets from his imagination—that’s why radio, also because it’s an oral book, a talking book; people say they read it aloud” and “it speaks through them, which makes it a loa.” Furthermore, “radio” refers to the fact that *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* contains “more dialogue than scenery and descriptions” (133-34). Another way Reed rewrites the Western novel is through the absence of quotation marks or any other device to indicate to the reader that there is a dialogue going on (which heralds *The Color Purple* by almost twenty years), just as there are no indented paragraphs. Actually, the whole novel is presented as a long narrative poem in five books, with short and long stanzas. More specifically, the narrative structure of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is similar to that of “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto,” a poem originally collected in *Conjure* (1972). This basically makes *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* a “Talking Book.” According to Henry Louis Gates, the “trope of the Talking Book is the ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition” that first manifested in a 1770 slave narrative. Used in slave narratives, the Talking Book refers to the way of “making the white written text speak with a black voice,” which makes it an “initial mode of inscription of the metaphor of the double-voiced” (131). Gates also remarks that black people became “speaking subjects only by inscribing their voices in the written word.” Ultimately, the Talking Book metaphor concerns itself with “recording an authentic black voice in the text of Western letters.” The analysis of the Talking Book further reveals “the curious tension between the black vernacular and the literate discourse” (130). In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* there is a tension between Voodoo/HooDoo and the Western, between Voodoo/HooDoo and

Christianity, and between scatting à la Charlie Parker and neo-social realism.

As for “Yellow Back,” it alludes to the fact that “old West books about cowboy heroes” had not only yellow covers, but they “were usually lurid and sensational” (Reed, “Self-Interview” 134), which explains the presence of lurid scenes in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. In *Mumbo Jumbo* Benoit Battraville, a Haitian houngan—Voodoo priest—informs PaPa LaBas and his people that there exists a “Radio Loa” whose “Yellow Back” symbolizes “its electric circuitry” (151). As Reed explains in “Ishmael Reed—Self-Interview,” “Broke-Down” is “a takeoff” on Lorenzo Thomas’s poem, but it also stems from the African-American slang “Break it down,” which is “to strip something down to its basic components.” Reed adds that *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is “the dismantling of a genre done in an oral way like radio. The ‘time sense’ is akin to the ‘time’ one finds in the psychic world, where past, present, and future exist simultaneously” (134). According to Reginald Martin, the title is a “street-talk language for the elucidation of a problem, in this case a United States town of the Old West with racial and oligarchial problems; these problems are explained, or ‘broke down,’ for the reader” (76).

If *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is a Talking Book and a loa because it speaks through people, and its role is to explicate or “break down” the Western, I contend that it is then associated with Esu-Elegbara (Legba in Benin). According to Gates, Esu-Elegbara, collectively referred to as Esu, is not only “the god of indeterminacy,” but he is also “the god of interpretation because he embodies the ambiguity of figurative language.” Additionally, Esu “decodes the figures” and “retains dominance over the

act of interpretation precisely because he signifies the very divinity of the figurative” (21). From this perspective, Loop Garoo functions as PaPa Labas, the North American version of Legba who appears by name in Reed’s third and fourth novels, *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, and in other versions in subsequent novels. But another contention is that *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is not just “double-voiced,” the characteristic of Esu and the signifying Monkey; it is a multi-voiced text. By “the dismantling of a genre,” one has to understand that *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down* is a contesting revision or a “Motivated Signifying” (Gates 124) of the Western as well as a rereading of the American history of the West. That is, the novel reimagines and reconfigures the traditional Western in order to build a multicultural Western where every voice can be heard. As has already been pointed out, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* rewrites the Western by both reclaiming the place of the black cowboy in the West and empowering Native Americans, minorities, women, and children. It is worth noting that what Reed does to the Western seems to be a general trend of the twentieth century insofar as there have been “interrogations of the 19th century Anglo-Saxon myth of the frontier by Native Americans, Mexican-Americans and African-American writers in the 20th century” (Bold xxii).

To understand how *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is a Talking Book and a loa and how its title underscores how the novel moves from an oral form like HooDoo to a hybrid literary form, a HooDoo Western, and how in the process the Western is rewritten, it is necessary to analyze “I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra,” a poem originally published in *Catechism of d Neo-american Hoodoo Church* (1970) and later collected in

Conjure—the title seems to echo the Egyptian god of sun, Ra, which appears as a pun on “Radio” in “I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra.” As there is an unusual consistency among Reed’s essays, novels, poems, and plays, one can conjecture that the idea for Reed to write a Hoodoo Western was first developed in these poems. Not only does the epigraph to the poem herald the conflict between Hoodoo and Christianity and between Loop Garoo and Pope Innocent, but the whole poem uses conjuration to rewrite the Western and counter the forces of the monotheist Set. The epigraph to “I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra,” taken from *Rituale Romanum* (1947), announces that the devil must be coerced into revealing “*any such physical evil/(potions, charms, fetishes, etc.) still outside the body/and these must be burned.*” We are also told that Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York endorsed and introduced the book (17). In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* Spellman becomes Pope Innocent who strips Loop Garoo off what he calls charms and fetishes. In the poem Loop Garoo sends an old friend of his a postcard with the information that “This time/The Witches win” (43). In the first stanza the speaker proclaims that he is “a cowboy in the Boat of Ra” who, when he rode from town, people compared him to the “dog-faced man,” and that he is not like Egyptologists “who do not know their trips” (17). *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* tells us that Ra is the “Egyptian sun god of Heliopolis; typically represented as a hawk-headed man; father of Osiris, Isis and Set” and that the “dog-faced man” refers to Anubis, “the Egyptian god of the dead, shown typically as a jackal-headed man” (Gates, et a. 2286).

The next stanza satirizes school “marms” who are unable to distinguish between the real Neffertiti, the Egyptian queen and

wife of Pharaoh Akhnaton in the fourteenth century B.C., and the fake one “chipped on the run by slick Germans” (17). Here, the speaker alludes to the fact that in the early twentieth century, the Germans stole the statue of Neffertiti’s head. For Reed, artistic pillage is tantamount to cultural imperialism, and it is for this reason that *Mumbo Jumbo* contains a multicultural and international group named the *M’utafikah*, whose mission is to take back the objects of art stolen from “Third-World” countries and take them to their countries of origin. The rest of the stanza describes Sonny Rollins with a hawk behind his head, an allusion to Ra, blowing his horn in “the Field of Reeds.” In the third stanza the speaker boasts of his sexual exploits with Isis, “Lady of the Boogaloo,” and having robbed at gun point her “Wells-Far-ago.” Furthermore, the speaker commands Isis: “‘Start grabbing the blue,’ I said from top of my double crown” (17). Isis is an ancient Egyptian goddess of fertility and sister and wife of Osiris, the ancient Egyptian god whose annual death and resurrection symbolized the self-renewing vitality and fertility of nature. While “Wells-Far-ago” echoes Wells Fargo, “a nineteenth-century overland stage company in the American West,” “my double crown” alludes to “the combined crowns of the Egyptian cults of Ammom and Ra, which symbolized a unified Egypt” (Gates, et al. 2287). Loop Garoo Kid’s sexual escapades permeate *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*.

In the fourth stanza the speaker refers to himself as “Ezzard Charles of the Chisholm Trail,” whose thumb was blown off when he tried to take up “the bass.” Though he is a practitioner of alchemy “in ringmanship,” he is “a sucker for the right cross.” Ezzard Charles was a prizefighter and “right cross” refers to the punch in boxing.¹ But knowing that Reed always intends a

multiplicity of meanings, “right cross” could also be a reference to the Voodoo cross (not the Christian cross), also known as *vévé*. In the fifth stanza the speaker reveals that though he left the temple hurriedly, he is waiting for his time. The fourth paragraph/stanza of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* informs the reader that the Loop Garoo Kid was “Booted out of his father’s house after a quarrel” (9); later in the novel we learn that the father may be the Heavenly Father and that the house is Heaven. The last four verses of the stanza talk about the “wanted poster” and how “moody greenhorns” made the speaker dance while the chambers of his gun’s mouth pot jammed” (18). “Moody greenhorns” probably refer to blues music, one of the main themes in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. The lewdness of “the cowboy in the boat of Ra” is the main subject of the sixth stanza. Indeed, he spends his time “Boning-up in the ol West,” and thanks to his “motown long plays,” he writes “for the comeback of/Osiris.” “Women arrive/on the backs of goats and throw themselves” on his “Bowie” (18). In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* Loop Garoo spends his time having sexual intercourse with women every chance he gets. More interesting is how the poet writes and makes “motown long plays” up, which recalls not only Loop Garoo’s concept about a novel but also how he improvises his Hoodoo conjurations. It is worth noting that “the comeback of Osiris” symbolizes the comeback of polytheism, one aspect of multiculturalism and the subject of Reed’s literary career.

The seventh stanza is of paramount importance insofar as it directly expresses the relation between “I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra” and *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. In effect, the speaker becomes “Lord of the lash,/the Loup Garou Kid,” who not only holds men’s souls in his pot but does “the dirty boogie

with scorpions” and entrances the bull, which echoes the Loop Garou Kid’s conjuration against Drag Gibson, his cattle, and his town in the novel. Equally significant is the fact *Loup Garou*, werewolf in French, is spelled as Loop Garoo in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. This stanza also shows the Loup Garou Kid changing from a cowboy with a gun into a conjurer cowboy, a theme that permeates the next stanza, where the “cowboy in the boat of Ra” is shown at work making conjuration. In this stanza Loup Garou Kid calls Pope Joan, the apocryphal female pope who supposedly ruled about 855-858 A.D., to come, be a nice girl, and bring him his “buffalo horn of black powder,” his “headdress of black feathers,” his “bones of Ju-Ju snake,” his “eyelids of red paint,” and hand him his “shadow” (18). That the Loup Garou Kid requests Pope Joan’s help is pivotal to the poem, because retrieving old cultures and cultural/historical figures, especially those neglected or dismissed by the mainstream, is the cornerstone of Reed’s postcolonial discourse and multicultural poetics. Also pivotal to the poem is the reference to “Pope Joan of Ptah Ra,” Ptah referring to the Egyptian deity and chief god of Memphis and god of craftsmanship. Ptah and Ra “became Ptah-Ra when the city-states of Memphis and Heliopolis combined” (Gates, et al. 2287). As for “Ju-Ju,” it not only refers to a charm or magic spell but also to a religion practiced in West Africa. In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* Pope Innocent theorizes that Hoodoo is the North American version of Ju-Ju, a religion that originated in Dahomey (now Benin) and Angola. A “Ju-Ju snake,” therefore, would be Damballah, the god of fertility and knowledge of past and present represented by a snake in the Voodoo of Dahomey. Loop Garoo Kid invokes this deity and uses

it to strangle John Wesley Hardin in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*.

In the remaining parts of “I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra,” the Loup Garou Kid vows to go to town after Set. In the Osiris myth Set murdered his brother Osiris, dismembered him, and scattered the remains to ensure that no resurrection was possible. In the poem Loup Garou Kid warns that he is coming “to unseat Set,” “to sunset Set,” and “to Set down Set,” punning on the fact that in Egyptology Set is known as the god of setting sun, a concept that fits into the Western insofar as the sun sets in the west. More important is the fact that Set is believed to have brought about monotheism by killing Osiris. In the poem Loup Garou Kid accuses Set not only of having usurped “the Royal couch” by killing Osiris but also of being an “impostor Radio of Moses’ bush,” “hater of dance,” and “vampire outlaw of the milky way” (18). In “Why I Often Allude to Osiris,” a poem originally published in *Conjure*, the speaker laments that “ikhnaton brought re [Ra]/ligious fascism to Egypt,” while Osiris would “rather dance than rule” (42-43). Implied is the fact that since dance is associated with Voodoo/HooDoo, a hater of dance is also a hater of Voodoo/HooDoo. These themes of Set murdering Osiris and being a hater of dance as well as the origin of monotheism are at the center of *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Scatting HooDoo Like Charlie Parker

The text of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is written in a Be-Bop style or à la Charlie Parker. While telling Drag Gibson about the kind of trick the Loop Garou Kid is laying on him and the town, the Pope characterizes Loop Garou’s modus operandi as follows: “Loop seems to be scatting arbitrarily, using forms of

this and adding his own. He’s blowing like that celebrated musician Charles Yardbird Parker—improvising as he goes along. He’s throwing clusters of demon chords at you and you don’t know the changes, do you Mr. Drag?” (154). Scatting is important on two levels: first, it characterizes Loop Garoo’s kind of Hoodoo and how blacks in the African Diaspora have had to improvise to maintain African-based cultural and religious systems; second, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* contains several scenes of scatting and references to jazz, a technique that allows Reed to re-place both the language and the text of the Western. Theda, for example, describes the hands of the black masseurs as “jazzy hands.” Also when Theda jumps for joy, he utters what sounds like a scat:

Woooooo wee!! Um ma um ma um ma ha ha!! Su ha
 su ha su ha !! Soo-kee o soo-kee. Lalalalalalalala
 lalalalalalalala. My my my my goodness. O get it. Get it
 GET IT GET IT OOOOOOOO oooooooooooooooooo
 oooo oooo
 o o Mewwwwoooooooooow. (140)

As alluded to above, “scatting arbitrarily” à la Charlie Parker not only characterizes the way Loop Garoo practices Hoodoo, but it also bespeaks of what happened to African religions and deities when they crossed the Middle Passage into the “New World.” Loop Garoo and his Hoodoo, then, are a living testimony that these African religious systems and deities did not vanish with and because of the experiences of slavery, colonialism, and racism. Before discussing Reed’s statement about the survival of African oral and folkloric elements in the African Diaspora, we need to discuss what spurs Loop Garoo’s Hoodoo practices. I have already argued that through Loop

Garoo one sees how African Americans have negotiated the political and cultural ideologies of the Western from which they have been so long excluded. Also, whereas cowboys have traditionally negotiated with guns and ropes, Loop Garoo does it with an African-derived folkloric weapon: Hoodoo. Initially, the conflict between Loop Garoo and Drag Gibson of Yellow Back Radio seems to be political and a matter of protecting one's turf. As a character, Drag Gibson is the HARRY SAM of *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* because not only is he a tyrant and murderer but he also is associated with filth. We learn that he got his name by riding behind cattle and catching dust and that his name is "shorthand for something scaly, slimy and huge with dirt" (47).

Scatting like Charlie "Bird" Parker is also illustrated in Loop Garoo's "micro-Hoo-Doo mass" intended "to end 2000 years of bad news" (63)—Christian monotheism and monoculturalism—in which "the demons of the old religion" become "the Gods of the new" (83). Before starting the mass, Loop Garoo has not only assembled "a laced canopy embroidered with such emblems as skulls, crossbones, swords, serpents and hearts," but he has provided food to his Loa, including "sea shells, playing cards, cigars, rum, thirty pieces of silver." Using maize flour, he draws "on the floor in front of the altars various symbols associated with the Loa" he wants help from (63). What Loop Garoo draws on the floor with flour is called vèvè or vever in Haitian Voodoo, "Symbolic caballa-like designs drawn on the ground to invoke the loa at ceremonies, made of wheat or maize flour or ashes" (Deren 337). According to Deren, the "drawing of vever requires real technical skill" as a "small amount of flour is picked up between the thumb and forefinger and let sift on to the ground while the hand moves in the line of the form which the vever is to take"

(204). Through the “micro-Hoo-Doo mass” Loop Garoo mixes Voodoo/HooDoo deities such as Legba, the loa of crossroads who is the first to be invoked in a Voodoo ceremony. Deren notes that the initial salutation must include Legba “without whose permission no contact could be made with any of the invisibles. It is also addressed to the two trinities: the Christian Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and the Voudoun Mysteries, Morts and Marassa” (203). While summoning Legba, Loop Garoo also accurately defines who Legba is and what his function is: “master of the crossroads” and messenger (63). In the greeting to Legba, Loop Garoo also recalls the fact that many of the Voodoo and HooDoo loas or deities are believed to have originated from Dahomey (present Benin and Yoruba in Nigeria), Guinea, and Congo. Thus even in a new environment, it is imperative that Loop Garoo go back to the place of origins. Loop Garoo’s invocation to connect his “circuit to Guinea” (63) represents Reed’s creative endeavor to reconnect African American literature to the oral traditions of Africa and the African Diaspora. In *Japanese by Spring* it is suggested that resurrecting Olódùmarè, the Yoruba deity, in African America is like restoring a lost phone contact (circuit) to Africa.

Worth noting, too, is the fact that instead of saluting the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost/Spirit as in Christian prayers, Loop Garoo has become himself the heavenly Father. Besides parodying The Lord’s Prayer, Loop Garoo’s calling himself the Father points to another meaning: in Haitian Voodoo, a “strong” houngan can be called Father or become a “Communal Father” if he is wise and knows “how to do things, many things, all things” in secular, “economic and political spheres” (Deren 158-59). As for Cousin Zaka, Loop Garoo is accurate in describing this loa in

agricultural terms. According to a note by Joan Dayan in *A Rainbow for the Christian West*, Cousin Zaka, brother of Azaka-Médé (god of agriculture) is “also a god of agriculture” and “Patron saint of the country farmer and the people of the mountains,” whom people treat with “great familiarity, calling him ‘cousin’” (250). Loop Garoo’s description of Cousin Zaka is equally consistent with how this loa has been described by other writers in the African Diaspora. In René Depestre’s Voodoo epic poem *A Rainbow for the Christian West: Voodoo Mystery Poem* (originally *un arc-en-ciel pour l’occident chrétien, poème mystère vaudou*), there is a section for Cousin Zaka, in which Cousin Zaka describes himself as Cousin Zaka whose “red kerchief,” “machete-couline,” “liana knife,” and “cane knife” greet “American choppers of dreams/On the shores of the Mississippi” the day before the battle (Depestre 143). Whether or not Reed was aware of René Depestre’s Voodoo poem does not matter; the important thing is that Loop Garoo invokes Cousin Zaka to take care of one of the “American choppers of dreams,” Drag Gibson.

Loop Garoo’s Be-Bop improvisation also permeates another verse of the “micro-Hoo-Doo Mass,” in which Loop Garoo mixes biblical and cultural figures with figures related to Voodoo and Hoodoo. In this way Judas Iscariot and Jack Johnson are mixed with Gu, a misnomer for Ogun, the West African and Haitian Voodoo god of iron and war. Conscious of his shortcomings, such as referring to Ogun as Gu, Loop Garoo appeals to the charter members of the American Hoodoo Church—Doc John, Doc Yah Yah, Zozo Labrique, and Marie Laveau (whom he calls “the Grand Improvisers”) to forgive him, send the Loa, and allow him to improvise, “*if I am not performing these rites correctly send the Loa anyway and allow my imagination to fill the gaps*” (63).

This is a powerful statement, not simply because *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is built on improvisation as in Jazz (Be-Bop), but also because it suggests the way blacks of the African Diaspora have had to fill in the gaps where they could not remember the name of the original deity—this idea is also explored in *Mumbo Jumbo*, *Flight to Canada*, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, and *Japanese by Spring*. Loop Garoo reinforces the idea of filling in the gaps when he calls himself an “amateur” because, unlike Doc John, Zozo Labrique, or Marie Laveau, he is still learning the art of Hoodoo as he goes along. Once again, Loop Garoo mixes Hoodoo deities with other personalities, Christian or otherwise. While Baron-La-Croix refers to Baron Samedi, the Voodoo loa of the underground, Red-Eyed Ezili seems to be a reference to Erzulie, the Voodoo loa of love. According to Leslie G. Desmangles, Ezili, the “Virgin Mother,” not only “represents the cosmic womb in which divinity and humanity are conceived,” but “she is the symbol of fecundity, the mother of the world who participates with the masculine forces in the creation and maintenance of the universe” (131).

When Reed was writing *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, his idea of Voodoo was Hollywood-like, because he did not possess accurate information. Or as he would later put it, he was still a victim of “white curriculum stress” (Personal Interview). But through Loop Garoo, Reed starts his research into Voodoo and Hoodoo. Reed has pointed out that Loop Garoo is a Legba figure. Asked by Zamir about the “parallels between the trickster figure of Loop Garoo and communications,” Reed answers, “Well, Legba is the god of communications. The messenger. Loop Garoo is an early Legba figure in my work. After Loop Garoo you get LaBas. I was on-the-job-training—I was really experimenting

with this” (299). The move from Loop Garoo to PaPa LaBas in *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* is of paramount importance insofar as it bespeaks of the nominal transformations that African deities had to undergo in order to survive in a new environment. As *Mumbo Jumbo* makes clear, however, their functions stayed the same, albeit Legba in the “New World” is described as an old man, whereas he appears younger in West Africa. As Maya Deren points out in *Divine Horsemen*, not only did several loas grow “in and of the new world” whose very nature imposed it, but new deities “were created by the transfiguration of an African principle into a new-world manifestation” (70). The fact that Loop Garoo and Legba are linked to communications (radio and television) and technologies is in tune with how black people have to adapt their traditions to modern technologies, thus eliminating the dialectics of tradition and modernity.

From Ju-Ju to Hoodoo: Cultural Survival of African Oral Traditions in the African Diaspora

That Loop Garoo represents the survival of African oral traditions in the Americas becomes more poignant with the arrival of the Pope in the town of Yellow Back Radio. Besides reinforcing the idea of improvisation and the colonialist character of Christianity during modern European colonialism, the presence of the Pope in the novel is of paramount importance. I argue that Reed has endowed Pope Innocent with the powers of a diviner and a medicine man. John Mbiti points out that the role of a medicine man is to find out “why something has gone wrong” and to “tell who may have worked evil, magic, sorcery or witchcraft against the sick or the barren” (157). In this letter to Drag Gibson (found

by two pigs, Matthew and Waldo, at the end of the novel), the Pope laments that his ears have been afflicted with “bitter sorrow” from learning that “many persons have abandoned themselves to devils,” murdered children and young cattle, and “withered the crops of the earth” by “their incantations spells and other charms and crafts.” The Pontiff declares that these people saddled by devils “outrage the Divine Majesty and are the cause of scandal and danger to very many.” The last sentence of the letter reads, “Arriving tomorrow with tool box” (176). Just like a true diviner/healer who has been requested at someone’s home, the Pope carries a box/bag of tools to diagnose and heal what aches Drag Gibson and his town. Reed revises this in *The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes*, when the Pope worries that St. Nick, who is “as irrepressible as voodoo” (*The Terrible Twos* 76), and Black Peter are Satan’s messenger who threaten “the survival of an organization that was almost two thousand years old” (*The Terrible Threes* 158). In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down Loop Garoo* compares himself with St. Nick: “. . . I’ve always been harmless—St. Nick coming down the chimney, children leaving soup for me—always made to appear foolish, the scapegoat of all history” (165). To the citizens of Yellow Back Radio, the Pope presents himself as a diviner/healer who arrives at the patient’s home to get rid of bad spirits or poison. The Pope announces, “I’m-a come to cool tings out and get rid of this maleficiem what’s been making the cattle break out in sores, their milk to dry, that’s parching your fields with-a plague—in other words howdy pardners before I’m-a adios everything will be really really fine as wine in the summertime” (148). The Pope further displays his skills as a diviner when he cautions Drag Gibson not to head for the hills to catch Loop Garoo with guns and conventional

methods. The Pope points out that “shoot-em-ups won’t work this time,” because Loop Garoo “got power stored in that mad dog’s tooth hanging on that necklace he wears. The mad dog’s tooth is the thing” (152). Now, this is really true divination, though one may argue that because Loop Garoo and the Pope turn out to be old acquaintances, the Pope knew the habits of Loop Garoo. However, this reading would be erroneous because Loop Garoo received the mad dog’s tooth from Zozo Labrique. In Africa only true diviners using either their psychic powers or spirits can detect objects and human beings from long distances. The text of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* does not reveal how the Pope knows the existence of the mad dog’s tooth. The Pope is not simply a diviner; he is also a healer who knows how to get rid of the mad dog’s tooth. He argues that to capture Loop Garoo requires removing the mad dog’s tooth from his neck.

Through the Pope, Reed historicizes what happened to Africans and their deities when they crossed the Middle Passage into slavery. Asked by Drag Gibson what Loop Garoo is putting on them, the Pope displays a profound and intimate knowledge of the history of Voodoo and Hoodoo from Africa to the black Diaspora when he correctly identifies and defines Hoo-Doo as “an American version of the Ju-Ju religion that originated in Africa,” the “strange continent which serves as the subconscious of our planet—where we’ve found the earliest remains of man,” and Ju-Ju having originated from Dahomey and Angola (152). In West Africa, Ju-Ju refers to both charms and a type of contemporary African music commonly referred to as Ju-Ju music, a combination of Makosa, Congolese Soukous, Rumba, and Salsa. Not only does the Pope corroborate the fact that the Catholic Church has been trying to destroy other people’s

religions and beliefs, but he also acknowledges that the Europeans have attempted to falsify the history of Africa “by ridiculing the history of Sub-Sahara Africa and claiming that of North Africa” as their own, just as they dropped the term “blackamoor” from St. Augustine’s name and “the German Aryan scholars faked the History of the Egyptians by claiming them to be white” (153). The Pope further theorizes that if Eve had stayed “in that garden, probably located in Dahomey, because that’s where the snakes are, Rome would be merely one of the centers of the Ju-Ju religion” and he would be “a poor wretch, stomping grapes or directing traffic in New York City” (153).

Though I agree to some extent with McGee that Reed “is not making an argument for the truth of Afrocentric interpretations of history” (33), I argue that Reed’s purpose is two-fold: let the Pope recognize the misdeeds of his Church and its failure to eradicate non-Christian religions in the “New World,” and show how African derived religions are characterized by multiculturalism and multiethnicity. The Pope points out that “when African slaves were sent to Haiti, Santo Domingo and other Latin American countries” and the “Catholics attempted to change their pantheon . . . the natives merely placed our art alongside theirs.” For the Catholics’ “insipid and uninspiring saints were no match for theirs: Damballah, Legba and other deities which are their Loa. This religion is so elastic that some of the women priests name Loa after their boyfriends” (153). The Pope also informs Drag Gibson that when “Vodun arrived in America, the authorities became so paranoid they banned it for a dozen or so years, even to the extent of discontinuing the importation of slaves from Haiti and Santa Domingo” (154). According to the Pope, what Loop Garoo is practicing is “a syncretistic American version” of

Haitian Voodoo (154). It is worth noting that in 1484 Pope Innocent VIII deplored the spread of witchcraft and authorized inquisitions in *Malleus Malleficarum*.

Now it is clear that what bothers the Pope the most is the elasticity/syncretism of Voodoo and HooDoo, which allows them to be irrepressible. According to Desmangles, “Symbiosis by ecology suggests the juxtaposition of religious elements necessitated by environmental and geographical adaptation,” whereas symbiosis by identification “suggests specifically the system by which, on the basis of similarity, Catholic saints were identified with or ‘transfigured into’ Vodou gods” (8). Symbiosis by ecology operates on two levels: first, there is a “spatial juxtaposition of Vodou (or diverse African-derived) elements and Catholic symbols,” as well as a “temporal use of these symbols in the unfo”; second, there are “prescribed ritualistic observances for the lwas [loas] on the Catholic holy days reserved for the saints in the Christian liturgical calendar” (8). From this perspective, it is clear that part of what the Pope says about Voodoo in Haiti and South America and HooDoo in North America is a case of “symbiosis by ecology” insofar as African slaves juxtaposed the two traditions, Christianity and African Voodoo, by placing their Damballah, Legba, Guédé, and other deities alongside Catholic saints. As Loop Garoo’s “micro-Hoo-Doo mass” and rituals suggest, however, African slaves juxtaposed more than two traditions, as Voodoo and HooDoo have incorporated traditions from Native Americans and later traditions from other ethnic groups. For Reed, of course, this is multiculturalism at work par excellence. As for the case of women who name deities after their boyfriends, it constitutes a weak example of symbiosis by identity, because these boyfriends are not Catholic saints.

Symbiosis by identity is “a system of identification or transfiguration” whereby, “on the basis of the similarities between African and Catholic myths and symbols, the saints were identified with African gods” (Desmangles 10-11). Thus Ezili, “whose originals exist both in the African goddess of the same name in Wydah in Dahomey (or Benin) and in Oshun in Nigeria, becomes the Virgin Mary; Benin’s python Damballah becomes Saint Patrick” and Legba Saint Peter (Desmangles 10-11). In Loop Garoo’s “micro-HooDoo mass,” Judas Iscariot is identified with an unnamed HooDoo loa of treachery, while Black Haw Indian houngan of HooDoo is identified with Legba, also present in the invocation, to the extent that he is asked to open the minds of and communicate with “prissy orthodox minds” (64).

The Pope’s fear of Voodoo/HooDoo is compounded by another aspect of Voodoo: capacity to spur and sustain revolutions. The Pope tells Drag Gibson that it is imperative that they “wipe out” the “syncretic American version” of Voodoo “because it can always become a revolutionary force” as in Haiti during the revolution when many “of the Haitian revolutionaries were practicing priests, or houngans . . .” (154). He also notes that “The Present Prime Minister of Haiti Dr. François Duvalier was former head of the Haitian Bureau of Ethnology” (154). As Reed blurs genres, the same account is given in an essay, “I Hear You, Doc,” published in *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*, which Reed wrote after his trip to Haiti in the 1970s. The importance of Voodoo in Haiti during the revolution and the American occupation is at the center of *Mumbo Jumbo*. One should note that the revolutionary aspect of Voodoo is not the Pope’s or Reed’s fabrication, for several historians and anthropologists have made the same arguments. Desmangles, for example, notes that

the role of Vodou in the Haitian Revolution was to provide “a channel through which ancestral traditions could be re-created” (12-13). The emphasis on past religious traditions became vital in inspiring the slaves to revolt against their masters.

The confrontation between Loop Garoo and the Pope elucidates further why Loop Garoo left his father’s house for “Horse opera” and “the Hoo-Doo cult of North America,” which he characterizes as “A much richer art form than preaching to fishermen and riding into a town on the back of an ass” (163). Additionally, Loop Garoo deconstructs Christ and his deeds, including what he calls “his cheap performance at the gravesight of Lot—sickening—and that parable of our friend Buddha and the mustard seed. One, just a grandstand exhibition, and the other, beautiful, artistic and profound” (163). Loop Garoo also demythologizes the Virgin Mary who, he charges, screamed at Christ’s “feet for three hours and the next night in my room I thought she would bite off my horns with the steel of her hungry teeth.” Even her ascension, which “became a Papal Dogma,” is doubted when Loop Garoo claims that everything was “groovy until that angel he sent—the impostor who spread the rumor of her ascension and before you knew it—it became a Papal Dogma” (163-64). When the Pope urges Loop Garoo to return home to prevent Black Diane from starting something that will make his “uprising look quite small,” he responds that there “was never uprising” and that the “propagandists in the late Middle Ages” concocted the idea of uprising (165). Consequently, he became the “fool—vagabond with the rucksack on my shoulder—always on the road. That’s me, the cosmic jester” (165). To crown it all, Loop Garoo calls the Pope and his crowd the “devils” because of the way they “massacred the Gnostics, not

to mention the Bogomils, Albigenses, and Waldenses” (165).

Through the confrontation, Loop Garoo underscores the fact that unlike Catholicism, “Hoo-doo, which in America flowered in New Orleans, was an unorganized religion without ego-games or death worship” (164). This openness of HooDoo prompts the Pope to charge Loop Garoo with “passing the elixir” to writers and painters in cafés, to which Loop Garoo counters by arguing that being always “with the avant-garde,” he wanted to expose Catholicism and its monotheism and show the world other realities and possibilities (164-65). That the Pope refuses to kill Loop Garoo—he leaves him in the hands of Drag Gibson, but warns him that it would be stupid to “do away” with him—is significant because it is reminiscent of what Reed has said about Pope Paul VI’s book *Africae Terrarum*. According to Reed in *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*, Pope Paul VI’s intentions suggested that the Church could benefit from “other traditions and rites. It is a tenuous truce the Catholic Church has made with non-Western African deities and rites in the Americas. Even the most sophisticated Creole Catholic has a Houngan tucked away somewhere in the background” (“I Hear You” 267).

By now, it should be clear that Loop Garoo and the Pope know each other very well, and given the fact that they seem to be poles apart as far as freedom in art and religion is concerned, one would expect Loop Garoo either to stay in Yellow Back Radio or to ride toward the futuristic city of the Seven Cities of Cibola. But Loop Garoo, cheated out of the martyrdom whereby he had hoped to rival Christ’s Passion, climbs down the scaffold and heads toward the Pope’s ship, which is “heading back to its point of origin” (177). There have been several interpretations to this ending—according to Robert Fox, Loop Garoo follows the Pope

because both are “intimates who need each other” and “who can return to their natural camaraderie, freed from the necessity of taking themselves seriously now that “they have acted out their respective roles” (47). For Patrick McGee, Loop Garoo “has no argument with Christianity per se; for he finally joins forces with the Pope and reclaims his feminine counterpart, Black Diane” (34). Reginald Martin posits that the ending of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* suggests a kind of reconciliation between Loop Garoo and the Pope, which points to “the two churches coming together as it were” (80).

The Pope certainly needs Loop Garoo to end the blues with which Black Diane has filled Heaven; but it does not seem that Loop Garoo needs the Pope, at least from the text. The Pope begs Loop Garoo to go with him, because otherwise Jesus Christ is going to make him crawl on his “belly toward him and kiss *his* feet” (166). Moreover, the Pope will have to put up with people “singing the same old hymns and he [Christ] sits there performing the familiar spectaculars—every day” (166) as well as with people “crying the blues. Whole choirs for days on end” (167). But it seems erroneous to argue that Loop Garoo has no bone to pick with the Pope’s Church, for not only does this reading undermine the role of Loop Garoo and HooDoo forces in the novel, but it denies what the Pope has acknowledged about the Church’s intense desire to wipe out HooDoo in North America. For sure, Loop Garoo following the Pope suggests a kind of cohabitation between the Catholic Church and HooDoo or a coming together of Loop Garoo’s church(es) and the Pope’s Catholic Church as it was at the beginning. After all, Reed argues that if “you scratch the Christian-Judaic culture, underneath you

got a Pagan. And the thing that would unite all [the tribes of the world] is the thing I call HooDoo” (qtd. in Gover 15).

There is another interpretation to the ending of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*: it is a trick ending, a characteristic of all Reed’s novels. As a matter of fact, Loop Garoo joining the Pope is consistent with his character, “the cosmic jester” who is “always on the road” (165). The ending is also consistent with the concept of “creating our own fictions” espoused by the children of *Yellow Back Radio*. In an 1972 interview with John O’Brien, Reed points out that what “it comes down to is that you let the social realists go after the flatfoots out there on the beat and we’ll go after the Pope and see which action cause a revolution. We are mystical detectives about to make an arrest.” Reed has revealed that the ending of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is “based on an introduction that Carl Jung wrote to *Paradise Lost*.” Not only does Carl Jung trace Satan’s origin, but he claims that “the devil climbed out of art at a certain period along about the time of John Milton and that Milton was using an old Gnostic idea of the devil as superman, ‘a man capable of all things.’” Additionally, Reed points out that the ending is “both a quasi-anarchistic and Tom Mix ending” in which religious symbols and the gods “return to art,” where “they belong as something one contemplates but that doesn’t participate in the world.” Another clue lies in the fact that, according to Reed, “all the events that Pope Innocent VIII was talking about were taking place in art. And what happens is that people are on their own and Loop Garoo and the Pope return to art” (qtd. in O’Brien 37-38).

Whichever interpretation we side with, what matters the most is that with the help of Zozo Labrique, Chief Showcase, the Amazons, and the children, Loop Garoo leaves behind a world

where people are not only heading toward an imaginary city equipped with machines that perform all the work, including feeding babies and changing diapers, but they are doing “their own thing” and swinging to the way they want. Swinging to the way one wants is what spurs the conflict in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Through PaPa LaBas, a well-rounded version of Loop Garoo, *Mumbo Jumbo* suggests that any reconciliation between Loop Garoo and the Pope, and through them HooDoo and Christianity, is built on quicksand.

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This casebook investigates the African American presence on the western frontier, Conjure and Voodoo, Neo-HooDooism and Mythogenesis, and Be-Bop/HooDoo Improvisations and the survival of African and Haitian Voodoo in North America in Ishmael Reed’s *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. In [“Westward Migration, Narrative, and Genre in African America”](#) David G. Nicholls explores the history of African Americans in the west, studies the literary expressions some African Americans left behind, and tries to explain why African Americans and their literature remain largely ignored. Nicholls reminds us that Reed breaks down the formula of the Western, which typically features a white cowboy hero on the Western “frontier enacting manifest destiny, by stretching the limits of logic and temporality expected of realism. He includes elements of science fiction, anachronisms, and Voodoo to achieve his purpose.”

In [“The Borg, Conjure, and Voodoo: An Analysis of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*”](#) Scharron A. Clayton investigates the issues of oppression—slavery and colonization—through a comparison with the fictional “Borg Society” as a sampling of the syncretic traditional African religion as depicted in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. By examining Voodoo references and inferences, religious ritual and metaphor, and religious history, Clayton urges us “to recognize, reflect, and appreciate the polyrhythmic nature of Reed’s writing,” especially “his uncanny skill of blending past and present, utilizing core elements of black life, critiquing American society, and displaying elements of European hegemony.”

In [“Regeneration through Neo-HooDooism: *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and Ishmael Reed’s Mythogenesis.”](#) Aimable Twagilimana demonstrates how by manipulating historical, cultural, literary, religious, political, and economic stereotypical forms Reed turns the text of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* into a cultural mosaic of the Western frontier where myths “reconnect Americans in a profound and absorbing way to the drama and ambiguity of American life.” More specifically, Twagilimana shows how through Neo-HooDooism Reed questions, breaks down, ridicules, and totally abrogates the domination of the “most enduring founding myths of American culture,” thus reimagining and reinventing the American Western.

NOTES

¹ I thank Jerome Klinkowitz for this reference.

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Westward Migration, Narrative, and Genre in African America

DAVID G. NICHOLLS

As a postmodern Western with a black cowboy hero, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969) is a singular creation. The singularity of this creation becomes apparent by comparison with so many of the popular representations of the American west in the nineteenth century, which rarely portray African Americans and their experiences. When one looks at histories of African American literature, moreover, one rarely sees the west as a significant setting for fictions, memoirs, or narratives about black Americans. Yet African Americans had a significant presence on the western frontier, and some left writings that show them struggling to find a fitting form to portray their experiences. In this essay I discuss the history of African Americans in the west, examine the literary expressions some of them left behind, and speculate on why these Americans and their literature remain largely unrecognized. This lack of recognition, I argue, creates an imaginative void about blacks in the west that Reed quite happily fills with his postmodern fabulation. To come to terms with the singularity of Reed's novel as somehow "about" black westerners, we need to examine both the historical legacy of these people and the cultural mechanisms that have led most of us to forget about them.

Blacks in the West

The notion that there were indeed blacks on the western frontier is a surprise to most Americans. African Americans did not move west en masse until the Second World War. But the U.S. census shows that there had been consistent, growing migration by blacks to the west since the 1840s, when there were 384 black Americans in the West, to 1900, when there were 165,432, and continuing to 304,300 at the start of World War II (Savage 201; Forbes 36). African Americans participated in the movement for westward expansion underwritten by Manifest Destiny, even if they are not generally remembered for their contributions. As William Loren Katz writes in his introduction to *The Black West*, “From 19th century dime westerns to today’s school histories, Hollywood and TV dramas, the tale of frontier blood, sacrifice, and conquest has bonded white citizens and established exactly who built the country—and who didn’t” (Katz x). Stories of the pioneers also have emphasized white experience. As John W. Ravage has noted, “The fantasy world of ‘the West’ is one filled with strong, durable men and women, the sons and daughters of European forebears. In this fantasy scenario, however, African Americans and other minority groups seem tacked on as merely added dramatic personae who—while they may occasionally fill out the subplots—seldom grace the main action” (Ravage xiv). Despite the important contributions of black settlers, buffalo soldiers, and cowboys, even African Americans in other regions have tended to overlook their western peers. Thus the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People felt compelled to run a story entitled “Black Cowboys Are Real” in a 1940 issue of its magazine, *The Crisis* (Harmon). Though historians do not agree on the exact number of black cowboys on

the western frontier, with estimates ranging from 2 percent (Taylor 157-158, 340n51) to as many as 25 percent (Porter 495), it is clear that they were indeed real. The general population of nineteenth-century settlers in the west is thought to have been between 1.5 and 3 percent, with black Americans populating every state and territory in the region (Ravage xix). While clearly a minority population, African Americans nevertheless had a certain presence in the opening of the western frontier.

Why has their presence been forgotten? As Katz and Ravage have suggested, mainstream popular culture has done much to create this historical amnesia. But within African American literary studies, too, there has been a tendency to neglect the west. By comparison, there are copious materials on the experiences of black southerners, and the urban experiences of African Americans are well represented in numerous genres. Certainly the vast majority of primary texts in the field address movement between the south and the north—through slave narratives, dialect poetry, fictions of the rural folk, and novels of migration and urbanization, to name only a few forms. It seems logical that the critical literature should take up this regional bifurcation as an organizing principle. With the recent publication of Farah Jasmine Griffin's *"Who Set You Flowin'?"*: *The African-American Migration Narrative* (1995) and Lawrence R. Rodgers's *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel* (1997), the relationship between narrative forms and the social process of migration has achieved a certain prominence in African-American literary studies. In their work (and my own as well, in *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America* (2000)), the African-American migration narrative emerges as a formal mediation of the movement from

the south to the north during the Great Migration of the twentieth century. The migration narrative, a text that handles the changes to characters as they move across space and through time, is of particular interest to those of us interested in writing anti-essentialist accounts of the relation between race and literature. For in the migration narrative, the migrant is not a fixed racial being, but one whose subject position is shaped by change—both self-actualized and culturally engendered. As the migrant moves, so does his or her relation to the ideological formation of race in American society. The experiences of those who migrated to the west (both before and during the Great Migration) remain unaddressed, however. Even Nell Irvin Painter's *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* is marketed through its cover as an account of "The first major migration to the North of ex-slaves," emphasizing northward rather than westward movement despite the fact that most of the Exodusters moved due west from Tennessee.

But just as there were indeed black westerners, there were also a number of them who wrote about their experiences on the frontier. Oscar Micheaux, notable as one of the earliest black filmmakers, wrote several novels drawing on his experience as a homesteader in South Dakota; some of these later appeared in film adaptations. Other notable novelists (Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman) were born in the west, but moved east to make their careers, rarely returning to the west in their fictional creations. As Douglas Flamming has argued, these westerners felt "heritage-starved" due to their distance from southern black culture and sought to engage the south rather than their own regional experiences in their works (92). Most frequently, however, black westerners wrote memoirs. Some

wrote of their movement to the west, others of their departure from the east. Following the formulation of the migration narrative as a formal mediation of social movement, I want to examine what happens when the migrant moves through the west. As I shall argue, these mediations take on not only a different landscape and itinerary but also intriguing formal properties. In the next section I analyze six memoirs of African American lives in the west.

Remembering the Black West

My first example is *Shadow and Light*, the 1902 autobiography of Mifflin W. Gibbs. Gibbs lived from 1823 to 1915. He was born as a free black in Philadelphia, where he assisted with the underground railroad as a young man. He would later head west to seek his fortune in the California gold rush, spending time as an entrepreneur, newspaper editor, and civic figure. His political activities in San Francisco were deemed provocative by white authorities, and, disappointed by the disenfranchisement of blacks, he moved to Canada and participated in frontier life there. In his later life he became a lawyer, then became the first black municipal judge in the U.S., and eventually served as consul general to Madagascar. Gibbs has been referred to by Tom W. Dillard as the “Horatio Alger of the black race” (xiii) and by a contemporary newspaper as “our Moses of the West” (qtd. in Dillard xviii), indicating that he rose from poverty to success while leading his people westward. In his narrative Gibbs blends elements of the slave narrative and the uplift narrative into his autobiographical form. For example, Gibbs links his narrative to that of Frederick Douglass by mentioning his relationship to him. Gibbs joined Douglass as a lecturer against slavery during 1849,

and he thus joins his narrative to that of the escaped slave who rose to prominence by gaining literacy and oratorical skills. After completing his tour with Douglass, he meditates and is inspired to “Go do some great thing” (Gibbs 37). As it is 1849, the obvious great thing to go and do is to follow the gold rush in California. Gibbs translates the freedom he sought with Douglass on the lecture tour into a quest for greatness, and that quest is answered by traversing the frontier to the riches of the west. His hybridization of the slave narrative and the frontier romance is framed by elements of the uplift narrative. Booker T. Washington, the “wizard of Tuskegee” who rose to prominence as the spokesman of the black agrarian class and as an advocate of industrial education for blacks, wrote a preface for Gibbs’s book. Just as the prominent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison framed Douglass’s *Narrative* with an authenticating preface, so Washington lends his authority and praise to Gibbs’s memoir. Washington had published his own autobiographical uplift narrative, *Up from Slavery*, in 1901, and his generous gesture toward Gibbs in 1902 must have pleased the author. In his own preface Gibbs emphasizes uplift by noting that his story “might be of benefit to those who, eager for advancement, are willing to be laborious students to attain worthy ends” (xxi). To invite further flattering comparisons, Gibbs includes numerous “portraits of men who have gained distinction in various fields” (xxi), mostly black men. Indeed, the book lacks much personal detail, but rather recounts his story in terms of the broad history of African Americans in his time. His narrative is replete with proverbs and truisms, demonstrating an extremely derivative prose style. Yet Gibbs is original in the way he derives his form from other sources: he creates a life story by blending elements of

the slave narrative and frontier romance, shifting the frame associated with the slave narrative into that of racial uplift.

Like Gibbs, Nat Love uses elements of the slave narrative to tell his story of life in the west, though his adaptation of the slave narrative derives most appropriately from the fact that he was born into slavery in 1854. In his 1907 memoir, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Better Known in the Cattle Country as "Deadwood Dick,"* Love describes his childhood as a slave and his departure in 1869 for the western frontier. Love modifies somewhat the chiasmic structure of Frederick Douglass's famous transformation, described in his 1855 *Narrative*, where Douglass states that "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (Douglass 39). Love, writing from the relatively genteel position of a retired Pullman porter, describes his transformation from slave to tenderfoot to cowboy on the western frontier: "To see me now you would not recognize the bronze hardened dare devil cow boy, the slave boy who a few years ago hunted rabbits in his shirt tail on the old plantation in Tennessee, or the tenderfoot who shrank shaking all over at the sight of painted Indians" (70). In his memoir Love recounts the experiences of some twenty years on the western range. His account makes little mention of his blackness, and the racial identities of his comrades are never explored in great detail. Instead, Love emphasizes the "universal manhood" (161) he shares with others on the range. But while blackness and whiteness do not seem to be operative distinctions, or are at least not worth mentioning much, Love makes much of his difference from the Mexicans on the southern border. Riding in what he calls Old Mexico and wanting something to drink, he describes in his own voice how he satisfies his needs: "I did not want to go to

the trouble of dismounting so urging my horse forward, I rode in the saloon, first however, scattering with a few random shots the respectable sized crowd of dirty Mexicans hanging around as I was in no humor to pay for the drinks for such a motley gathering. . . . The fat wobbling greaser who was behind the bar looked scared, but he proceeded to serve us with as much grace as he could command. My forty-five colt which I proceeded to reload, acting as a persuader” (75). Sensing the gathering of an angry crowd outside, he determines to depart, first unloading his gun into one of the bystanders. This rather horrible scene, told so unabashedly, is exactly the sort of adventure readers would expect to read in a cowboy’s memoir. Indeed, just as Gibbs’s narrative voice was derivative, one hears in Love’s words some tall tales, exaggerations, and formulaic episodes from other cowboy narratives: one suspects that much of the story is made up. (There is some question whether Love is, in fact, the legendary Deadwood Dick).

In Love’s case the adventure in the Mexican tavern solidifies his position as an American cowboy who has contempt for those across the border. His contempt has a flip side, however, for he later falls for the erotic allure of a “Spanish” girl across the border. Love shares with his American comrades a fear of and contempt for the Indian population of the American West, though he notes that when he is captured by Yellow Dog’s tribe they heal his wounds with care. This, he surmises, is because Yellow Dog’s tribe has a good portion of “colored blood” (99), and they feel he is thus worth saving. But for Love, the most operative terms of difference relate to nationality, not to color. When the frontier closes in 1890 with the advent of the railroads (which make cattle driving obsolete), Love becomes a Pullman porter and traverses

the west for much of his remaining life. His narrative of these later days reads like a patriotic travel brochure:

Think of the pioneer who in 1849 traversed these once barren stretches of prairie, walking beside his slow-moving ox team, seeking the promised land, breaking a trail for the generations that were to come after him as you are coming now in a Pullman car. Think of the dangers that beset him on every hand, then wonder at the nerve he had, then again let your chest swell with pride that you are an American, sprung from the same stock that men were composed of in those days. (146)

As Love's use of the word "stock" indicates, he feels a biological connection not to one or another race, but rather to an American national identity sharing the same biological origin and, perhaps, the rather sharply demarcated "universal manhood" developed through the frontier experience.

In *Negro Frontiersman: The Western Memoirs of Henry O. Flipper, First Negro Graduate of West Point*, the author reveals a configuration of racial and national identity politics that resembles that of Nat Love. Composed in 1916, his narrative is a personal one, addressed to a Mrs. Brown, who shared a close platonic friendship with the author for over forty years. Flipper was born into slavery in 1856. In 1873 (after emancipation) he entered West Point. Though he was not the first African American to enter the military academy, he was the first to survive the hazing there and graduate, which he did in 1877. He enjoyed considerable renown for this feat and recounted his story in a separate memoir. His military service ended under a cloud, however, for he was court-martialed for embezzlement; though declared innocent of the charge, he was discharged for conduct unbecoming an officer. Later historians have concluded that he was simply a poor quartermaster and lied to cover up his errors,

but he did not embezzle. He spent much of his later life striving to clear his name, though he enjoyed success in several civilian professions. In his western memoir Flipper reveals some consciousness of the racial differences that were so palpable at West Point: when he visited Fort Concho to get supplies, for example, “there was a constant stream of colored women, officers’ servants, soldiers’ wives, etc., to see the colored officer. I was a veritable curiosity” (8). But most of his comments on cultural differences focus, like Love’s, on national affiliation. Part of his job is to monitor the conduct of the Indians “to protect them and also the settlers scattered about the country. Whenever they went out without escort they always slipped over into Texas, stole horses and cattle and even killed people” (5). Flipper feels no dissonance about his mission and vigorously campaigns against a “band of hostile Mescalero Apaches, who were on the war path in New Mexico, southwest Texas and northern Mexico” (15). After his discharge, he works in Mexico and describes himself as a hapless gringo. He complains of the “shiftlessness” (30) of the people there. He also notes that “All over Mexico I have been treated by Americans and other foreigners on an absolute equality” (46), further prioritizing his national identity rather than his color or race. His priority is further made clear when we remember that his account is an intimate one, made to someone who shares his complexion and who would therefore be sympathetic to complaints about racial abuse. Flipper does not make explicit connections to racially marked genres like the slave narrative or the uplift narrative, yet his message about difference in the west echoes that of Love: nationality, not race, is what is at stake for the black man on the American frontier.

Robert Anderson's 1927 memoir *From Slavery to Affluence* obviously follows the formula of the uplift narrative. Anderson was born in 1843 in Kentucky, and the beginning chapters recount his experiences as a slave (recalling one element of the slave narrative). He does not escape slavery, however, but rather joins the Union army after getting his owner's permission (a rather unusual situation to be sure). He joins only six months before the end of the war, and he never sees action. After the war, however, he is sent with his company to Indian Territory and he experiences the west for the first time. After his discharge, he goes home to Kentucky, then north, then to Iowa, and finally heads farther west to Nebraska, where he homesteads. His first homestead fails, and he becomes a migrant worker for some years, but eventually he determines to try homesteading again. He notes: "The idea of owning my own land and being independent had been given me while I was still in the army, and I had never been able to get rid of that idea. It is to that determination, formed when a soldier, that I owe my independence today" (Leonard 51). He finally marries when he is seventy-nine, now rich, independent, and well traveled; his wife, some sixty years younger, recorded his story and added her own. Anderson's story is significant in that it draws not only on the slave and uplift narrative conventions, but it also shares with Micheaux's novels the discovery of an endpoint in the homestead and thus secures a place for an African American property owner in the West.

Two additional memoirs begin in the west and move eastward. The first, Taylor Gordon's *Born to Be* (1929), is the story of a native of White Sulphur Springs, Montana, who would eventually achieve prominence as a performer of Negro spirituals during the Harlem Renaissance. With a foreword by Carl Van

Vechten and illustrations by Covarrubius, Gordon's account of how he moved east was well supported by key lights of the Renaissance crowd. Gordon was a member of the only black family in his hometown. He leads an interesting childhood, working as a messenger between brothels in the town's red light district. Though he lives somewhat on the margins of propriety, his racial identity is not a grave concern for the young man on the western frontier. When he describes his efforts to abandon his childhood wardrobe for a more adult masculine attire, he sounds very much like any other cowboy on the range: "I had reached the point in life where all boys wanted to be men. I acted as much so as possible. I got high-heeled boots, a six-horse-roll on my pants, leather cuffs, Stetson hat, with a package of Bull Durham tobacco in my breast pocket and let the tag hang out, always chewing a match in company. I used to rig myself out this way for a dance" (42). Yet as a young man he became restless and longed for the excitement of eastern metropolises: "I wanted to be an Easterner. . . . I bored Mother to death about the Big Cities and how I wanted to go to them. . . . But no matter how bright I could paint my picture, Mother could always spot it out with a kettle of black" (55). Indeed, his mother tries to warn Gordon that his blackness will be of consequence in the cities to the east. When Gordon leaves White Sulphur Springs to take a job as chauffeur in Minneapolis, he discovers a world in which his color limits his ability to move socially: he is denied service in a restaurant because of his blackness. Through acquaintances with other African American men, he discovers that his professional options are limited to certain jobs. And he struggles to understand the language and mores of those who had grown up in black communities. Though Gordon's narrative is ultimately one of

success, for he emerges as a popular singer in New York, it also emphasizes a certain loss of innocence as he leaves the relative freedom of the west to find success in racially stratified cities.

Era Bell Thompson tells a similar story in her memoir, *American Daughter* (1946). Thompson would find success in Chicago as an editor for *Ebony* magazine after publication of her book, but she spent her formative years in North Dakota, where her family sought their fortune as farmers. Upon the arrival of Thompson and her siblings at the local school, she discovers that the teacher is quite perplexed: “They were the first bona fide Negro children she or the pupils had ever seen” (32). Sometimes, Thompson expresses a sense of separateness from the white European immigrants who form the majority population. She describes one Christmas dinner: “There were fifteen of us, four percent of the state’s entire Negro population. Out there in the middle of nowhere, laughing and talking and thanking God for this new world of freedom and opportunity, there was a feeling of brotherhood, of race consciousness, and of family solidarity. For the last time in my life, I was part of a whole family, and my family was a large part of a little colored world, and for a while no one else existed” (74). Her feeling of belonging is consonant with New World ideals for settlement—she and her family seek freedom, opportunity, and community. And though she reflects upon race consciousness, her narrative often finds her quite comfortably integrated in her larger community. Thompson reads of the meanings of race outside of North Dakota in the *Chicago Defender* newspaper through stories of lynching and riots in cities like that where her brother, Dick, works: “For a long time, I could see the lifeless body hanging from the tree. To me it became a symbol of the South, a place to hate and fear. And Dick’s

civilization was a riot, where black and white Americans fought each other and died. I wanted never to leave my prairies, with white clouds of peace and clean, blue heavens, for now I knew that beyond the purple hills prejudice rode hard on the heels of promise, and death was its overtaking. And I wondered where was God” (113). Later, she too will discover racial prejudice in her travels to Minneapolis. She is most profoundly an *American* daughter on the prairies, not an African American one. Like some of her cohort of black frontier memoirists, she too sees herself as part of the American group as opposed to the Indian population. She has come to North Dakota with visions of native groups in her head, and she is frequently disappointed not to see them as the mythic presence she expected. Late in her childhood, she discovers a group of them and is surprised at how they differ from her expectations: “It was inevitable I should finally find my Indians. In between the bluffs along the river was the Indian school for girls. There were no wigwams, no squaws, no warriors, only big wooden buildings with little girls in pale blue dresses, their faces stolid and sallow, not red; their bobbed hair straight and black” (128). Thompson plays with stereotypes of life in the West, at one point offering a column to the *Chicago Defender*: “I . . . assumed the pseudonym of ‘Dakota Dick,’ and became a contributor to the ‘Lights and Shadows’ column as a bad, bad cowboy from the wild and wooly West” (152). Formally, Thompson’s memoir borrows from the uplift narrative formula, though only lightly so.

Genre and the Black West

African American experiences in the south and north have given rise to several genres, such as the slave narrative, the racial uplift

narrative, and the protest novel. Though none of these exists as fully separate from other prose genres (as indeed no genre is ever “pure”), we can observe in our reading certain formulae and conventions that are repeated from work to work. By comparison, there is no genre we recognize as the black western. Why is this so? Certainly, there are few examples of black writers (or white writers, for that matter) addressing the black experience in the west. When writers have attempted to address these experiences, they use elements of the slave narrative and uplift narratives along with other narrative conventions that are less specific to black experience (the frontier romance, for example). Yet these black shadings seem to fade into more nationalistic concerns: the memoirs I have discussed may foreground their novelty as the expressions of black authors, but race is not the foremost concern to these writers. Indeed, Gordon and Thompson leave a fairly harmonious existence only to encounter racial prejudice in the north and east—that is, to discover their blackness. Race, in the binary of white vs. black, does not appear to have been a terribly important concern of life on the frontier. The operative category of difference was most frequently American nationality, distinct from that of Mexicans and Indians. We might then wonder whether the “invisibility” of black experience on the frontier derives from a lack of sources or distinct genres. It may rather be that the paradigmatic divide of white vs. black that pertains to racial discourses east of the Mississippi does not enable us to see how race operates on the frontier. Indeed, Quintard Taylor has argued that “There is a striking ambiguity about race in the West” (18) due to multiple groups of color (natives, Mexicans, Asians, and blacks). He also argues that in general there has been “remarkable social fluidity” (17) for African Americans, despite

frequent restrictions based on race. And Douglas Flamming has noted that “African Americans . . . found relatively more openness in the West than elsewhere (at least for a while), and that openness complicates the issue of black identity” (99). It is perhaps for this reason that hybridized narratives, rather than a fully developed genre, transmit the experiences of black Americans. For while black westerners found some useful formal tools in the slave narratives and the uplift narratives by African Americans, they also found much to relate to in less racially specific forms.

Reading Reed’s West

The foregoing paragraphs suggest some context for Reed’s decision to situate a postmodern novel in the west and to feature a black cowboy as hero. Reed’s fiction is not meant to be a realistic portrayal of the historical experience of black Americans, to be sure. Reed breaks down the formula of the Western, which typically features the cowboy hero on the frontier enacting Manifest Destiny, by stretching the limits of logic and temporality expected of realism. He includes elements of science fiction, anachronisms, and VooDoo to achieve his purpose. But if Reed is not writing a believable Western in the traditional sense, he nevertheless conjures up a partial vision of black characters acting in that domain. In this sense, then, we may read Loop Garoo’s journey to Yellow Back Radio as something of a migration. He and his cohort have left New Orleans to seek their fortunes, itinerantly, in the west through their traveling circus. Reed shows a black presence on the frontier, one rarely articulated in recent African American fiction. Yet Reed’s configuration of race in the region runs counter to what we have

observed from historical sources and memoirs. For Loop Garoo's primary affiliations are with not only colored characters, but Indians: Chief Showcase is his ally and sometime savior. Most of the historical accounts show blacks bonding with whites as Americans against Indians, rather than with Indians and against whites. Given Reed's frequent interest in Native American literature and politics (and his own Cherokee heritage), it is not surprising that he makes this significant revision in his portrayal of race on the frontier. The significance of this revision, however, has been lost because there has been an imaginative void when it comes to black experiences in the west. By discussing these memoirs and their historical circumstances, I hope to provide a context in which Reed's portrayal of the frontier may be read.

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The Borg, Conjure, and Voodoo: an Analysis of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*

SCHARRON A. CLAYTON

One of the problems in this county is that our approach to the solution for our problems has been truncated. The slavemaster not only sets the limits on how you are going to change him but what the target is as well. I think that we have to realize that just because a guy's in New York criticizing books doesn't make him any better than George Wallace.

—Ishmael Reed, qtd. in O'Brien 174

The Loop Garoo Kid confronts the essence of decadence oozing from the pores of Drag Gibson, in a wild western world governed by the quest for goods and profits at any cost, even to the sacrificing of children in a small dying town. Voodoo rides adjacent to its “white sister” Catholicism, while spells and prayers abound from the oddest gathering of characters. As the reader engages in pun-packed, ever-changing rhythms and quick scene changes, “meta fictional impulse plays lightly . . . and purposeful anachronism penetrates [the] reader's defenses” (Weixlmann 57). Readers of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* are immediately roped in by the black cowboy, whose name reveals an association with folklore's loup garou, the being that is graced with the ability to “metamorphose” (Weixlmann 58). Concurrently, Ishmael

Reed's unique literary delivery informs us that his work is not linear, while his verbal and visual blending of old and new, fictive and factual, serious and satiric sends our senses on a swift adventure.

The twenty-first century has thus far failed to reveal any novel approach to reviewing the work of “cutting edge” African American artists, who continue to reinvent their genres, only to find themselves marginalized in mainstream cultural criticism. Social raptivists, social literary critics, and social artists still unfortunately find themselves in a quagmire of cultural relativism situated in a context of the Western ideology of right, goodness, and correctness, perpetuated and transmitted by “them” to the rest of “us.”

When considering who the “thems” and the “us-es” are, in the context of art, I find it hard not to recall the struggle of the “us-es” in establishing their rightful place in society. To this end, Gates and McKay remind readers of the richness and strength of African American vernacular and literary forms, and they assert that if the literary work of African Americans had been taken seriously, Africans in America would have written themselves out of slavery long before the Emancipation Proclamation. However, there has been tremendous resistance among colonizers to recognizing the significance of the work of the colonized of African descent, particularly in America—“land of the free, home of the brave.” For what reasons might this situation exist? The answer becomes obvious as one reviews the history of oppression, colonization, and suppression of the language of black Africans in America.

We must remember that the colonizer of any country must accomplish several tasks to establish and maintain control of the masses: disable the language of the oppressed, the religion of the oppressed, the potential education of the oppressed, the memory of the “living/walking dead,” and any other aspect of primary cultural forms that would lend fuel to the pursuit of liberation from oppression. Only the oppressed in any country have the right to liberatory protest (Frederickson 4). The form of protest can range from picket lines to radical speech to marches to deconstructing Westernized art forms that lay claim to superiority.

So what are the dangers of contemporary art, history, and a social “reality” that are based on yesterday’s European constructs? The social institutions that maintain the white-supremacist ideology would need to be destroyed and reinvented to enact the ideal, to-be-wished-for egalitarian nature of the United States’ democratic, pluralistic society: a “for real” utopian state that no reader of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*—a title described as a surrealist joke by an ill-informed Webster Schott (O’Brien, “Ishmael Reed” 31)—has ever seen. And it is doubtful that we will experience such a society unless we are willing to engage in an essentially critical analysis of the world of the Borg.

Consumers of popular culture, specifically the *Star Trek* world, will recognize that the Borg society is an automated, single-minded, totalitarian world where individual creativity is impossible and the dominant ideology controls all behavior. Borg society functions from a central brain that has technologically programmed psychological, political, and behavioral mores in every member of the community. Thus

all thinking, doing, and being are directed so that free will, critical thought, and creative actions are nonexistent. In fact, programmed, mindless, and mechanical behavior is rewarded, and aberrant behavior results in destruction. Simplistic and compliant beings are the goal of a society dominated by the Borg.

Many critics don't expect us to write about the objective problems of society. . . . I'm from Tennessee. My ancestors always spoke up. So I'm speaking up.

—Ishmael Reed, qtd. in Moore 234

Understanding the cultural context of Reed's work is essential to understanding his writing, which has been described as defying classification from a Western perspective. From his earliest beginnings, Reed recognized the desire to produce a way out of colonially influenced and sanctioned artistic expressions. He has demonstrated that the necessity of a template for art is wrought with the most dubious intellectual assumptions. For instance, though he has been influenced by the nature of collage in written expression (O'Brien, *Interviews* 167), he also discerns clearly the false nature of superimposing philosophical tenets onto one's work, tenets that fail to fully express the felt experiences that motivate a creative person to explore the imagination. The inability to experiment outside of one's ethnicity resonates in the desires of numerous ethnic writers (e.g., Charles Johnson, Ernest Gaines). As such, Reed's departure from the academy during his junior year in 1960 actually provided the freedom needed to divorce himself from Western normative behavior and its conventional creative forms. His self-liberation

allowed him to develop the discipline of writing and pursuing his own form of storytelling devoid of such Western-influenced labels as *surrealistic*, *thematic*, or *expressionistic* (O'Brien, *Interviews* 170-71). Reed says, "I consider myself a fetish-maker. I see my books as amulets, and in ancient African cultures words were considered in this way" (qtd. in O'Brien, *Interviews* 174).

So what is a fetish-maker who employs amulets and magical meanings in his writing? A storyteller in the oral tradition, not afraid to employ the vernacular and create a new vernacular; a challenger of the ignorant and confused twentieth-century critic; a spiritual jokester who crawls around grounded and seeped in African tradition; a self-proclaimed literary genius inviting the ill-informed attack of Western thought. In the seventies Reed clearly believed that Christian traditions advanced the thinking that heathens failed to possess souls and therefore could not possess imagination or deal with ambiguity; thus the most interesting black writing, in the opinion of numerous Western critics, was black autobiography as opposed to black literature (O'Brien, *Interviews* 174).

In spite of his intent to create a text that would read like a children's book (O'Brien, *Interviews* 175), Reed made *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* a serious literary work. Why? Primarily because he, in syncretistic fashion, blends religious forms, modernism and postmodernism, science fiction and realism, and Marxist and Freudian thought through the introduction of characters who are challenged physically, emotionally, socially, and religiously. They are challenged because when the prevalent Western schools of thought are

invoked to explain a meaningful life, older ways of understanding the world assert themselves. This essay explores the issues of oppression by comparing the fictional Borg society and a sampling of the syncretistic traditional African religion as depicted in Reed's *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. Through examining the evidence of Voodoo allusions, as well as religious ritual, metaphor, and history, the reader is urged to recognize the polyrhythmic nature of Reed's writing. That is, his blending of past and present utilizes core elements of black life, critiques American society, and displays elements of European hegemony.

Borgonian Life According to Reed

As noted, the Borg is a fictional group of people who operate from one brain center, one sanctioned ideology, one solution to problematic situations, and, who knows?, one leader. The Borg describe a utopia for those in today's society who express a desire to return to the past as they knew it, as controllers. If only we would all think the same, write the same, draw the same, smell and excrete the same odiferous elements. We would thus become able to dysfunctionally lead, confuse, obfuscate, retard, and maintain a status quo—one that supports the oppression of some and the advancement of a few. Well, thank goodness, some of us potential Borg are and have been thinking out of the box. In fact, we've been able to see the inclusion of different ideas, beliefs, and rituals along with the inclusion of different bodies. Diversity threatens certain locations of power that would prefer that all writing, religious beliefs, rituals, expressions be the same. Why not identify suppression as a

goal? Why not simply insist upon all humankind divorcing themselves from themselves to achieve the state of being that is most desirable? Why not insist upon the continuance of a white-supremacy-based society for the remainder of the twenty-first century and beyond?

Reed gives us cause to pause and contemplate. He continually encourages us to attack the Borg mentality in perhaps the greatest artistic effort ever waged against the constructed national mind: a Borgonian group with its archaic thinking that attacks black cultural expressions and labels them black barbarisms, while itself clearly enacting behaviors that render it the actual barbarian. How? Through promoting the slaying of culture as dictated by figureheads and advancing thieves of ill gotten “booty”/ideas.

Through the Borg-like figures of Drag Gibson, Bo Shmo, and Pope Innocent VII, the supremacist cultural establishment and its literary forms are engaged via the mystical investigative metho-dology that Reed affords the reader of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. Vintage 1969-imagination-freedom-fighter-designee, Reed positioned himself to take down thug nationalists and revolutionaries and become a fetish-maker extraordinaire with this work. Bundled in a layered critique of capitalist-controlled literature, politics, and religion in a colonized, socially constructed reality, Reed demonstrates his mandate to black writers to “flee the cultural slave quarters and develop non-Western literary standard” (qtd. in O’Brien, *Interviews* 165). In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* Reed eschews preferred, controlled, dictated, Westernized creative writing, Christianity as the sole source of redemption, and capitalism

as the economic savior of civilized society. People, places, time, language, religious doctrines and beliefs metaphorically combine to reveal Reed's both serious and humorous critique of the world. Such a critique delivers a scathing, satirical treatise on the reformatory need of imagination liberation (O'Brien, *Interviews* 165-66).

Thus morality, American history, tyrannical mind-shaping myths, and Christianity are among the targets in much of Reed's work and certainly are targets in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. O'Brien clearly asserts that invention and forms and techniques allow Reed to achieve his goals (*Interviews* 165). For a moment, visualize an environment composed of a capitalistic self-proclaimed guru (Drag Gibson) who has founded the American west in a mythical manner and is at war with a black, fallen-angel cowboy who possesses supernatural powers that only a pope can understand; mind-censoring, prescriptive literary critics; and the U.S. Government immersed in a messy situation that must be resolved. Sprinkle in a few exiled, threatening kids, powerful women, a babbling Baptist minister, and a plethora of morally unethical behaviors that combine with the use of traditional African beliefs and *VIOLÁ!* You've got a town named for "An Expensive, often lurid novel bound in yellow cloth or paper" (O'Brien, "Ishmael Reed" 31).

Reed's work is protest in action; protest "can occur when a group is given some access to central institutions of a society and some standing in its legal and political system" in spite of the limitations of rights as defined by those who control such access and rights (Fredrickson 4). Further, protest is the property of the disenfranchised that have been

identified as being included within a system, but find themselves not included nor accepted in the descriptive rhetoric of the free. Even in the throes of seeking liberation for the country, the disenfranchised are never free to produce, pursue, and provide for self and significant other as are their nonoppressed counterparts. Such freedom is the route to actualized living as a free person in this country. Reed has selected to live a creatively free life through the genius of his creative voice that confronts Western art forms.

Surely art can reflect society, but can it be the means through which the oppressed liberate themselves from repressive, color-based caste and class systems? When the lives of people are intricately intertwined with the rhetoric of the times or the leaders of culture, can art take the leading role in delivering a message to the people/victims of oppression on how to overcome the oppressor? What of the relational nature of art and politics, art and humankind, art and the shaping of society through the maintenance of cultural forms that benefit contemporary society? Loop Garoo becomes the voice of literary freedom, positioned to rebuke European concepts of past, present, and future with the possibility of human transformation in the notion of African-centered time as expressed by the ideas of *Sasa* and *Zamani*. The Kiswahili words *Sasa* and *Zamani* help us decipher Reed's use of events as demarcations of time. According to John Mbiti, these terms are most simplistically understood as elements of a phenomenon calendar as opposed to a lunar calendar, a calendar "in which the events or phenomena which constitute time are reckoned or considered in relation with one another as they take place, as they

constitute time” (*African Religions* 19). *Sasa* refers to a “now period” and implies nearness or immediacy or now-ness; it addresses time from where and when people exist (Mbiti, *African Religions* 21). In this time period people are conscious of their existence and able to project themselves into both the short future and the past. *Zamani* subsumes a portion of *Sasa* and has quality and quantity of experiences, as does *Sasa*. However, it also provides a security to the *Sasa* period through binding the past and the present; it is a storehouse of all events and phenomena (22). In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* Reed utilizes this two-dimensional concept of time to engage the reader in Loop’s life by describing the story yet to unfold: “Folks. This here is the story of the Loop Garoo Kid” (9); he proceeds to detail Loop’s past: “A terrible cuss of a thousand shivs he was who wasted whole herds, made the fruit black and wormy . . .” (9). The opening continues with additional actual time, or *Sasa* time period, accounting of Loop. Concurrently with this African-based introduction to Loop, the reader is immediately made aware of Loop’s ancient powers in a folklorist fashion, one that captures the impact of storytelling in a radiolike format.

Mbiti reminds us that time as conceptualized by Western thought is quite foreign to the traditional ways of life among Africans: “For them, time is simply a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are inevitably or immediately to occur” (*African Religions* 16). Thus potential, actual, and no-time are concepts closely aligned with the ontology of the African; a religious base grounded in a belief in God as the supreme

source of understanding of man and all things; spirits who explain man's destiny; man, animals, and plants (Mbiti, *African Religions* 15-16). The rhythm that is maintained among these categories yields explanations of the aspect of time: "What has not taken place or has no likelihood of an immediate occurrence falls in the category of 'no-time'; potential time is noted by events certain to occur while actual time is what is present and what is past suggesting a backward movement of time. The African reality and sense of being is based upon what has taken place" (Mbiti, *African Religions* 16).

Keeping this two-dimensional time frame in mind, potential/*Sasa* and actual/*Zamani*, later in the novel Reed cleverly enlists the Pope to share the events of the *Zamani* period of time with Drag Gibson through detailing the origins of man, explaining the role of Germany and Rome in recasting history, colonizing Africa, and attempting to erase the African religious sensibility and replacing it with a European ontology (152-54). Specifically, the history that the Pope shares moves backward from the now to the period beyond which nothing can go. "He's got power stored in that mad dog's tooth hanging on that necklace he wears," the Pope warns the men who are ready to go forth and kill Loop. "You have to find some way to remove it from his neck" (152). He cautions that the Vatican library has identified the syncretism that has occurred to form American religion from the ancient and powerful Haitian Voodoo. He explains, "We've tried to hide the facts by ridiculing the history of Sub-Saharan Africa and claiming that of North Africa as our own. Notice how the term "blackamoor" was dropped from St.

Augustine's name, and how our friends the German Aryan scholars faked the History of the Egyptians by claiming them to be white" (153).

Colonialism and Oppression: The Oppressors and the Oppressed

Robin D. G. Kelley describes Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1972) as a declaration of war that could be described as a "third world manifesto" because "it was a polemic against the old order . . . the kind of propositions and proposal that generally accompany manifestos" (7). The text was revolutionary in that it captured Engels and Marx's spirit, the condition of old empires on the verge of collapse (Kelley 7). Decolonization and revolt came to the fore after the 1945 gathering of black people for the Fifth Pan-African Congress discussed the future of Africa. Nineteen fifty-five witnessed representatives of Non-Aligned Nations attempting to discuss the freedom of the third world (Kelley 8). Césaire, along with Du Bois, Fanon, Padmore, Wright, Sartre, and many others, confronted the problems of power and inequality. *Discourse on Colonialism* placed the colonial question front and center in revolutionary discourse.

Césaire forged a surrealism designed to "finally transcend the sordid dichotomies of the present: whites/blacks, Europeans/ Africans, Civilized/savages—at last rediscovering the magic power of the maboulis, drawn directly from living sources" (Kelly 16). Césaire, like Reed, attempts to move creatively from the confines of a school of thought (French literature) to a language capable of clearly communicating the African heritage. Césaire's discourse

captures the emotions of the oppressed while advancing a scathing commentary on oppressors, revealing the very nature of supremacist, colonial ideology that shapes systems of injustice and displays the savage nature of the perpetrators and the systemic illness they unleash on themselves. One merely has to scrutinize Drag Gibson and the Washington officials as their behavior becomes more bizarre and illicit, resulting in the disintegration of their physical as well as mental states. So Césaire attacks the impact of colonialism on the colonized, history, and the culture of the colonizer. Specifically, Kelley notes that, drawing upon the Hegelian school of thought, Césaire adeptly demonstrates how the ills of colonialism, however unintended, “ ‘decivilized’ the colonizer and exemplified the position: torture, violence, race-hatred and immorality” (Kelly 8). These acts represent “a dead weight on the so-called civilized [*Drag Gibson*, what a “drag” he is] pulling the master class deeper and deeper into the abyss of barbarism” (9). Kelly surmises, “The instruments of colonial power rely upon barbaric, brutal violence and intimidation, and the end is degradation of Europe itself” (9).

Drawing on Fanon, who theorized that Europe was a creation of the third world, Césaire reports on the superiority complex of the colonizers who fail to recognize themselves in any manner “thingified” through the process of “thingification.” Thus both material and spiritual well-being is disrupted by colonialism. Reed informs readers that there is no one way to see the world, and in fact, ontologically speaking, the world is our personal connection to the source of our being. The genesis of the universe has many explanations and none supercedes another. So in Reedian

fashion, if you have a need for superiority, you have lost the battle for survival and everlasting life. There is no one answer or solution that is best: there are many, but racial positioning fails to reveal our best options as a people.

Reflections on colonial behaviors in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* reveal the process of “thingification” in action. The colonizer claims ownership of previously owned and occupied land (in this case the entire western portion of the United States) under the blessings of the colonizer’s government (the colonizer could be the government itself), inflicts servitude on anyone not in his group, reduces any true owners to servants, and replaces their culture with his own, while inducing them to believe that they are being given the privilege of joining the colonizer’s culture (note Chief Showcase and Chinaboy). The colonized must be reduced to appear as if they have no culture or civilization that could ever equal that of the colonizer. To allow the Other to have any trappings of humanity merely renders it impossible for the colonizer to justify his delusions of grandeur and superior nature and horrendous inhuman acts.

Notice the manner in which Drag reduced his Chinese servant to an object: “Chinaboy! Chinaboy! Bring me that there package. The Chinese servant rushed into the scene with his arms weighed down with a bundle” (Reed 23). Later, Drag’s guest, Doc, moves beyond ordering this grown man: “How many times have I told you I take two lumps in my java Chinaboy? he said, biffing the man on the head with his cane” (56), as if he were punishing an animal. When the servant retaliates, Drag merely admonishes the Doc not to get angry, but to “let all the little yellow infidels sass you” (56),

for he allows them to sass him to make them think they are human, when in fact he is merely humoring the poor souls. In fact, he will manipulate his oppressed people to win whatever gain he can. The strongest indication that Drag has created people “things or objects” is captured in this phrase: “Hear that injun, that’s my injun” (57). People are owned only if they can be removed from the human race and become things, a feat embraced by supremacist and capitalist beliefs: “Your world Drag Gibson, definitely your world. The white man is smarter than God” (57).

According to Césaire,

A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization.

A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization.

A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization. (31)

Similarly, Reed makes it perfectly clear that there is no human value to be found in the act of colonization, an act that has at its center Christianity, a Christian pedantry, which gives birth to the dishonest equations: “*Christianity = civilization, paganism = savagery*” (Césaire 33). Simply follow the discourse of Drag as he describes his servant (Chinaboy) and his Indian (Chief Showcase) or women: “Doc there’s nothing wrong with ladykilling. Why I don’t need em . . .” (58). The reader should note the possessive and self-centered nature of the capitalist Drag on our society; civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, a “gang-green” sets in, the center of infection begins to spread. What a rhythm: surge and sickness

in the same instance. As the oppressed surge, the capitalist drags them back to his center of control even though he becomes sicker in the process. What a Drag.

Obviously, colonization brutalizes the colonized and colonizer in the same moment by decivilizing them and revealing “buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism” (Césaire 35). When society accepts atrocities inflicted upon those who have been colonized, marginalized, or “thingified,”

civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place . . . and . . . at the end of all these treaties that have been violated, all these lies that have been propagated, all these punitive expeditions that have been tolerated, all these prisoners who have been tied up and “interrogated,” all these patriots who have been tortured, at the end of all the racial pride . . . a poison has been instilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward *savagery*. (Césaire 35-36)

Witness the primary purveyor of the European-formed caste and economic system. What happens to Drag and why? “The old fat and ignorant cattlerancher lay in his bed, his chest rapidly rising and falling” (Reed 137).

African Traditional Religion and Being

Metaphysics, the white mythology which resembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own logos, that is, the mythos of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call reason.

—Jacques Derrida (qtd. in Serequeberhan xxvii)

Henry Alpern has suggested that the study of metaphysics, of that which fails to define absolute truth or appear to our senses, provides a foundation for understanding many phases of human behavior. Citing the work of David Hume, Alpern writes in *March of Philosophy* that the essential nature of metaphysics, in religion, morality, economics, art, and sociology, as well as abstract sciences and behaviors, considered from a practical angle, is a guide and foundation for man's development, whether consciously or unconsciously (Onyewuenyi 30). African ontology is central to philosophical understanding of the African reality. Western thought and research have more often than not accepted magic, totemism, animisms, and ancestor worship as the foundation of practical endeavors of Africans (Onyewuenyi 39-40). However, these ideas remain vague as a consequence of little effort to discover their roots and are reduced to mere ramblings if the ontological perspective of Africans is not included.

As Reed introduces the reader to the text, he marks the presence of African traditional religion and life through references to magic, "A cowboy so bad he made a working posse of spells phone in sick," and continuing, "who wasted whole herds, made the fruit black and wormy" (Reed 9). Just what kind of magician is this man who has been expelled from "heaven"? A mere trickster born with a caul (able to see visions) and ghost lobes on his ears? Just how long has this man (?) been around? Of course, these clues could be ignored, but Reed's embedded message of control and liberation would go undetected. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to ignore "Zozo Labrique, charter member of the

American Hoo-Doo Church” (10). As Zozo talks of her life, we learn that she was so vigorously harassed in New Orleans by Marie Laveaus’s followers that she was robbed of significant possessions: “even Henry my snake [in Hoodoo, serpent God Damballah] and mummies appeared in the curtains” (13). Of course, Hoodoo was derived from African vaudun by way of Haitian voodoo, a powerful belief system.

The African conception of being is dynamic as opposed to the static nature of being expressed in Western schools of thought: “being is dynamic. Existence-in-relation sums up the African conception of life and reality” (Onyewuenyi 40). The African does not separate being from force. Rather, “the Africans speak, act, and live, as if for them, beings were forces. . . . Force, for them, is the nature of being, force is being, being is force” (Onyewuenyi 40). For Africans, beings are not differentiated by their essences or nature; rather, forces differ in their essences or nature. Thus Onyewuenyi reminds us that there is a divine force, celestial or terrestrial forces, human, vegetable, and even mineral forces. So that “which is” or the “thing as it is” in Western thought is being, while being is “an existent force” or “that which is force” for the African. As a consequence, beginning with the Great Force/God followed by spirits, founding fathers, and the dead, a hierarchy of forces is formed; living men are ranked according in terms of seniority, then animals, vegetables, and minerals, categorized by relative importance within their category.

We also learn that, in spite of his powers, Loop has a huge and powerful person above him: “I should have known that if she wasn’t loyal to him with as big a reputation as he

had . . .”(11). A hierarchy of forces is in the making here, a dynamic hierarchy existing in *Sasa* but closely blended in the *Zamani* period of time. Further, we find that upon being cast away from his father’s house, Loop finds comfort in his reshaped identity with relationships forged among the members of the circus. His community gave him an identity as a noted lariat-twirling cowboy. Also we note that an allegiance and devotion existed among this crew: “Count me in too, Loop said, we’ve braved alkali, coyotes, wolves, rattlesnakes, catamounts, hunters” (14), suggesting that the circus crew had survived through fellowship.

Loop Garoo performs voodoo rituals, invokes the ancestors and his personal Loa, cast spells, and follows closely the instructions and teachings of his personal guide, Zozo. He attends perfectly to the order and hierarchy required when invoking the forces and powers above him. The procedures he follows reinforce the role of maintaining a balance between the forces. An ancestral altar is maintained in the cave that serves as his retreat; he traces patterns in the dirt, sacrifices an animal, feeds his personal Loa, prays, and chants accompanied by a slow pulsating rattle:

Loop began to shake a rattle slowly.

I the Father which wert in heaven conjure and command thee

O Legba master of the crossroads to connect this cowboy’s circuit to Guinea and summon forth. . . . (63)

As the prayer opens, Loop affirms both the present and past nature of time (“wert in heaven” and “connect” this period of time). The image of the snakes (Veves), which hang behind his altar, and the drawings on the floor oblige the Loas to

ascend to earth (Rigaud 80), while he implores Legba (Master of the Crossroad) to bring forth the powers of the ancestors. Loop continues his invocation by summoning the ancestors in a systematic fashion and includes asking for the guidance from the likes of Jack Johnson and Madame Marie Laveau (Reed 63). Following the call to the ancestors and the casting of the spell on Drag, Reed includes this inventive last stanza that links people, ideas, and dreams in a rhythmic fashion:

O Black Hawk American Indian houngan of Hoo-Doo please do open up some of these prissy orthodox minds so that they will no longer call Black People's American experience "corrupt" "perverse" and "decadent. Please show them that Booker T and the MG's, Etta James, Johnny Ace and Bojangle tapdancing is just as beautiful as anything that happened anywhere else in the world. Teach them that anywhere people go they have experience and that all experience is art. (64)

Recognizing the original inhabitants of North America as a source of moral strength and guardian of the magic powers of the sun (Houn'gan), Loop appeals to the original American to educate the supremacist and capitalistically controlled Western mind to the uniqueness and talent of black artists. In fact, Loop admonishes that all experience is valuable and worthy and calls attention to the immoral acts of white colonized society; the nature of being is dynamic and ever changing within the African frame of thinking as opposed to a static never-changing, fear-embraced reality. Through Loop, Reed brings the value of American black existence to the table of reality that needs expansion: teach them that all experience is valuable and worthy; broaden the perspective.

Reflecting upon the world depicted in *Yellow Back Radio-Down*, the reader is immediately taken from any traditional notion of time and place and thrust headlong into a surreal world occupied by challenged circus characters anchored in a barren environment, seeking a town somewhere between “Western world,” syncretic religious practices, youth rebellion, capitalism at its most decadent level, multiculturalism, racism, sexism, and a seemingly chaotic world. The appearance of German soldiers, a Native American businessman, a Catherine the Great devotee, a corrupt pope doing God’s work, adds to the readers’ forced entry into content substance opposed to space and time. For instance, Reed places all of the corrupt forces of imperialism in the overlapping time period within which this fiction takes place. Past and present events are blended to give the reader clues into the entangled nature of capitalism, imperialism, and racism. Drag Gibson unveils his intrigue and admiration for Catherine the Great, the imperialist who expanded the boundaries of Russia, maintained a class system, increased the numbers of serfs after promising to free them once she became ruler, and entertained a series of lovers. In this one person, Drag could feed his sick intentions to control the west through expanding his land holdings and objectifying people; through her, he is able to justify his ill appetite for power. The entanglement of the Germans and Rome is equally fascinating in regard to the religious confusion of the Western world and the establishment of Rome as the center of Christianity: Drag’s protestant preacher (who held closely to the Hoo-Doo practiced in *Yellow Back*) is a sorry personality, and the Germans are referred to as practicing a lowly

religion, while the pope was placed on a pedestal as the most powerful (by the capitalist Drag).

These disparate entities all unite following Loop's meticulous spell casting: "This will indeed be the super-hero hype to end them all . . ." (64). Upon conclusion of the ritual, ". . . Loop drank some . . . blood" (gives extra power) of the sacrificed animal, put "goofer dust from Drag's projected plot into a little bottle," and "removed some shiny black boots which hung near a colony of bats. On each boot was painted the emblem of a yellow chicken. He tried on a black fedora. Hanging above the altar was a whip made of bull's hide and python skin. It was tough and heavy and when it flew through the air it whistled" (65). After burning candles, mixing potions, making dolls, and chanting poems, Loop brings together all the forces in destruction, culminating at the dwelling place of Catherine the Great, Drag's ranch.

Time is of little or no interest to many traditional African believers because time is simply a composition of beliefs that may, in fact, be two-dimensional: a long past and a present with virtually no future. This notion differs from the linear concept of time embraced by Western thought that includes an indefinite past, present, and infinite future. Clearly, embracing the Western ideology necessarily causes a conflict with those who function on actual time (what has and is taking place). Time is a factor in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*; a long past as demonstrated in the characters of Native American descent, Catherine the Great's decadent influence on the major capitalist of the region (Drag), the intergenerational conflict and outcome, and the nature of voodoo and Catholicism. At one point, the past and the

present join and depict the ideological fallacies that plague society as the “big guys” continue business as usual.

God is the ultimate explanation of events, behaviors, and people in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. We must look at God’s role, particularly with Loop and the pope, one a fallen man and the other a corrupt man. Both men are referred to as his sons, have unusual powers, and have had a long past life together: “Loop, impatient with the antics, was about to turn the little man into stone . . .” (160); “The Pope stroked the attendant’s back and it became straight” (161). As the two come into contact in the town of Yellow Back Radio, the reader becomes aware of the past relationship: “What do you want Innocent? Loop asked as soon as they were alone. Isn’t it enough that you turned me in?” (161); “Look Loop you know me, I wouldn’t have done anything if it hadn’t been for the woman. She wants you to come back Loop” (161); “The raunchy Pope, Loop grinned, you were always my favorite”; “Cut it out Loop. Why don’t you give up this nonsense and come back home?” (162). In addition to this relationship, spirits appear, a preacher is transformed, animals with unusual habits and abilities exist, and men decompose while living. Reed has taken on the basic ontology of numerous traditional African beliefs along with historical and social satire and specific Hoo-Doo practices. As the story unfolds, however, differences can be overcome through compromise when there is a mutual enemy, even if it is over time. For example, Loop and the pope ultimately ride off together, the Chinese servant realizes his freedom, Chief Showcase is able to resume life, the children begin to direct their own lives/write their own fiction, and the drag on society is taken

down. However, the reader is reminded that the future is so very uncertain that actions must take place in the present and are the result of understanding the past.

In spite of the rapid sequencing of events, Reed fully embraces the ideas that time is important in pursuit of specific purposes, events are the core of understanding, and the sequence of such events lend more understanding. In fact, there is a composition of events that tends to shed meaning to a particular phenomenon. Because of the events or phenomena that occur, time is created. Given this, the reader is prepared to realize that a linear or sequential chain of events, alone, fails to shape or construct events. Similarly, Reed's work is not about time; his work pinpoints the atrocities and arrogance of institutional systems of inequality. Time has no end. So Reed creates a space with the sequence of conflicting events embedded in religion, capitalism, racism, sexism, and bottom-line overall greed and self-serving behaviors. Clearly, Reed illustrates Audrey Lorde's comments on difference in the context of capitalism; copy it if it's profitable, destroy it if it's a challenge or ignore. In fact, capitalism renders the populace unable to communicate with one another.

Voodoo, Hoodoo, and Traditional African Religion

Voodoo is a red gris-gris bag the size of a small sack of marbles tossed under the front steps leading into your house by that eccentric busybody you crossed words with last week. Voodoo is a curse that one placed on its victim robs away free will, numbs the intellect or even kills. . . . Voodoo is—well, it may be whatever

you have been indoctrinated to believe it to be. We do not necessarily understand the term Voodoo or the religion it denotes.

—Bodin 1

Vodou (voodoo) has been described as originating in Africa and transplanted to the Americas and Haiti, where the beliefs and practices combined with enforced Christian beliefs (Appiah and Gates; Righaud). The re-created vodou in the Americas represented more than a hundred different ethnic groups who, under oppressive religious rule and enslavement, designed a purposeful and systematic survival strategy to combat the effort to induce an amnesia of language, lineage, and ties to “Ginen,” the mythical African homeland. Perceived as a threatening source of linkage among Africans, European values and Roman Catholicism were imposed throughout areas of the Americas as a means to stop the practice of vodou. Appiah and Gates remind us that, “Vodou is a comprehensive system of knowledge that has nothing to do with simplistic and erroneous images of sticking pins into dolls, putting a hex on an adversary, or turning innocents into zombies. It is an organized form of communal support that provides meaning to the human experience in relation to the natural and supernatural forces of the universe” (1950).

In fact, Western thought aside, vodou shares with other religions the elements of creating harmony, keeping balance, cultivating virtues and positive values, and reverencing the ancestors (the cement that binds family and community). The religious practice recognizes a single and spiritual entity or God, known as Olorun among the Yoruba, Bondye or Gran Met in Haiti, or Mauvi-Lisa among the Fon. The least

understood of the religious beliefs based upon the tenets of vodou is the dimension of worship described as possession (spiritual) and found in the indigenous religions of Cuba, Brazil, portions of Latin America, and North America (Olmos; Lewis). During possession, the Lua are said to ride a person like a cavalier rides a horse; the opening and receiving of the spirit in a tangible manner allowing the receiver to receive answers to pressing questions. Loop Garoo, in his transformed state of possession, rides a noble horse that propels his power to confront the evils of censorship, exploitation, and oppression while evoking the religious powers of his linkage to traditional beliefs and practices.

Quotations from William S. Hart, Henry Allen, and an American cowboy song open the text of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, and at once Hollywood's depictions of the west are juxtaposed with a cattle drive and cowboys. Unlike the clichéd view of the clandestine nature of voodoo, Allen's Hoo-Doo image is surprisingly ecumenical:

America . . . is just like a turkey. It's got white meat and it's got dark meat. They is different, but they is both important to the turkey. I figure the turkey has more white meat than dark meat, but that don't make any difference. Both have nerves running through 'em. I guess Hoo-Doo is a sort of nerve that runs mostly in the dark meat, but sometimes gets into the white meat, too.

. . . Anywhere they go my people know the signs. (5)

The importance of people of color and whites to America is clearly depicted in this passage. Allen suggests that whether the "dark meat" is in America or in any other land, Hoo-Doo has a universal nature. Originating in Africa, the religion has taken on a variety of names in different countries (e.g.,

Santeria in Cuba), but Hoo-Dooism is, as Reed notes, also the form practiced by Native Americans and the Cantonese (Henry 208). Imported with the religious beliefs of the enslaved West Africans, Voodoo has been perceived by Whites as a threatening practice to be controlled, although it has been described as an extraordinarily complex religion, with complicated rituals and symbols established over thousands of years, longer than any other of today's established faiths (Brouillette; Chireau; Rigaud; Schaffer).

Obviously, Reed is aware of this. Zozo describes the power of magic practiced by Hoo-Doo followers in New Orleans: “[Marie Laveau] got her cronies in City Hall to close down my operation. . . . [S]he layed a trick on me so strong that it almost wasted old Zozo . . .” (13). Dressed as Marie Laveau was reported to dress and dying from a gunshot wound, Zozo passes on the knowledge of conjure magic (the manner in which a diviner in Yoruba religious practices learns) to Loop: “. . . I'm done for. . . . It's a mad dog's tooth it'll bring you connaissance and don't forget the gris gris, the mojo, the wangols old Zozo taught you and when you need more power play poker with the dead” (26). Moreover, the strength of Hoo-Doo doesn't escape Drag. When he orders one of his men, “Go over and get Preacher Boyd to walk around with his hazel wand so's the women'll be satisfied. . . . They love rhythm and ritual,” the cowhand responds, “I don't know if Preacher Rev. Boyd will work out. . . . He started to have d.t.'s and said something about a gila monster who was God” (44-45). Drag ultimately sends for Pope Innocent, believing only he has the presence to confront Loop.

Chireau reminds us that the arrival of European occultism and magical beliefs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries paralleled the transfer of the spiritual traditions of West Africans. However, the massive importation of the enslaved overshadowed the presence of Old World occult practitioners in spite of the explicit genealogy of such practices due to the print culture of Europe. Reed reawakens our knowledge of the diverse conglomerate of persons who embraced magical and religious beliefs, whether from a traditional African religious base or from a European perspective, moving between both worlds freely (Chireau 225). The ease with which Drag wishes to employ magic of a Christian minister, as we saw earlier, is Reed's clever insertion of the notion that voodoo is no more pagan than the religious practices of other societies. In fact, when Rev. Boyd imagines a gila monster as God, as Drag's cowhand reported, he invokes the image of a huge lizard, one of the creeping animals prominent in many African societies, which has misreported God's message of people's immortality: he reports instead that men will die (Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* 51). Additionally, the name of the Rabid Black Cougar Saloon invokes the cougar, kin to the hyena, which, among people like the Fajulu, Nuer and Madi, is blamed for cutting off the cowskin which "once joined earth to heaven, thus causing a separation between the two worlds" (Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* 50-51).

The reader of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, so named due to the influence of radio scripts and the intent to break down the novel form, is immediately introduced to the concepts of conjure and voodoo through Reed's use of

metaphors and textual images and visuals (note the use of two circles, one white, one black, preceding each new section). His selection of western African traditions is extremely significant for a variety of reasons. For instance, the power of voodoo as a liberation theology is noted in the role it played in the formation of the Haitian government following the revolution in 1804. A revolution of ideas, literary form, and the relationship of Christianity to government and economics allows for new conversations, for “*When State Magic fails unofficial magicians become stronger*” (Reed 45). Additionally, ways of understanding the world and being in the world differ among people; however, that difference is not to be feared because close scrutiny of one’s own beliefs and practices reveals points of connection and understanding in spite of the totalizing nature of supremacist thought.

Occultism, a universal phenomenon, is feared most by those who employ deficit thinking when they approach the Other. Reed reveals this clearly as he allows Drag to grasp for understanding of his degeneration, and this grasping witnesses him initially seeking ancient magical assistance instead of conventional religious succor. This is not uncommon, for historically, many whites in New Orleans were drawn to voodoo for various reasons and they comprised as much as one-third of the voodoo membership in 1846 (Brouillette 2).

Described as being born with a veil/caul over his eyes, Loop has potential priestly powers, including dream interpretation, visions, reading of signs—the skills of diviners in traditional African religions. According to Weixlmann, the paired circles first appearing following the description of

Loop can be traced to voodoo and Umbanda and “cleverly permit black to become the principal element in the design” (58). Presence (black circle) comes first and absence (empty circle) follows, denoting the prominence of black as opposed to the dominant white in European American literature. The circles also signify the duality of existence in Rada and Petro voodoo rites (58). Additionally, the circles can be viewed as the circle that is one of the geometric elements of the poteau-mitan, the center post of the peristyle (partly enclosed and roofed courtyard adjacent to the holy of holies of the oum’phor, the voodoo temple) or a metaphor for the duality of existence (Rigaud 15-16).

Zozo Labrique, the queen of conjure or mam’bo (manman/mama), who was given the history of Marie Laveau’s rival (legendary Widow Paris who dominated the New Orleans voodoo world), mixed potions, gris gris or grigri, had a pet snake, and taught Loop all she knew. Reed alludes to Loop’s potential of being a houn’gan in that the only person to whom he can be compared is the pope; only he could communicate with Loop. According to Milo Rigaud, the voodoo priest houn’gan or papa loa can be compared only to the pope of Roman Catholicism because “everything they do proceeds directly from the powers of the invisible” (Rigaud 33). The utility of sacred charms (often created objects) and the diversity of skills embodied by religious specialists were imported into the New World along with the Africans.

Drawing upon beliefs associated with nature, Reed reveals his knowledge of African belief systems. For instance, Reed’s inclusion of rock images—“Above the

man's head on the hoodoo rock" (14)—is a particularly interesting inclusion, for among some peoples (Lugbara and Langi), rocks are the manifestation of God, and others (Akamba) hold that the first men were brought by God out of a rock. Still, some peoples (Banyarwanda, Bari, Bavenda, Madi, Sonjo) are reported to have sacred stones and rocks that are used for religious rites and observances (Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 54). Reed describes a dead man hanging upside down from a tree outside the town of Yellow Back Radio (mythical trees are featured in numerous stories), apparently killed while attempting to spread the truth of the circus of Zozo and Loop. The mythical tree of life is believed to be the source from which all life emanates among the Herero, while others narrate the forbidden tree whose fruit God forbade man to eat (Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* 51). This murder is a telling sign of intolerance to welcome the circus troupe to Yellow Back Radio, an unusual group of migratory travelers reminiscent of maroons within the United States (Aptheker 150).

An even more graphic image is Loop's retreat to a cave in the mountains after discussing charms and curses with Chief Showcase, who is familiar with voodoo and revenge directed at white intruders and murderers of his people. In many African societies certain caves and holes are given religious meaning; for some, God brought the first men out of a hole or cave. The cross (hex) that Loop plans for Drag takes place in the cave where he practices an ancient religion. Loop reveals himself as a sorcerer, sacrificing animals to Great Legba (God), writing incantations, and apparently talking to himself (spirit possession). Loop, dressed in white (traditional

adornment), works his magic and completes the curse of Drag, the metaphor of the evils of capitalism, to end 2,000 years of bad news; such desire virtually depicts the humanitarian reaction to the evils perpetuated by colonizers. Drag reveals that only a more powerful entity or practitioner/diviner will be able to interrupt Loop's spell. Only a more powerful conjurer can remove a hex. Both good and bad magic exist in the traditional African religions, and spells like Loop's are said to date back as far as the origins of Christianity (Chireau 225-26).

In summoning the pope from Rome, after surmising that the local preacher had little possibility of being helpful to his worsening condition, Drag directs the reader to the meaning of Roman Catholicism to Christianity (Smart 22-27). There are numerous meanings attached to Rome: the eternal city, hub of the old Empire, center of pilgrimage, the center of the spiritual hub of the universe. With the centrality of Rome comes the centrality of the pope, successor of Peter, "martyred in Rome perhaps on the very spot where St. Peter's now stands—and of Paul, the great apostle who ended his days in the imperial capital" (Smart 23). So Drag summons the leader from a location central to Christian myth. Smart asserts that Rome "is the earthly vehicle for the transmission of the divine teachings and the life-giving rituals of Christianity" (23). Additionally, the relationship of the Catholic Church to voodoo and indigenous African religions, slavery, capitalism, and racism introduces an intriguing aspect to the encounter of the pope and Loop. Reed manages to bring these disparate issues to the foreground and depict the connection of the two via myth and ritual, the duplicity of

religious belief and comfortable companionship with exploitive economic practices, and the Western perception of the sins of Ham, which led to the punishment of his descendants.

The final scenes in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* depict an incredible exchange between a fallen son and one who continues to serve his father (Loop and the pope). Loop's attempt to rid the world of evil is perceived as evil itself, while perceived good (the pope) reveals a less than admirable character on many of the same issues. The exchange between the two inadvertently suggests the possibility of Loop being the scapegoat for the ills and sins of both characters due to his multiple differences and unwillingness to assimilate his ideas and practices into a preset restrictive mold: "Difference is made to be a quality in and of itself, the essential property. . . . This becomes a serious matter when, and with due respect, certain retrograde practices become glorified" (Memmi, *Racism* 39).

A revealing exchange between Loop and the pope:

I ask you one more time Loop, end this foolishness
and come on home. He built a special district for you, red
lights, the works. . . .

No dice, baby. (166)

As Loop initially refuses to accompany the pope, the pope exposes his lowly status and discomfort with the establishment (Father); he is made to grovel and take varied abuses. The pain of "selling out" is revealed along with the pope's anger with Drag and what he represents: "You idiot slob. . . . If you think you can do away with him then you Americans are stupider meatheads than the rest of the world

gives you credit” (167). The pope leaves, Loop is in jail awaiting execution, the crowd waiting for the lynching gets restless and leaves, the Chinaman has blueprints for Drag’s tomb, and Chief Showcase has adorned his native blankets while Drag attempts to maintain control. As Drag makes a spectacle of himself, Loop gets away and joins the pope as they leave chaos together.

As Loop and the pope ascend seemingly toward the home of their “heavenly father,” Reed introduces the reader to yet another contemporary biblical-historical-mythological challenge: the implied “three-decker” universe of Western religious thought and two-dimensional cosmological belief of African religious traditions. The New Testament describes a Jesus ascending to heaven: Is this a literal description of someone going up into the sky or moving beyond heaven? Loop’s punishment was to locate on earth, suggesting a belief in heaven and the earth as boundaries. Can people actually live in or travel to a mythical world?

A scrutiny of the writing may reveal double messages throughout the text. No gods, no heavens, no ascent. The reader is given the huge metaphor, Father’s house, for goodness and right in the European sense, but goodness plagued with less than righteous behavior. Thus Reed leaves the reader with two possibilities: the symbols of religion and gods (Loop and the pope) return to art; or Loop goes back to Rome. Reed’s trickster’s muse has posited Pope Innocent VIII as an interpreter of art, with the two collaborators leaving the people to return to art.

Through demonstrating the closeness of indigenous African religion, Americanized voodoo, and Christianity in

the form of Roman Catholicism, Reed has challenged readers to consider the automatic relativistic supreme positioning of Western culture and art. A complete critique of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* would have to bring in the creation of man, the relationship of God and man, concepts of time and space, African philosophy, and spiritual brings. Close reading of this novel reveals the genius of Ishmael Reed and the vastness of his liberated imagination. It's best to read *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* as if you're listening to his voice, then reflect upon the messages, but never use old forms of literary classification for this unclassifiable work.

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Regeneration through Neo-Hoodooism:
Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down and
Ishmael Reed's *Mythogenesis*

AIMABLE TWAGILIMANA

Ishmael Reed's second novel, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), opens up a fictional universe best described, in a different context, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's terms as "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and the fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. Ghosts may enter here, without affrighting us" (46). Indeed the geography of Reed's cosmology—the American western frontier—assembles all types of historical, cultural, religious, literary, political, and economic ideas, usually in their allegorical or stereotypical forms. Reed can then freely revise and correct them away from the usual human manipulation and bias that created them in the first place. The text of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* thus becomes a cultural frontier where myths are reorganized to reconnect Americans in a profound and absorbing way to the drama and ambiguity of American life.

If Ishmael Reed's oeuvre is an exercise in the redefinition and redemption of national culture, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is, with the introduction of Neo-Hoodooism as a literary method, the beginning of his artistic and spiritual quest to redeem the traditionally marginalized groups and their cultures in the

United States. Through Neo-Hoodooism, Reed reimagines and reinvents the American cultural landscape by questioning, breaking down, ridiculing, and altogether abrogating the monopoly of the most enduring founding myths of American culture. These include the Western novel¹ and the frontier myth in general, the “puritan origins of the American self,” as Bercovitch puts it, and the supremacy of Christianity. Reed submits these myths of American origin, culture, and consciousness and their heroes to his fictional universe in a geographical space of conflicts and cross-purposes to destabilize and put them in their right place in a multicultural America. Reed populates *Yellow Back Radio* with a group that makes it look like a microcosm of America: a powerful, corrupt cattleman who embodies the violence and greed of the western frontier; an Indian who has survived the onslaught of the frontier wars; a group of neosocialist realists (headed by Bo Shmo); a group of kids who have refused social indoctrination and who end up dead, except for two who embark on the quest for the Seven Cities of Cibola (symbol of freedom and imagination); the U.S. government seeking full control of the chaotic space; the Pope; the Amazons, who cannot be happy with the invasion of civilization; and a circus, whose only survivor, the Loop Garoo Kid, is the central character of the novel. The text becomes an ideological resistance to the myth of violence that suppressed the presence of other cultures and ideas. Even though the text certainly focuses on the cultural black heritage, the New-Hoodooist aesthetic that informs it brings together all the traditions that have shaped the American multicultural—the European, the African American, the Native American, the Asian, the Hispanic and Latino, and more. Each of the groups on the frontier tries to conquer, tame, possess, and

control it; but only the Loop Garoo Kid, Chief Showcase (the Indian), and the two kids ultimately triumph over the rest because of the overarching power of their imagination.

The setting of the *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is “a city which seemed a section of Hell chipped off and shipped upstairs, Yellow Back Radio, where even the sun was afraid to show its bottom” (10). The physical attributes of such a city of the Wild West are familiar: “The wooden buildings stood in the shadows. The Jail House, the Hat and Boot store the Hardware store the Hotel and Big Lizzy’s Rabid Black Cougar Saloon” (15). The text familiarizes us with all the elements associated with the trappings of violence in the Western novel and film. The usual violence is abundant. Early in the novel, Drag Gibson’s cowhands massacre the children who have chased the adults out Yellow Back Radio and the circus members, including “a Juggler a dancing Bear a fast talking Barker and Zozo Labrique, charter member of the American Hoo-Doo Church” (10); the Loop Garoo Kid is the only member of the band who will survive the attack, thus setting up the expectation of the customary revenge scheme. Later in the novel, Drag Gibson will enlist the indomitable John Wesley Hardin to kill Loop Garoo. Drag Gibson, John Wesley, the U.S. Marshals, the neo-social realists, and the U.S. government use the old, stereotypical means of violence that tamed the West. In his seminal study of the frontier myth, Richard Slotkin describes violence as the means that defined American self-consciousness: “The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation, but the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the means of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American

experience” (5). It is this physical and ideological violence that defines the dominant American mythology that Reed seeks to repudiate through his Neo-Hoodooist writing. Slotkin expands on how the American mythology functioned:

True myths are generated on a sub-literary level by the historical experience of a people and thus constitute part of that inner reality which the work of the artist draws on, illustrates, and explains. In American mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation of Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who (to paraphrase Faulkner’s *Absalom! Absalom!*) tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness—the rogues, adventurers, and land-boomers; the Indian fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness; the settlers who came after, suffering hardship and Indian warfare for the sake of a sacred mission or a simple desire for land; and the Indians themselves, both as they were and as they appeared to settlers, for whom they were the special demonic personification of the American wilderness. Their concerns, their hopes, their terrors, their violence, and their justification of themselves, as expressed in literature, are the foundation stones of the mythology that informs our history. (4)

The American mythogenesis that Slotkin characterizes is, to be sure, monotheistic, intolerant, violent, and destructive of other cultures. This total violence has ultimately led to the Eurocentric view of “our civilization.” “This is a big misunderstanding,” Reed argues, “that the fundamentalists have in this country, cultural fundamentalists: that American is an extension of European civilization” (qtd. in Martin 184). Reed counters this totalizing culture of violence with a multiculturalist perspective he calls voodoo aesthetic or Neo-Hoodooism, which “can absorb” unlike the “the settler thing [which] is monotheistic and nonabsorptive”

(qtd. in Martin 184) This new, “true Afro-American aesthetic” (qtd. in Martin 180) allows Reed’s text to achieve a symbiosis of the ideological tensions that helped to create African American literature in the first place—a literature that started as a reaction to another form of horrendous human violence to the African race: slavery. Violence and ways of undoing its physical and metaphysical consequences constitute probably the most important theme in the African American literary canon.²

Even though the protagonist of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is a cowboy—the Loop Garoo Kid—the text subverts the western element of macho violence by replacing the trail of cattle and cowboys and the unbridled, bloody fights with a company of acrobats, clowns, animals, and kids. The children of *Yellow Back Radio* have chased the grownups out of town because of their tyranny. They want a world of imagination and do not like going to school, a space of indoctrination, to learn preconceived notions. They want complete freedom: “We chased them out of town. We were tired of them ordering us around. They worked us day and night in the mines, made us herd animals harvest the crops and for three hours a day we went to school to hear teachers praise the old. Made us learn facts by rote. Lies really bent upon making us behave. We decided to create our own fiction” (16). Like the kids, Loop Garoo is a cowboy of imagination and superior ways conferred to him by Neo-Hoodooism, which Reed uses to construct a new American mythogenesis to replace the one described by Slotkin. Reed defines it as a multicultural, international aesthetic that rescues Afro-Americanness from the confines of “the black aesthetic thing [which] is a northern, urban, academic movement” (qtd. in Martin 180). Neo-Hoodooism encompasses not just the United States but also the Americas and

the world. Once this is established, the “black aesthetic,” which has largely informed the study of African American literature since the 1960s, becomes obsolete in the eyes of Ishmael Reed. “Blacks are probably more American than any other group here. I know that a lot of blacks have Native American ancestry—I know I do, and it’s something to be paid more attention to” (qtd. in Martin 181). The origin of (African) Americans is multicultural by definition—African, European, Indian, Asian—and thus any aesthetic that attempts to capture this reality must be multicultural as well. The Loop Garoo Kid embodies this *classical Afro-American form*.³

As the hero of this classical art form, Loop Garoo is a character of epic proportions. As an epic hero he carries the origin, history, culture, identity, and ideology of Neo-Hoodooism. Heroes of epic poems such as the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Aeneid* embody the national origins, histories, and ideologies of their respective nations. Originating in prehistoric and mythic times, these works were codified in writing after generations of oral tradition. With the passage of time and the unavoidable ideological alterations to serve the politics of successive periods, these epic poems were, at the time they were written down, ideological and historical palimpsests, each generation that inherited them having added its own history, culture, ideology, and linguistic dialect. In the same manner *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* is an assembly, an anthology, as it were, of multiple texts, cultures, histories, and dialects. The Loop Garoo Kid personifies these historical and geographical layers of a new aesthetic. He is a (black) cowboy on the western frontier and a houngan (voodoo priest, thus a representative of a black international religion). This power is bequeathed to him

early in the novel by the dying Zozo Labrique, “charter member of the American Hoo-Doo [the American version of Haitian Voodoo] Church” (10): “Flee boy, save yourself, I’m done for, the woman murmured pressing something into his hand. It’s a mad dog’s tooth it’ll bring you *connaissance* and don’t forget the *gris gris*, the *mojo*, the *wangols* old Zozo taught you and when you need more power play poker with the dead” (26). Loop does exactly this later in the novel (63-64). He invokes, in a parody of the Christian rituals, the different loas to empower him and conjure his enemies.

Loop is also the living sign of a literary narrative method that emanates from Neo-Hoodooist power (at work in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and in other writings by Reed), a metaphor for multiculturalism, thus an enabling agent for the history, politics, texts, and cultures of the world previously marginalized by the oppressive Eurocentric myths. Neo-Hoodooism absorbs the African American, Native American, Puerto Rican, Chinese American, Japanese American, Jewish, third world, and Euro-American cultures. As Reed would put it, the Loop Garoo Kid is, like the Neo-Hoodooist aesthetic that he embodies, syncretic and polytheistic.

The Loop Garoo Kid has metamorphosed through time. The name itself is a playful anglicization of the French *loup garou* or werewolf, which gives it a mythic dimension. He is a man of all historical times, from oral biblical times (he is the rebellious angel Lucifer) to ancient Egypt to Jeffersonian times (late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) to modern Las Vegas and well beyond. From these “unwritten,” oral dimensions, Reed presents Loop Garoo in the written form. The anglicized *Loop* “also suggests the completion of an electrical circuit, which is

fitting in the context of the radio/video imagery the novel exploits, and which reappears in *Mumbo Jumbo* in the reference to the ‘electric’ loa with Yellow Back” (Fox 45). Furthermore, Loop reflects the multiplicity of intertexts and meanings, as Nazareth suggests: “to knock for a loop is to throw into confusion. . . . Once you get to the multiple meanings, you, the reader, begin to loop” (qtd. in Fox 45). *Loop* can also be traced back to Haitian Voodoo. Using Zora Neale Hurston’s *Tell My Horse*, for which Reed wrote a foreword in 1990, Mvuyekure suggests that “the word ‘Bukka’ may also derive from a Haitian Voodoo evil loas or spirits, of the family of the Congo, called ‘Bacca Loup-Gerow. . . . [The Bacca-Loup-Gerow are] ‘recognized as evil, but one must feed them to have better luck than others’” (77-78). Loop Garoo would then be an emanation of the Voodoo deity, which incorporates elements of Christianity and thus makes it a syncretic religion. In this respect, Martin writes that “although given Christian principles in skeletal form, the slaves appropriated, or syncretized, many aspects of Christianity, including saintly icons as well as Catholic practices which were used in rituals against the slaves’ oppressors. Thus, figures such as St Paul and the Virgin Mary appear as Voodoo fetishes. In Voodoo murals, Catholic symbols and Voodoo symbols appear side by side as positive or negative talismans” (*Ishmael Reed* 71). Thus instead of suppressing Christianity, Neo-Hoodooism, the African American version of Haitian Voodoo, co-opts and absorbs some of its elements.

The Loop Garoo Kid appears, fittingly (as the third element of his name tells us), as a cowboy, much in the line of well known frontier legends like Billy the Kid. Unlike Billy, however, Loop is not an outlaw because he killed, but because he rebelled mostly

against powerful institutions (he is the rebellious angel fallen from heavenly grace) and played tricks on his enemies. Man of many incarnations, he is a member of a black circus in the early nineteenth century on the western frontier and, to play fully his role as Lucifer or the one who brings light, he becomes a houngan or Voodoo priest, after performing necromancy (63-64). He is physically given protean dimensions. He was “Born with a caul over his face and ghost lobes on his ears” (9), and he also had a “cleft foot” (9). Fox reads the caul and ghost lobes as “the signs of a ‘two-head’ or hoodoo man (indeed, Loop is a founder of the American Hoodoo Church). ‘Two-head’ actually means having two minds, which is beautifully apt, given the fact that Loop is in the forefront of the conflict between those who view reality in more than one sense and those who insist that there is only one sense” (46). As such, Loop Garoo becomes the Esu figure that Henry Louis Gates, Jr., describes in his seminal book on African American literary theory (see Gates 3-43). Pertinently, Esu is an international trickster figure. Gates notes that “this curious figure is called Esu-Elegbara in Nigeria and Legba among the Fon in Benin. His new World figurations include Exu in Brazil, Echu-Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba (pronounced La-Bas) in the pantheon of the loa of Vaudou of Haiti, and Papa La Bas in the loa of Hoodoo in the United States” (5). Like Esu, the collective name for all these characters, the Loop Garoo Kid is presented as a postmodern artist whose craftsmanship embodies “individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rupture” (Gates 6). The postmodern epistemology with its networks of texts, cultures, and ideologies

creates a very liberating artistic technique that pits Loop Garoo against those guided by a narrow, unidimensional view of art, such as Bo Shmo, a fake artist, leader of the neo-social realist group that believes that “All art must be for the end of liberating the masses” and that “A landscape is only good when it shows the oppressor hanging from a tree” (36). He accuses Loop of being “too abstract” (35). He adds, “You are given to fantasy and are off in matters of details. Far out esoteric bullshit is where you’re at. . . . [Y]our work is a blur and a doodle” (35-36). For Loop Garoo, Bo Shmo’s philosophy of art is a form of violence because it is intolerant of other possibilities. “We blast those who don’t agree with us,” Bo Shmo warns (36). Loop counters Bo Shmo’s reductive view of art by saying, “What’s your beef with me Bo Shmo, what if I write circuses? No one says a novel has to be one thing. It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o’clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons” (36).

The neo-social realist Bo Shmo and his group act within the violent mythology described early in the chapter. Bo Shmo responds to Loop Garoo’s arguments with violence. He has his men “discipline” Loop Garoo by putting him “through changes. Being neo-social realist and not very original they gave him a version of Arab Death. They smeared jelly on his face and buried him up to the neck in desert. Soon his face would be crawling with vermin which was certainly no picnic of a way to go” (37). Bo Shmo’s form of disagreement is reminiscent of the history of violent subjugation of Native Americans, African Americans, and other minorities. His monocultural views are intolerant of other ways of thinking and doing things. This is exactly the kind of

practice that Loup Garoo's Neo-Hoodooism seeks to "break down" and change.

Interestingly enough, Loop Garoo Kid is saved from probable death by an idea from his own universe, "something right out of Science Fiction . . . from the heavens" (37). The man who pilots the science fiction is none other than Chief Showcase (Cochise), who belongs to the same cultural space as Loop and the children. Showcase represents the result of the mythogenesis described by Slotkin. He survived the violent massacres of Indians by Europeans who wanted to impose their religion and culture and who were expanding their economic empire. Reed characterizes them as intolerant monotheists who destroyed the cultures of South America, Africa, and Europe in the name of civilization. As Michel Fabre notes, Showcase "develops into a fundamental embodiment of a positive cultural essence. . . . Children dress as Indians, cowboys exhibit their scalps, tourists weep over a bygone past, the head of an Indian appears on the nickel, and his artifacts are embalmed in the Smithsonian Institute or the Metropolitan Museum" (19). In the manner of Loop, Showcase himself proves to be a trickster figure, but unlike Loop, he is an *ieron*, a dissembler. Even though he is at the service of the like of Drag Gibson, who massacred his people, he outwits them through the use of irony. For example, he talks about the honesty of whites in their dealings with the Indians. He exploits his knowledge of the frontier to get what he wants. To entice Drag's wife, Mustache Sal, into having sex with him, he combines irony, humility, and his knowledge of Sal's plan to poison Drag: "What does white folks business have to do with me, Showcase said lifting her long black skirts and placing his hand upon her creamy thighs. The white man has the brain of

Aristotle, the body of Michelangelo's David and the shining spirit of the Prime-mover, how would it look for a lowly savage and wretch such as me meddling in his noble affairs?" (109). He also serves multiple loyalties without being caught: employed by Drag, he spies for the children of Yellow Back Radio and for the U.S. marshals and is on very good terms with Drag's nemesis, Loop Garoo. His invention of the flying machine (later appropriated by the white man) gives him Promethean dimensions: his craft enhances human civilization and helps to save those, like his race, who might be the victim of fanatics like Bo Shmo and Drag Gibson. Bo Shmo and his gang flee because they cannot understand and are afraid of this type of cosmology. It is too big for their narrow view of the world. Loop and Showcase understand each other well—they are conversant with each other's cultures.

Bo Shmo's thinking is also a hardly veiled criticism of the black aesthetic critics of the 1960s and uncompromising commitment to *littérature engagée* (or literature committed to social protest and the liberation of the masses). Like Bo Shmo, they condemn "individualism" or any art that does not conform to a prescribed line of writing. They are naive sellouts like the two Alcibiades Wilson and Jeff Williams who are too cheaply fooled into betraying their "brother" Loop. Chief Showcase's remark probably gives the best assessment of people incapable of imagination and fantasy, prime qualities in Reed's writing. Showcase calls them "mediocre bandits"(37) who do not belong to the place (the desert), for

Deserts are for visions not for materialists. Read any American narrative about crossing—apparitions, ravens walking about as tall as men, the whole golden phantasmagoria. . . .

Stupid shmucks and books around here think [the helicopter is] some kind of flying ghost cow. . . . Bo Shmo and the cattlemen are in the same routine. Afraid of anything that can get off the ground, materialists that they are—anything capable of groovy up up and away strikes terror in their hearts. (38)

The whole episode clearly shows the destructive nature of Bo Shmo's thinking and the liberating possibilities of the Loop Garoo Kid's Neo-Hoodooist vision. At the same time, Neo-Hoodoo brings together and absorbs other cultures: the Native American (represented by Chief Showcase, a survivor of the mythology of violence that exterminated his people) and the African American (at this point twice the victim of violence, first from Drag Gibson against the circus and second by Bo Shmo and his men). It is not surprising that children also belong to Loop's universe, as they are opposed to oppression and believe in the endless possibilities of imagination. In fact, the two kids who survive the massacre by Drag Gibson's cowhands start on a quest for the Seven Cities of Cibola, a place where machines do all the work, and people use their time for imagination and reverie.

Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down blurs the traditional distinction between (science) fiction and reality. In fact the two realms merge. What is perceived as "reality" is fake (for example Bo Shmo's art) and what is perceived as fiction is reality: the Seven Cities of Cibola becomes real at the end of the novel. "Hey come on," the two children shout, "we found it, the Seven Cities of Cibola! It's as far as you can see from where you're standing now" (170). This announcement liberates the people from the desolate hellish town of Yellow Back Radio. Again, fiction saves!

The common folk turned away from the scaffold and sure enough there in the distance could be seen rising a really garish smaltzy super technological anarcho-paradise. The people began

to trot in slow motion towards the blue kidney shaped swimming pools, the White Castle restaurants, the drive-in bonanza markets, the computerized buses and free airplanes, the free anything one desired. (170)

Once again Drag Gibson instructs his men to use violence to prevent the people's progress, as he is calculating to exploit the new city for his own benefit. But it is too late now for Drag Gibson. The government soldiers led by Theda arrive to arrest Drag's men. The forces of violence and destruction occupy center stage as the government forces kill Drag's cowhands; Drag is devoured by carnivorous swine; and Amazons join the fray to kill off the soldiers and then return to their pristine forests. Interestingly enough, those who used violence are exterminated by the same violence. Forces of violence, oppression, and intolerance are defeated whereas the possibilities of fiction, imagination, fantasy, creativity, and freedom triumph. The Loop Garoo Kid, himself unscathed, if deprived of a martyrdom reminiscent of Christ's, moves to a another frontier. On his green horse he leaps onto the Pope's ship returning to Rome. Having apparently saved people from the desolation of Yellow Back Radio and helped to return them to the Edenic Seven Cities of Cibola, Loop goes to back to his cosmic origins.

In the image of Loop Garoo the cowboy, Neo-Hoodooism as a literary technique blurs the traditional generic taxonomies. What is presented to us as a novel appears in the form of text blocks that look like poetry stanzas. Each block is like a response to the previous one in a call-response fashion, a fundamental ritual of black discourse, inclusive by nature because it makes the audience part of the discourse process. The voice of the speaker alternates with the response of the audience, or both voices

interweave to form a continuous flow of words, each anticipating and simultaneously responding to the other. This mode of signification in which signifiers are continuously heard, and signifieds are continuously bracketed, produces endless possibilities of meaning in art and discourse.

Quite often the conventions of prose are flouted. For example, punctuation is frequently omitted. This poetic license leads to the blurring of the distinction between direct and indirect or reported speech in the written text. Thus the written text coexists with the oral text, the text without visible punctuation marks. “I based the book on old radio scripts in which the listener constructed the sets with his imagination,” Reeds said of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, “that’s why radio, also because it’s an oral book, a talking book . . . there’s more dialogue than scenery or descriptions” (*Shrovetide* 133-34). In fact, the unindented text blocks give the visual impression of a play. Art, Reed seems to suggest, should not be constrained by conventions.

Along with the author’s freedom to use poetic license in his craft goes the choice to assemble all types of genres. Thus at the very beginning, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* promises to be a Western novel, but the reader gets a parody of the Western novel, fantasy, myth, magic realism, modernism, postmodernism, roman à thèse, soap opera, poetry, and more—a *mélange* that readily repudiates Bo Shmo’s neo-social realism and any other narrative method that would limit the possibilities of artistic imagination. The *mélange* also produces the kind of discursive “gumbo” that Loop feeds to the masses on the radio. He uses both the Voodoo invocations and the modern radio technology. He fuses the past, the present, and the future together. In fact, the traditional notions of unity of time and space are blurred, thus flouting one of the

fundamental conventions of novelistic writing. But this does not matter for Ishmael Reed (or any other postmodern writer for that matter) because each novel writes itself and “can be anything it wants to be” (36). Indeed, Reed’s text becomes a palimpsest of all kinds of anachronistic superimposition: prehistory coexists with modern and futuristic technology, the French Revolution (invoked here by the presence of the guillotine), World War II, generals from the American revolutionary war, Germans, Indians, dragons, nineteenth-century cowboys, the Pope, Amazons, characters from heaven acting out their human passion, and the Loop Garoo Kid, a composite of many other ideas, as discussed before. In addition, the text assembles different dialects of English to reflect different racial and cultural idiosyncrasies.

It is obvious that *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* suppresses all frontiers—historical, geographical, religious, fictional—to create a new, fictional universe described as “Neo-Hoodooism.” The power of this *mélange* drives us back to the precreation time to make it possible for the text to correct history, challenge the superiority, and abrogate the destructiveness of the cultural fundamentalism that allowed European civilization and its avatars (capitalism, Christianity, and imperialism) to annihilate other cultures. Only in this fictional cosmology can the Pope, whose institution proved intolerant to other religions in the last twenty centuries, acknowledge the relevance of religions that preceded Christianity. The encounter between Loop and the Pope toward the end of the novel allows the rebellious angel to criticize the violent God of the Old Testament. The Pope says, “Of course the ol man wanted us to come blasting like before, you know how ill tempered he is—belligerent chariot fleets, thunder storms, earthquakes” (163). Loop criticizes the Catholic Church’s

Inquisition for its brutal intolerance. The interview with the Pope also gives Loop the opportunity to offer an alternative to Christianity in the form of “Horse opera. . . . [T]he Hoo-Doo cult of North America. A much richer art form than preaching to fishermen and riding into a town on the back of an ass” (163). He lauds the “low” culture religion figures, such as Buddha, said to be “beautiful, artistic and profound” as opposed to Jesus Christ’s “cheap performance at the gravesight of Lot—sickening” and plainly silly or “just a grandstand exhibition” (163). In this episode Loop destroys the whole Christian creed by showing how it is part of the history of violence in the world that used lies and intolerance to get rid of those who were not on the same side. Loop proclaims himself “the cosmic jester” (165), harmless, loved of children and simply “the scapegoat of all history” (165), whereas the Church represented by the Pope has made itself guilty of intolerance and violence. “You and your crowd are the devils. The way you massacred the Gnostics, not to mention the Bogomils, Albigenes, and Waldenses” (165). From this perspective Loop is the real savior, even though he escapes, unscathed, from martyrdom, saved by the Amazons. He even has the Pope acknowledge the inescapable reality of Neo-Hoodooism:

Well anyway, the Pope continued, when African slaves were sent to Haiti, Santo Domingo and other Latin American countries, we Catholics attempted to change their pantheon, but the natives merely placed our art alongside theirs. Our insipid and uninspired saints were no match for theirs: Damballah, Legba and other deities which are their Loa. This religion is so elastic that some of the women priests name Loa after their boyfriends. When Vodun arrived in America, the authorities became so paranoid they banned it for a dozen or so years, even to the extent of discontinuing the importation of slaves from Haiti and Santa Domingo.

Loop Garoo seems to be practicing a syncretistic American version. (153-54)

Neil Schmitz says of the Pope's intervention in the story that "it underlines the contradictions in *Yellow Back Radio*" and that "in effect, the Pope's arrival restores the hyphenated consciousness Reed seeks to annul in his fiction. It is the Pope who fills us in, who makes the connections that enable us to see how and why Loop works as a character. . . . And every explanation, every concealed footnote, betrays the artifice of the myth" (Schmitz 135). At this point, however, the text has sufficiently made it clear that Loop Garoo is a necromancer, he works spells, and his religion and his art, Neo-Hoodooism, is universal. If this is the case indeed, it should not be surprising that the Pope shows up to acknowledge the wrong done by his Church and his own agreement with Loop. The Pope in this story is like the Bokononists in San Lorenzo in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat Cradle*. Everybody is a Bokononist there, but nobody dares show it in public; in fact, even the rulers are Bokononists, but they do not hesitate to inflict the worst kind of punishment to anybody who openly practices Bokononism. Consistent with his absorptive art, Reed lets the Pope echo the voice of the forces that the text undermines. His speech helps Neo-Hoodooism avoid the kind of violence that Christianity used to impose since he himself basically has to agree and speak on equal terms with the Loop Garoo Kid.

The Pope also acknowledges the monotonous routines of people in heaven "singing the same old hymns" (166), as opposed to the curious nature of necromancy in Voodoo invocations. He refuses the token of Drag's appreciation for "'enlightening' us" (167). Thus does he repudiate one of the metanarratives that

sustained the colonization and enslavement of South America, Africa, and Asia. The term *enlightening* invokes the eighteenth-century and the Enlightenment ideas that sustained the European collective undertaking to conquer and colonize in the name of civilization.⁴ In the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and a good part of the twentieth century, European powers imposed Christianity, their languages and cultures on three-quarters of the world.⁵ Violence on a large scale was used to decimate whole cultures and impose European ideas. At the end of this episode, the Pope announces the inevitable triumph of Loop and his polytheistic religion and art (Neo-Hoodooism) in America. “If you think you can do away with him,” he tells Drag Gibson, “then you Americans are stupider meatheads than the rest of the world gives you credit” (167).

While *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967) features a much victimized protagonist, Bukka Doopeyduck, who recalls many of the protagonists in the African American literary tradition, such as Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and the protagonist in *Invisible Man*, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* redeems the black male in African American literature by escaping the cycle of stereotypes in which both white and, surprisingly, black writers have entrenched him. From the annihilation wrought upon the black race within the institution of slavery to the subservience, innocence, and supersentimentality of Uncle Tom in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to the violence and sexism of men in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to the violence and worthlessness of black male characters in the work of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Terry McMillan, to name a few, the black male figure is the scapegoat of everything that goes wrong in America. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for example, shows Janie Crawford as the victim

of black male violence. To end it, she leaves one husband, figuratively kills the second, and literally kills the third (in self-defense). In *Native Son* Bigger Thomas defines himself through violence by killing a white girl and a black girl. “But what I killed for, I am!” he concludes before his execution (Wright 501). In *Invisible Man* the protagonist is simply a victim of a society that refuses to recognize his identity, and his only consolation is to subscribe to the culturally suppressive idea of the “melting pot” inscribed in “E Pluribus Unum”—“Our fate is to become one, and yet many” (Ellison 577), he proclaims, thus convincing himself that no matter what, he is an American after all, ironic pronouncement after several hundreds of pages in which society refuses to acknowledge his relevance.

In the works of Walker, Morrison, and McMillan, most black males are violent, abusive, incestuous, and good for nothing. Any reader of African American literature has to wonder about this consistent negativity in the characterization of the black male. There are at least two possible ways of looking at this phenomenon. First, it is part of the literary tradition that started as a reaction to slavery, an institution that victimized the whole black race and led to the emasculation of the black male. There was no escaping this victimization from the hands of whites during slavery and the long period of struggle for human and civic rights that knew its most recent peak in the 1960s when Ishmael Reed was coming of age as an artist. While many still see race matters as a subject of great concern, one has to ask why many contemporary African American writers have shifted their gear toward the black male, instead of concentrating their effort of the chronic problem of racism in America. This leads us to the second possible way of understanding the black male as a

character. Reed understands this as a conspiracy mounted by the black aesthetic writers, the black feminist writers, and the white feminist writers and critics. He is particularly harsh toward the black feminists:

there's just a few of these black feminist writers who are playing this "hate black male" angle. Bill Cook, a friend of mine at Dartmouth, said that this "rape romance" was actually introduced by female writers in the nineteenth century. There are several books that have been written about this—there was this fascination by Anglo women for Afro-American males when there were none around. . . . So I think people like Alice Walker and those kinds of feminist writers who are supported by people like Gloria Steinem—you see how this patronage continues." (qtd. in Martin 178)

In the same interview Reed comes back to the continuous characterization of black men as violent: "And I gave the example of Gail Jones's *Eva's Man*—not to mention *Corregidora*—in which black men are portrayed as brutes, apes, but also Toni Morrison's *Sula*, in which the character Jude is burned alive by his mother. . . . And Alice Walker's fascination with incest—which can always get you over, if you have the hint of incest" (179). This concerted characterization of the black man as violent has made him a sort of pariah marred in stereotypes—the black man steals, rapes, and is altogether violent. Reed forcefully rejects the politics of feeding the establishment's expectation of the "ideal black male—spineless, cultureless, impotent nerd" (qtd. in Dick 243). To the "white, black, and other critics [who] still want blacks to write about how much they 'suffer'" (qtd. in Dick 245), Reed offers a redemptive black cowboy with supernatural forces that conjure the logic of victimhood that casts the African American male as a scapegoat for American social ills.

Reed's use of his "classical Afro-American form," Neo-Hoodooism and its priest, the Loop Garoo Kid, redeems the black man by presenting a positive and optimistic protagonist. As an artist, Loop is "similar to the necromancer (a word whose etymology is revealing in itself!). He is a conjurer who works Juju upon his oppressors; a witch doctor who frees his fellow victims from the psychic attack launched by demons of the outer and inner world" (Reed, *19 Necromancers* xvii). Here we have a character that is not already doomed at the beginning, but who instead transcends time and space, is of divine origin, can conjure those who usually conspire against his race and the other historically victimized groups, and can confound the powerful cattleman of the American west (Drag Gibson) and the Pope. This power allows Loop to re-create the western frontier from a black and international perspective into a "horse opera" or Neo-Hoodoo Western. The hero of this new form is possessed by the Hoodoo deity that empowers him to perform tricks on his enemies—the neo-social realists, the monoculturalists, and the monotheists.

Reed's experimental fiction earned him quite a number of good and bad names—"revolutionary" and "unique" on the one hand, and "savage," "gangster," "surly," and more, on the other hand—because, starting with *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and the Loop Garoo Kid, he shatters what he calls the "tyranny of experience," that "arrogant assertion that your view of the world is correct" (*Shrovetide* 222). Yet the new artistic gospel he preaches is liberating, if it questions the very foundation of many reared in such monocultural and monotheist systems as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. To parody Jean-Paul Sartre in a different context, Neo-Hoodooism is a humanism. It is multicultural, and as such it is committed to the proposition that "every man is an

artist and every artist is a priest. You can bring your own creative ideas to Neo-Hoodoo"("Neo-Hoodoo Manifesto" 21). If this new aesthetic "challenges, provokes, and even infuriates" (qtd. in Dick 246), it is because it touches very sensitive nerves of the American consciousness and the myths and metaphors that have sustained it. Grounded in black diasporan history, Neo-Hoodooism deconstructs the essentialism of the other systems that Reed then displaces and rearranges in a multicultural America. In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and its protagonist the Loop Garoo Kid, Reed proposes a mythology that is inclusive, not destructive, of otherness. The Loop Garoo Kid, the black cowboy, saves the inhabitants of Yellow Back Radio from violence and tyranny and leads them to a city of endless possibilities of imagination. So is it pertinent to end the novel on three scenes of redemption. First, led by the two children (symbols of innocence), the inhabitants of Yellow Back Radio march toward the Seven Cities of Cibola, a modern-day Garden of Eden! Second, the Amazons ride back to their forests (another unsoiled garden!), no longer threatened by "civilization." Finally, his redemptive work completed, the Loop Garoo Kid makes a metaphorical leap back into time . . . to save the heavens as well?

NOTES

¹ In *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* Reed explains the origin of the title of his second novel:

The title *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* was based upon a poem by Lorenzo Thomas called *Modern Plumbing Illustrated*, which was published in a magazine called *East Side Review* (1966) which lasted one issue. I based the book on old radio

scripts in which the listener constructed the sets from his imagination—that’s why radio, also because it’s an oral book, a talking book; people say they read it aloud, that is, it speaks through them, which makes it a loa. Also radio because there’s more dialogue than scenery and descriptions. “Yellow Back” because that’s what they used to call old West books about cowboy heroes. . . . “Broke-Down” is a takeoff on Lorenzo Thomas’ *Illustrated*. When people say “Break it down” they mean to strip something down to its basic components. (133-34)

² See Twagilimana. I argue that “it may be difficult for us as contemporary readers of the African American literary tradition to believe or even imagine the full extent of the brutality towards the African American humanity, intelligence, and self-esteem. African American writing emerged and developed, among other things, to counter the multifarious ideologies that sustained this violent environment and to turn absence into presence” (*ix*). Thus is it not surprising that many texts in the African American canons show protagonists annihilated by racist and/or sexist violence and fighting back to reclaim their humanity. This idea of the African American as an eternal victim is an idea that Ishmael Reed repudiates in his fiction, through Neo-Hoodooism as a narrative method.

³ Reed uses this term in opposition to “black aesthetics,” which was once called avant-garde. See the Martin interview.

⁴ See Césaire. He adamantly rejects the pretense of “the white man’s burden” or “civilizing mission” that Europeans use to justify the subjugation and negation of other cultures and religions: “I look around me and wherever there are colonizers and colonized face to face, I see force, brutality, cruelty, sadism, conflict . . .” (177).

⁵ See Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin: “More than three-

quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism” (1). Later, they argue that “the political and cultural monocentrism of the colonial enterprise was a natural result of the philosophical traditions of the European world and the systems of representations which this privileged” (11-12). The postcolonial situation parallels that of the minority groups that Reed’s text brings back to the American center from the margin.

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