



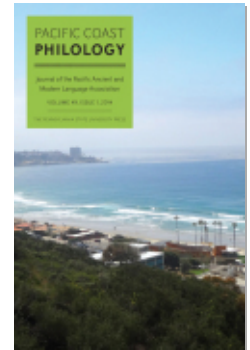
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Set and Osiris in Ishmael Reed's Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic



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Abstract: “Set and Osiris in Ishmael Reed’s Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic” examines Reed’s early poems and novels through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari’s “schizoanalysis” to show that Neo-HooDoo (Reed’s name for his aesthetic) works like *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) demonstrate a rejection of Richard Wright’s realism as the only “authentic” form for African-American writers. Pushing the boundaries of narrative discourse through his use of Egyptian myth and avant-garde poetics in these works, Reed uses the god Osiris as a playful, yet political, creative engine that opposes centralized control and domination by largely white American powers that follow Osiris’s brother and rival, Set.

In *The Golden Bough*, Sir James Frazer speaks to the Egyptian god Osiris’s generosity and restless nature: “Eager to communicate these beneficent discoveries to all mankind, he committed the whole government of Egypt to his wife Isis, and traveled over the world, diffusing blessings of civilization and agriculture wherever he went” (Frazer 421). The Egyptian myths of the brothers Set and Osiris deeply influenced Ishmael Reed’s rhizomatic Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic, and Osiris’s generosity infuriates Set, who refuses to share power with mortals. Set covets greater control and sets up laws and rules to restrict the people wherever possible. Reed’s Neo-HooDoo works celebrate the festive and liberating Osirian spirit in his poems and novels, and he continually uses Set to characterize oppressive, white American and European cultures as

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Osiris's opposite. Through these allusions and direct references to Egyptian mythology and deities in such poems from *Conjure* (1972) as "The Ghost in Birmingham," "The Jackal-Headed Cowboy," "I am a cowboy in the boat of Ra," "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto," "The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic," "catechism of d neoamerican hoodoo church," and "why I often allude to osiris" as well as the extended explorations of the Osirian themes in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974), Reed's Osiris is situated as a beneficent god who abjures his power, teaching humans to live for their own fulfillment and improvement, their own freedom and invention. Reed's version of Set is used to connect the modern military-industrial complex and the use of nuclear weapons in a denial of Osiris's life-giving force, and these competing forces form a rhizomatic aesthetic that drives Reed's critiques of American literature and history through this matrix of Egyptian myth and contemporary culture. Reed's Neo-HooDoo is a vibrant, challenging poetics built on the tensions of life and death, play and restriction, and the individual and state power.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari use the terms *rhizome* and *rhizomatic* to describe the condition of modern Western civilization, though one of their chief models for the rhizome comes from thirteenth-century Asia.¹ As theoretical tools, I find great use in Deleuze and Guattari's metaphors of "deterritorialization" and "reterritorialization," "smooth space" and "striated space," and the "line of flight" to analyze the strategies postmodern writers such as Reed use to question issues of history and historicity. In particular, their term *rhizome* is especially useful to apply to Reed's aesthetic project; they state "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order" (7). Where Deleuze and Guattari see the plays of force and power, they also observe struggles for autonomy and liberation; they use the clinical term *schizophrenia* as a means of resisting hegemonic modes of behavior, particularly in Western industrialized nations. Describing their use of the term, Eugene W. Holland says: "Deleuze and Guattari use schizophrenia to refer to a specific mode of psychic and social functioning that is characteristically both produced and repressed by the capitalist economy" (x). Schizophrenia is therefore not seen as a mental illness but rather a process, one that demonstrates the pernicious effects of state power, and Neo-HooDoo is therefore a schizophrenic aesthetic used to break free of restrictive labels on his work and of restrictive models for his work.

Reed's aesthetic marks a departure from both modernism and the realism that, since at least Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), was seen as the principle Afro-American narrative mode. Neo-HooDoo therefore signals a rupture

in the American novel form along the lines of such pioneering postmodernist texts as *Naked Lunch* (1959), *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and other “circuses” as Reed’s HooDoo cowboy and novelist The Loop Garoo Kid labels his, and by extension Reed’s, combative works:

What’s your beef with me . . . 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.

All art must be for the end of liberating the masses. A landscape is only good when it shows the oppressor hanging from a tree. (36)

This lynching of the oppressor sets out Reed’s artistic agenda as perhaps best expressed in his poem “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto”: “Neo-HooDoo believes that every man is an artist and every/artist a priest. You can bring your own creative ideas to/Neo-HooDoo. Charlie ‘Yardbird (Thoth)’ Parker is an exam-/ple of the Neo-HooDoo artist as an innovator and improviser” (*Conjure*). Osiris is the dancer, the jazzman, the lover—artists like Parker and James Brown are seen as “houngans” or holy artists in Neo-HooDoo. Likewise, in “why i often allude to Osiris,” Reed writes:

i’ll take osiris any time.
prefiguring JB he
funky chickened into
ethiopia & everybody had
a good time. osiris in
vented the popcorn, the
slow drag & the lindy hop.
he’d rather dance than rule. (*Conjure* 43)

Throughout Neo-HooDoo, it is dance that opens the land to successful agriculture and that so enrages Set’s followers, whether in ancient Egypt, 1920s New Orleans, or contemporary America.

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed names the twentieth-century manifestation of Osirian resistance “Jes Grew,” which erupts in New Orleans in the 1920s, and, as Sharon A. Jessee notes, “is an attitude, rather than a substance; a form, rather than content; a characteristic which plays a part in Ishmael Reed’s vision of individual and collective identities” (128). Through connections of Jes Grew to such African-American musical projects as blues, jazz, and rock, Reed strengthens the congruence of his aesthetic project and the diverse artistic, social, and political changes in America since the end of the Civil War. Like jazz, rock, and the blues, Osiris’s songs and dances take on local

mutations; Osiris and his modern manifestation as Jes Grew are therefore highly successful as well as beneficial social viruses of free expression; the people hear the songs, dance the steps, and make them their own—they don't need a leader or priest or rules keeper. Instead, everyone can make their art—do their thing be it a dance, a song, a poem, a novel—and be free.

In Egyptian mythology, Osiris is a “vegetation god and god of the dead, whose presence was manifested in the spouting grain and the rising waters of the Nile, invented agriculture, writing, and the arts, and transformed humanity from barbarism to civilization” (Scheub 203). Being the “inventor” of agriculture is just one of Osiris's identifiers; Reed makes use of the myths of Osiris and Isis introducing the cultivation of wheat, barley, grapes, and other fruits and grains to foster self-rule by humanity, so that Reed's figure of Osiris is a god of life who combats what Reed figures as Set's desire for continued human cannibalism. In the Egyptian myths, these gods are born from the earth god, Geb, and the sky goddess and wife of Ra, Nut. Osiris, Isis, Set, and Nephthys are hardly models for domestic tranquility; they fight and plot and try to destroy each other while they also marry among themselves. Further, because of Nut's infidelity with Geb, Ra decreed that she would be unable to give birth for the duration of the solar year. However, Thoth, another of Nut's lovers, won from the Moon goddess the five lunar days that were outside of Ra's curse; these Thoth gave to Nut so she could deliver her children, and Osiris was born on the first of these days, Horus on the second, Set on the third, Isis on the fourth, and Nephthys on the fifth. Therefore, as in the later Greek myths concerning Rhea's aiding Zeus to escape his father's stomach, Thoth's cunning led to the birth of the next generation of deities. Osiris and Set married their sisters, Isis and Horus respectively, but it was Osiris and Isis who ruled Egypt because when Osiris was born, “a voice rang out proclaiming that the Lord of All had come into the world” (Frazer 421).

Conversely, Reed says that Set invented bullfighting and taxes and is a misogynist; he treats his wife Nephthys “like a dog, and called her a bitch a tomato a heifer a cow and all other words related to the farming he hated so” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 166). Set seeks to dominate and subjugate women and nature; he is “the 1st man to shut nature out of himself. He called it discipline” (162). Set further sought to destroy the glory of Osiris's Egypt by tricking his brother into a sarcophagus that Set and his followers covered with molten lead and threw into the Nile; later Set dismembered Osiris's body, scattering it to the winds and the Nile. Reed's version of Set believes that he creates order and seeks an inflexible world that abhors fluidity and spontaneity especially as practiced in music, dance, and literature.² In an attempt to perform an Osirian miracle and win the loyalty of the Egyptian people,

Set decided that he would fasten his hold on the populace by performing miracle the way Osiris used to. He had 1 of his *bokors* who practiced the art of the Petro Rites with the Left Hand “come on up and give the folks a show.” Well, being insufficient trained the *boker* didn’t know what he was doing; he only knew Dirty Work and raised the temperature of Egypt to over 50,000 degrees resulting in something resembling an A-bomb explosion. Set and his followers fled to Heliopolis City of the Sun and decided to rule Egypt from there.” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 182)

Set and his followers engage in a literal scorched earth campaign where Osiris’s rites bring life from the soil. In the novel’s further use of the myths, Set conspires to take power and usurp his brother’s throne.

Reed often plays with the useful coincidence that Set’s name denotes rigidity in English, although his name is Anglicized as “Seth” at times. Set wants things fixed in their proper state, and Reed notes Set’s penchant for codifying rules through his actions and associations: “He spent most of his time ‘out with the boys’; legislators, an unpopular group of poets who went about Egypt telling Egyptians that they could do better that they weren’t ready and that they ought to try to make something out of themselves” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 164). Set wants to enslave the people and create hierarchies, armies, and weapons: “Set would show them. Happy all the time. Enjoying themselves when there was hard work to be done, countries to invade, populations to subjugate” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 163). Set comes as the aggressive European colonizers, missionaries, and conquerors in the New World. Set is Cromwell in Ireland and Columbus and Cortez in the New World; Set is the Inquisition, the Crusades, the slave trade, the Salem witch trials, Jim Crow. As James Lindroth notes, “Everywhere, as in his inverted image of a gross and salacious Santa [in *The Terrible Twos* (1982)], Reed subverts the white belief in a European culture superior to all others” (n.p.). Set’s ideology is identified in *Mumbo Jumbo* as “Atonism,” and it is racist, fascist, and utterly bent on the domination of others, especially African-Americans. Set seeks any means necessary to quarantine Osirian outbreaks to the slave quarters of “Black writing” that is, for the Atonists, always already second class. Neo-HooDoo is therefore a liberating poetics, breaking free of intellectual ghettos by going back to the African sources and showing their persistence and power for new expression.

Reed uses the figures of Set and Osiris in many of his Neo-HooDoo works, and he employs this binary to show how humanity, and not the gods, creates and sustains barbarism and fascism to enslave and delimit the lives of other groups. In Reed’s version of the myths, after Osiris gave up his power to the people, Set seized it for himself. In Reed’s works, Set and Osiris primarily figure in *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Conjure*, Reed’s first collection of poetry. In the poem, “why i often allude to osiris,” Reed describes this dichotomy through

the effects ascribed to each deity, a strategy he also employs in *Mumbo Jumbo*. In this poem, Set is called “ikhnaton,” but Set’s destructive nature, like the root word of “Atonism” in Ikhnaton’s name, can be seen in such images as: “ikhnaton brought re/ligious fascism to egypt” and “where once man animals/plants & stars freely/roamed thru each other’s/rooms, Ikhnaton came up with/the door.” (*Conjure* 43). This fascism of locking creative, vegetative spirits spreads out from Egypt, and LaBas shows how Atonism reappears throughout history in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Set’s modern followers are fascistic in their efforts to retain and expand their social, economic, and political powers, and Neo-HooDoo resists against Set, Atonism, and any monologic force bent on domination.

Reed further suggests that although Jes Grew is a Deleuzian rhizome that arises and evolves from traditions in African Vodun, Caribbean VooDoo, and American HooDoo, Jes Grew is a spontaneous movement of the spirit through music and dance that erupts to threaten Western civilization, ruled since the fourth century A.D. by Set’s followers the Atonists, and the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic opposes Set at every turn. In “I am a cowboy in the boat of Ra,” Reed’s speaker is Osiris laying down a direct challenge to Set’s rule:

look out Set here i come Set
to get Set to sunset Set
to unseat Set to Set down Set

usurper of the Royal couch
imposter RAdio of Moses’ bush
party pooper O hater of dance
vampire outlaw of the milky way (*New and Collected Poems* 23)

The idea of such resistant powers “just growing” comes to Reed’s Neo-HooDoo aesthetic through a variety of cultural sources: African mythologies, religions, and beliefs systems, Afro-American songs and folktales, and Reed takes the name “Jes Grew” itself from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) through a quote from James Weldon Johnson’s *Book of American Negro Poetry*: “The earliest Ragtime songs, like Topsy, ‘jes’ grew” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 11).³ This reference is not his only play with Stowe’s novel; he also wrote his *Flight to Canada* (1976) through *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Stowe’s source, *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave*.⁴ Patrick McGee argues that in novels like *Mumbo Jumbo* and, in particular, *Flight to Canada*, Reed’s revisionist histories challenge not simply the versions of history that have been handed down but the power structures made manifest in such histories by writing from “the perspective of those cultures and classes [the United States] has marginalized. If Harriet Beecher Stowe offers a white Christian view of

slavery, Ishmael Reed counters it not simply with a black view (for, as he points out, she appropriated black narrative in the first place)" (41). Thus, the Set/Osiris dichotomy becomes a prominent feature driving Reed's aesthetic project; he writes and rewrites on top of established histories and canonical novels and forms to at the same time reclaim black voices and traditions and to parody searches for "authentic" Afro-American voices. As Lindroth says, "Reed not only deflates the white pretension to cultural superiority, he simultaneously promotes black cultural achievement. And once again, the figures and language of hoodoo play important roles" (n.p.). Reed thereby creates stews of voices, styles, mythologies, and histories that combine to attack limitations on the novel form, accepted (read: white) versions of Western history, and the histories of Africans in the Americas as well.

Neo-HooDoo in general and Jes Grew in particular are all the more troubling to the dominant white structures of power, personified in the opening of *Mumbo Jumbo* as the mayor of New Orleans, because "there are no isolated cases in this thing. It knows no class no race no consciousness" and affects whites and blacks, poor and rich alike (5). Throughout Reed's Neo-HooDoo aesthetic Jes Grew and Osiris's Work is figured as a spreading social virus, causing the people to laugh, dance, sing, and love; in the poem "Off d Pig," Reed writes: "a curfew is lifted on soul/friendly crowds greet one another in d streets/Osiris struts his stuff & dos d thang to words/hidden beneath d desert" (*New and Collected Poems* 77–78). The images of the soul's curfew being lifted and Osiris doing his thing are exactly the kind of moves that Set and the Atonists hate.

Conversely, Reed links Set's colonization of other lands to modern imperialism, as Set and his legislators "went about Egypt telling Egyptians that they could do better that they weren't ready and that they ought to try to make something out of themselves" by, the suggestion comes, "invading foreign countries and killing" (*Mumbo Jumbo* 164). While Osiris danced and sang to help humanity, Set plotted and schemed to enslave them. It is therefore an important part of Osiris's spirit that he abdicates the power so coveted by his brother, and in this dichotomy, Reed mirrors the West's paradoxical dependence upon Africans and their New World descendants as labor to create Western civilization and upon blackness as a negative signifier to be repudiated and destroyed.

Mumbo Jumbo and the myths of Osiris counter the idea that Osiris "imposed" agriculture and civilization on other peoples, suggesting instead that he was welcomed and celebrated by them. However, to further his claims of being a "just ruler" himself, Set makes the claim that Osiris was an imperialist and criminal. There is no mistake however, in viewing Osiris as a state force; his divine right of rule was announced over the land at his birth,

and Osiris introduced agriculture to Egypt, wiping out cannibalism in the process. Similarly, in the plateau entitled “7000 B.C.: Apparatus of Capture” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write that “it is the State that creates agriculture, animal raising, and metallurgy; it does so first on its own soil, then imposes them upon the surrounding world” (429).⁵ In the Set/Osiris power struggle, we can see the ambivalent nature of a Deleuzian rhizome: although Reed’s Osiris stopped the people from eating each other and ushered in an age of peace and freedom, his state power did “subjugate” the populace by ending the “free” practice of cannibalism and “locking” the people into an agrarian lifestyle. Further, Reed demonstrates how easily repressive forces like Set can manipulate ideas and individuals as means of possessing power.

As Deleuze and Guattari talk about the “imposition” of state power through agriculture, Osiris did not create armies to vanquish Egypt’s neighbors and enslave their people but instead traveled about, taught the people to raise their own food, and ended cannibalism. Set opposes Osiris at every opportunity, and ultimately destroys Osiris and mutilates his corpse. Reed’s play with the myth in *Mumbo Jumbo* connects this murder to Set’s preference for cannibalism and misogyny: “Set stood there in triumph. There goes your Seedman eaten by fish, let’s cut out all this farming jazz and go back to eating each other. Come here you, Set said in his John Wayne voice, swaggering towards a luscious woman, a succulent dish standing in the crowd” (176). Reed’s Neo-HooDoo mouthpiece, the priest or houngan Papa LaBas, says that Set and his crowd labeled Osiris a tyrant, and worse, a “dilletante, a recipient of a far-out education, and one who would not know how to deal with the enemies of the Egyptian people” (162).⁶ In *Mumbo Jumbo*, according to LaBas in the crucial chapters near the end of the text that “unravel” the Atonists’ plots and conspiracies from ancient Egypt into the 1920s, Osiris is not interested in ruling or controlling others through intimidation and threats; these are Set’s hallmarks. Osiris is by contrast and definition a life-force; in the myths, he dances and the crops spontaneously erupt with produce. In Reed’s use of the myth, the people love Osiris; they adopt his dances, learn to farm, and stop killing and eating each other. When peace and tranquility existed on the Nile, LaBas says that Osiris “became bored” and left “Isis in charge of the affairs of Egypt which was a little thing because at that time as 1 historian wrote ‘The Egyptians had little difficulty in being good’” (165). Because of its productivity, he brings the work to other civilizations: “Osiris toured the world with his International Nile Root Orchestra, dancing agronomy and going from country to country with his band; and a choir directed by a young comer named Dionysus” (165). Reed thus transforms the contents of the hero myth into a modern rock tour with Osiris as a celebrity warmly welcomed in his travels. Reed also emphasizes the connection of music and spirituality by including

a modern “NOTICE” in the middle of LaBas’s narrative about ancient Egypt: “[Little] Richard, Chuck [Berry] and Johnny [Ace] wish to remind California’s rock fans that the stage is virtually indestructible. One may attend with no fear of mortal injury, should he or she feel the call to come forth and declare his or her soul to the glory of rock ‘n’ roll” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 168). In this passage and throughout *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed mixes media, histories, and genre; he figures rock music as a Neo-HooDoo and Osirian art form because it evolved from African and African-American musical styles and because it inspires the people to move, to “shake things up” through song and dance. As Reed writes in “Catechism of d Neoamerican Hoodoo Church”:

o hougans of america—post this on yr temples.

DO YR ART D WAY U WANT
ANYWAY U WANT
ANY WANGOL U WANT
ITS UP TO U/ WHAT WILL WORK
FOR U. (*New and Collected Poems* 53)

Neo-HooDoo and Jes Grew are the freedom to express—the freedom of excess—that Set hates about Osiris’s work and that Reed celebrates in his aesthetic as the power of the individual to break free of (often artificial and state-imposed) boundaries and limits.

In this spirit of spontaneous and freeing art, sound, recorded sound in particular, plays a crucial role in Jes Grew’s 1920s resurgence. The 1920s were an era of explosive sounds in America; the blues and jazz gave voice to racial and cultural struggles, and radio and consumer goods like 78s and 45s brought popular songs to more people than ever before, and Reed plays with radio and recorded sound as a battle front in the war between the Atonists and those they would enslave. In ancient Egypt, however, it was writing, introduced by the god Thoth to create a permanent record of Osiris’s Work, which helped propagate and spread Jes Grew as a catchy pop song or new dance spreads from one head and body to another through the radio and other means of transmission.⁷

For Neo-HooDoo, the Book of Thoth is the source of the Jes Grew social virus through the spread and evolution of Vodun to VooDoo and then to HooDoo. From Egypt, Osiris moved throughout Africa and to the Americas, spreading his songs and dances that accelerated the growth of crops and helped the people to move from hunter-gatherer and cannibal tribes into agrarian societies. However, in Osiris’s absence, Set conspired to take power

and usurp his brother's throne as the Atonists conspire to destroy the Book of Thoth in Reed's contemporary setting in *Mumbo Jumbo*. After Set drowned Osiris in the Nile, Isis found Osiris's body and prepared to resurrect him, but Set discovered the body and tore it into fourteen pieces to stamp out the transmission of Osiris's message of individual freedom.

Reed echoes this dissolution in *Mumbo Jumbo* in a character named Hinkle Von Vampton's rending of the Book of Thoth into fourteen parts that are kept in constant circulation to ensure that Jes Grew cannot find its text and it is a "lost liturgy seeking its lost litany" (211). Hoping to keep the text's secrets from the Atonists, a group of black Masons secured the fragments and gave them all to a Muslim named Abdul Hamid who could transcribe the hieroglyphs. Unfortunately, Hamid decides, "Black people could never have been involved in such a lewd, nasty, decadent thing as is depicted here. This material is obviously a fabrication by the infernal fiend himself!!! So into the fire she goes!! It is our duty to smite the evil serpent of carnality" (202). But as a vital life force of dance, music, sex, and procreation, how could Osiris's Work be anything but carnal? Creation and procreation are powerful forces; Hamid anachronistically sees the Book of Thoth through the monologic lens forged by such figures as Elijah Muhammad. Because the Book does not fit this worldview, Hamid destroys the evidence that it ever existed; he is an ironic Atonist who thinks he is working against them right up until the moment they murder him.

Throughout Reed's aesthetic, we see evidence that white critics and editors searching for so-called "authentic black voices" reduce the creative power of all voices; in the past, emerging writers who failed to fit an established "black" pattern such as realism (and most of Reed's texts contest any such patterns) were rejected as somehow inauthentically black. As noted earlier, who cares if Reed himself writes "circuses"? The Neo-HooDoo aesthetic is a dynamic and creative style that allows Reed's novels and poems to pose crucial political and artistic challenges for readers and critics. Among such racist ideologies were efforts to pigeonhole African-American literary artists as either poets in the Langston Hughes tradition or, following the critical and popular success of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, so-called naturalist or realist novelists. In particular, because of Wright's critical and commercial success, realism became *the* style for African-American fiction; however, because the content of Reed's novels has been so much concerned with resistance to oppressive systems like American racial policies and practices, it should be no surprise that the forms of Reed's texts resists easy pigeonholing as "realist," "naturalist," or "protest" novels.⁸

Certainly, Reed's work "fails" to conform to established patterns, and he rejects Wright's realism, for example, to create and re-create his own voices,

styles, and aesthetics. Reed clearly loves to play with expectation and genre; he follows Mark Twain in creating a contentious writerly persona; in this enterprise, he is like the America he calls “the smart-aleck adolescent who’s ‘been around’ and has his own hot rod” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 16). Reed knows the score; he’s been around and his poems and books are as souped up as any teenager’s ride, but his equivocation of America and the teenage car culture that has come to be a dominant social force in America since the 1950s is no simple observation (*Mumbo Jumbo* 16). It is a politically loaded connection of the freedoms afforded by automobiles and the loss of mobility and agency that has occurred in the creation of black enclaves like Harlem, Roxbury, and Watts.

In an interview with Bruce Allen Dick, Reed makes the connection between artistic confinement and such prison-like neighborhoods clear: “Sure, black writers are confined to realism. They are also handicapped by the puny range of intellectual and cultural life in this country” (244). Additionally, in “Performance, History, and Myth: The Problem of Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*,” Theodore O. Mason argues:

Reed’s project has two distinct, though related parts. He wishes to loosen the stranglehold of the Judeo-Christian tradition on the cultural patterns of black people everywhere (not simply Afro-Americans). Further, he wishes to reestablish the virtue of fiction as performance on the part of the artist, wresting it from the domination of the West, which to his mind has emphasized contemplation and tranquility over performance and activity. (97–98)

Therefore, in texts like *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed transforms the contents of what “black” writing is and can be as he transforms the very idea of what a novel can be or do. *Mumbo Jumbo*, for example, is a collage of images and text and includes a bibliography. It is, as Mason argues, this duality in Reed’s fiction that makes it a difficult challenge both to established reading practices but, more importantly, to the overriding traditions and genres he writes in: “Reed’s sense of history devolves from an understanding that the historical ‘facts’ as we understand them are wholly fictions propagated by the masters of high Western cultures” (98). In other words, Reed’s novels enact radical transformations of the contents of Western, particularly American, history and the novel genre to give voice to suppressed ideas and peoples and to open the landscape of the American novel while rejecting the notion that “black writing” can be reduced to single genres or styles. Reed revels in the creation of anachronism and other confounding fictions wherever and whenever possible.

Reed's use of African sources is part of his efforts to carve out a unique creative niche for his own writing while rejecting any set genre, particularly realism alone, for Afro-American expression. Again turning to the 1997 interview with Bruce Allen Dick, Reed says:

When I invoked HooDoo as a reference for my early work, I was signaling to readers and critics that my work would be a modern interpretation of African American folklore. That I would depart from the modernist writing which had been the vogue from the turn of the century to the 1950s—these huge, sprawling things full of heavy-handed characterization, Freudian psychoanalysis, cryptic symbolism, and devoted to western-bound political, aesthetic, and philosophical issues. (228)

Reed continually seeks to push the limits of narrative form, not as a “black author” but as an original voice and artist, and he continually engages and often enrages his supporters and critics.

Reed also engages the evils of the dominant culture that sought to fence him in or tie him up. Reed never lets an opportunity for engaging the body politic or rejecting any effort to limit his work pass by untouched. As he attacked lazy people in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, in particular African-Americans, who are content to “mooch” off of the efforts of leaders and risk takers, in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed takes on the whole of Western culture that has instilled a view of Africa and Africans as second-class and therefore duly subjugated nonpersons. Such a depiction opened him to criticism for showing examples of characters that fit racist stereotypes Reed was trying to satirize and destroy.

One of Reed's early champions, and lately one of his harshest critics, Henry Louis Gates Jr., says in *The Signifying Monkey*:

In six demanding novels, Reed has criticized . . . what he perceives to be the conventional structures of feeling that he had received from the Afro-American tradition. He has proceeded almost as if the sheer process of the analysis can clear a narrative space for the next generation of writers as decidedly as Ellison's narrative response to Wright and naturalism cleared a space for Leon Forrest, Ernest Gaines, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, James Alan McPherson, John Wideman, and especially for Reed himself. (218)

As Gates argues, one of Reed's strategies in this part of his project has been his play with realism and his “parting” from the limits of modernism; further, I think that Reed's conflicts with Gates and Alice Walker and others over the portrayals of male African-American characters in Reed's, Walker's, and other writers' works show Reed's continuing efforts to combat the appearance in narrative and public spaces for what Reed calls sexist and “racist thinking”

(Dick 240). Gates further argues that one of Reed's strategies for freeing his works from such restrictive labels is parody:

Mumbo Jumbo's double narrative, then, its narrative-within-a-narrative, is an allegory of the act of reading itself. Reed uses this second mode of ironic omniscient narration to signify upon the nature of the novel in general but especially upon Afro-American naturalism and modernism. (229)

The novels are anachronistic, cartoonish, absurd, and wildly playful in their efforts to destroy such limits as realism's narrow aesthetics, and we can also see Reed's play with genre through misplaced "artifacts" and variant histories in both *Mumbo Jumbo* and in the novel written before it, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*.

In the town of Yellow Back Radio, the HooDoo cowboy the Loop Garoo Kid greets the Pope and sums up the Church's repressive nature that the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic opposes: "As always—Inquisition Inquisition. I would venture to guess that your Inquisition signaled the triumph of the clerk, the bureaucrat, and the West has been in the committee thing ever since" (163). The Loop Garoo Kid voices the frustration many African-American artists have felt when told their works are insufficiently "black" because they do not conform to established, and profitable, published forms. In his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," James Baldwin likewise rejects a standard black aesthetic: "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (23). Likewise in Neo-HooDoo, Reed deconstructs and reconstructs the "rules" of novel writing to open the novel to anything and everything under the big top to transcend limits on portrayals of human beings and protest the Atonistic restrictions and liberate the form and, perhaps, the people. Neo-HooDoo is an acrobatic tightwire act performed without a safety net.

One hallmark of Reed's Neo-HooDoo texts and postmodern novels in general is the use of anachronisms. Ostensibly a Western anachronism abounds in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*: cowboys travel not only by horse but also by helicopter; they listen to Martha and the Vandellas on the radio, and the Pope travels by dirigible and speaks both standard English and in the stereotypical patois of stock Italian immigrant characters of stage, radio, and screen. For example, on his arrival, Pope Innocent says, "Thank-a-you citizens of Yellow Back Radio. I'm-a come to cool tings out and get rid of this maleficiem what's been making the cattle break out in sores" (148).⁹ However, Reed is not simply playing with history as a postmodern show or making the point that history is as much a construct as any novel although these are a part of his

project. Instead, Reed ridicules the realism of traditional American westerns as the same novelistic discourse Edward W. Said identifies in European novels about India and other colonies: "The colonial territories are realms of possibility, and they have always been associated with the realistic novel" (*Culture and Imperialism* 64). Said further argues,

Without empire . . . there is no European novel as we know it, and indeed if we study the impulses giving rise to it, we shall see the far from accidental convergence between the patterns of narrative authority constitutive of the novel on the one hand and, on the other, a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism. (69–70)

Likewise, in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* Reed works to show the imperialism implicit in the western genre that glosses over the creation of the American West as a "free" space, "open" almost exclusively to white homesteading on tribal lands.¹⁰ The western's stereotypical reduction of Native American life and culture is another of Reed's targets for parody in works like *Yellow Back Radio* and for his social activism with the Before Columbus Foundation.

Reed's Neo-HooDoo texts often return our gaze to those peoples obfuscated by the history of Western settlement. The appearance of Pope Innocent in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* demonstrates that Set's Atonists are always already bound to Western imperialism and monotheistic religions like Christianity and monologic novels. In both *Yellow Back Radio* and *Mumbo Jumbo*, the Atonists and the Church see American HooDoo as a threat because as Vodun came to the New World with African slaves, it evolved, assimilating the Church's rites and saints and reterritorializing them as private signs of resistance. As a means of containment and control, Christianity, particularly Catholicism in the French and Spanish colonies, was forcibly introduced into the slave populations. In Haiti, a rhizome of beliefs was established as Vodun and Catholicism deterritorialized and reterritorialized each other; the Church's hegemony was broken in the secret rites and covert communications of slaves transforming the sacred images and the Saints and the Virgin to conceal messages of revolt and resistance. The slaves continued to practice the religions of Africa, but under the guise of the colonizers' rituals and signs.

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed uses the Haitian revolt against French colonialism as an example of the successful resistance of blacks in the Americas, and he relates Jes Grew to such actions:

The Wallflower Order launched the war against Haiti in hopes of allaying Jes Grew symptoms by attacking their miasmatic source. But little Haiti resists. It becomes a

world-wide symbol for religious and aesthetic freedom. When an artist happens upon a new form he shouts "I Have Reached My Haiti!" (64)

Clearly, Reed "reached" one of his Haitis in such early works as *Mumbo Jumbo*, but as Reginald Martin says, "As the first slave colony to achieve independence, Haiti represents not only the ideal but the actual possibility of political autonomy and social liberation (though full liberation itself may remain an unachieved goal) in the context of the black Atlantic" (26–27). In other words, the creation of the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic was a political as well as artistic achievement for Reed; it remains an important aspect of postmodernism particularly for African-American writers who sought to escape the restrictive confines of realism.¹¹

More importantly, as more and more Africans were imported to the Americas through the slave trade, the religious practices and rituals they brought with them became concentrated and masked by Catholicism and renamed as voodoo and then HooDoo; in her anthropological study of African-American folklore *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston says,

Hoodoo, or Voodoo, as pronounced by whites, is burning with a flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion. It has its thousands of secret adherents. It adapts itself like Christianity to its locale, reclaiming some of its borrowed characteristics to itself, such as fire-worship as signified in the Christian church by the altar and the candles and the belief in water to sanctify as in baptism. (183)

Both terms served as both warnings to whites of insurrections and as excuses for violence, often by lynch mobs, against strong or resistant African-Americans. To remove the threat to established white hegemony, or even the appearance of resistant blacks, such forces were destroyed by the white power structures. Therefore, HooDoos have often hidden themselves and their practices in secrecy and by using established, acceptable signs of faith like Christian icons, songs, and rituals. We can see an example Reed playing with Christianity as a show of monotheistic power in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* through Pope Innocent explanation of HooDoo's dangerous nature to the cowboys he recruits to round up Loop: "It's important that we wipe it out because it can always become a revolutionary force. Many of the Haitian revolutionaries were practicing priests, or hounngans, as they are called" (154). As the leader of the Church of Rome, Innocent knows all too well how religion becomes a repressive, or liberating, force—again, Set is aligned with the modern Church. Reed continues to use Western authority figures in this manner in *Mumbo Jumbo*, subsuming them under the larger title of the Atonists, but this critique is already well established in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*.

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed argues that it was Set who created the religious hierarchy of what became the modern monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and just as the Atonists and monotheistic faiths place restrictions on the spirit, Reed sees expectations on African-American writers to produce more *Native Sons* as repressive powers to be resisted. As Gates argues in *The Signifying Monkey*, the appearance of chaotic subversions of deep structures of order relates Reed's novels to Mikhail Bakhtin's sense of "carnivalistic" folklore.¹² In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin says that the "carnival sense of the world possesses a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality" (107). By comparison, Jes Grew appears to be as "electric as life and is characterized by ebullience and ecstasy" (*Mumbo Jumbo* 6). The close affinity between Jes Grew and carnival is remarkable and demonstrates that there is a purpose to Reed's playful aesthetic; like carnival, Jes Grew reverses the social order, albeit temporarily. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, a rhizome is always in motion, and may at any time turn over on itself; that which was deterritorialized is often reterritorialized. Mardi Gras ends at the stroke of midnight on Ash Wednesday, and the streets of New Orleans's French Quarter are cleared by the police after a week of turbulent, largely unbridled hedonism. Jes Grew's song can be silenced by the destruction of the Book, but a new iteration—a new dance or catchy tune—always pops up again somewhere.

According to Bakhtin, in the carnivalistic, "the heroes of myth and the historical figures of the past are deliberately and emphatically contemporized; they act and speak in a zone of familiar contact with the open-ended present" (108). Like Thomas Pynchon and other postmodern writers, Reed often makes use of mythic and historic figures throughout his texts; in *Mumbo Jumbo*, for example, President-Elect Warren G. Harding appears at a Harlem rent party. However, the point here is that as a fitting metaphor for Reed's texts, the novel as circus gives the appearance of disorder, but only that. The same orchestrated shows of "chaos" go on every night, in the same rings, for an entire season or seasons. However, within the confines of the big top and between the covers of a book, there is great freedom; the Neo-HooDoo novel enables Reed to be wildly discordant and fly off on wild high wire acts. He may fall, but therein lies the artistic challenge of Neo-HooDoo: can an artist like Reed do anything new with a genre like the novel that has more than three centuries of history? As a public performance-art, the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic shows further affinities with jazz and dance. As Alfonso Hawkins writes:

When Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn wrote the setting for "A Drum Is a Woman," they, too, figured, metaphorically, a jazz representative that best demonstrates its

varied musical and contextual manifestations. Madam Zaji is rhythm. *She transcends containment and breathes freely as she reinvents herself through dance, exoticism, and the drum.* (85, emphasis added)

Hawkins rightly connects the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic and jazz here, through the freedom, reinvention, and exoticism offered by jazz, with a novel through the experimentation needed for artistic growth and complexity, but there is no safety net, and both the jazz musician and the experimental poet or novelist may crash to the floor. In *Signifying Monkey*, Gates does not make this connection between jazz, Bakhtin's sense of the carnival, and Reed's works, but like circuses or carnivals, Reed's novels suspend

laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life . . . what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all that forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it—that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age). All distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: *free and familiar contact among people.* (Gates 122–23, emphases original)

This suspension of distance and other hierarchies between people and peoples speaks to the heart of Reed's aesthetic project and fits neatly with Reed's use of the Osirian spirit in *Jes Grew*. However, we are in danger or reading too much into Reed's parodies of modern race relations if we assume that we can rely on a text like *Mumbo Jumbo* or *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* to end racism. At best, such texts, like the real carnivals and festivals Bakhtin argues they are modeled upon, offer models of behavior that show the temporary breakdown of barriers; Reed's novels show the rhizomatic nature of carnival/noncarnival life or Set and Osiris or novelistic discourse.¹³

In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, *Mumbo Jumbo*, and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, Reed connects Neo-HooDoo to revolutionary artistic acts like the Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age in an early passage in *Mumbo Jumbo*: "1920. Charlie Parker, the hounigan . . . for whom there was no one master adept enough to award him the Asson, is born. 1920–1930. That 1 decade which doesn't seem so much a part of American history as the hidden After-Hours of America struggling to jam. To get through" (16). Patrick McGee, reading *Mumbo Jumbo* through DuBois's concept of "double consciousness" and Gates's use of Afro-American folklore and the "Talking Book," connects Reed's style to Parker's revolutionary technique. In McGee's reading, Reed and

Parker create “double-voiced” styles that, like Jes Grew, seem to explode into being from nothingness:

Like Charlie Parker, Reed not only repeats himself but reverses his own narrative mode. From the outset, the plot of *Mumbo Jumbo* is motivated by Jes Grew’s quest for a text, which, in another register, is shown to be already there as the signifier that calls it into being. The text articulates the space and the voice (the loa) of the pretextual it attempts to name. (110)

As Parker and Gillespie’s Bop served notice that new voices were emerging to challenge listeners and to shake up swing and big band jazz, Reed uses the specter of the Haitian revolt as a symbol of armed insurrection to Western colonial powers. At the same time, Haiti was also used as “proof” of the violent nature of the slaves and former slaves in the Americas and for the need for such repressive state apparatuses as the Fugitive Slave Law and Jim Crow. Therefore, we can observe the rhizome of power and force at work in Reed’s aesthetic, and Neo-HooDoo provides a framework for real action for human rights and artistic freedom.

NOTES

1. We can see a model of the smooth/striated and war machine/State rhizomes in Deleuze and Guattari’s “plateau” or chapter entitled: “1227: Treatise on Nomadology:—The War Machine.” See *A Thousand Plateaus*, 351–423.
2. See for example Keren Omry’s “Literary Free Jazz? *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Paradise*,” where she argues that Neo-HooDoo can create a kind of autonomous artistic utopia:

I understand Reed to offer instead new mechanisms by which meaning is established, communicated, as well as challenged, and it is to these processes, discussed further below, that I refer as Utopian. Although the link between the conceptual Utopia implicated in each and free jazz is not always straightforward or explicit, the music and the literature clearly grapple with parallel ideas and problems, and the solutions of one inform the development of the other. (129)

Or, we might say, Parker and his fellow Neo-HooDoo houngans like Reed and Toni Morrison seek the artistic utopias that white artists have demanded and received.

3. In Stowe’s novel, Miss Ophelia asks Topsy a series of questions about her past, her parents, and her age. Topsy has no idea how old she is or who her parents are; to Ophelia’s question: “Do you know who made you?” Topsy replies, “Nobody’ . . . ‘I spect I grow’d” (356).

4. See Patrick McGee's *Ishmael Reed and the Ends of Race*; in particular, 35–42.
5. See Richard Swope's discussion of Deleuzian space and jazz in "Crossing Western Space, or the HooDoo Detective on the Boundary in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*."
6. This may or may not be an intentional typographic error; Reed writes that "Papa LaBas knew the fate of those who threatened the Atonist Path. . . . Their writings were banished, added to the Index of Forbidden Books or sprinkled with typos as a way of undermining their credibility" (*Mumbo Jumbo* 47). I think that Reed is playing with the idea that *Mumbo Jumbo* itself has been targeted by the Atonists, as there are several typos in (at least) the Scribner edition. See also page 43, "publihsers," for example.
7. In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida says, "It is not by chance that in mythology, the Egyptian in particular, the god of sciences and technologies is also the god of writing" (313).
8. See Reginald Martin's *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic* for Martin's archaeology of the so-called "Black Aesthetic" and Reed's battles with this concept and with critics who would limit his work to it. It should also be noted that Reed is not the only African-American writer trying to break free from Wright's realism; Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin come quickly to mind.
9. While there were thirteen popes named Innocent, Reed plays with the idea of the concept of Papal Infallibility as he has Loop Garoo talk about such events as the Inquisition as an ironic counterpoint to the Pope's "innocence."
10. Reed's work with the Before Columbus Foundation, referenced through the photograph on page 184 of the Scribner edition of *Mumbo Jumbo*, which incidentally replaced the original picture of captured Nazis Werner Von Braun and Walter Dornberger in 1945, is an example of Reed's extra-textual political activism.
11. See Alfonso W. Hawkins Jr.'s "Madam Zajj and Jes Grew."
12. See Gates's *Signifying Monkey*, 50–51, 110–113, 131.
13. Deleuze and Guattari mention only Bakhtin's work *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, published under the pseudonym V. N. Volosinov, in *A Thousand Plateaus*; see 524n13 for example. They do not mention the similarity of their concept of the rhizome and Bakhtin's *carnivalistic misalliances*:

A free and familiar attitude spreads over everything: over all values, thoughts, phenomena, and things. All things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced, distanced, are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations. Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid. (Bakhtin 123)

Deleuze and Guattari expand upon this, I believe, adding that, in carnival, when the festival ends, so too do these contacts and combinations; therefore, life and carnival life form a rhizome.

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