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We Are Cowboys in the Boat of Ra: Sonny Rollins and Ishmael Reed's Black Cowboy

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We Are Cowboys in the Boat of Ra: Sonny Rollins and Ishmael

Reed's Black Cowboy

by Brian Flota

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James Madison University

Ishmael Reed's most celebrated poem, "I am a cowboy in the boat of Ra," is regularly anthologized because it represents the central concerns of his Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic. Its content fuses elements of African American popular culture (Motown, Sonny Rollins), voodoo (loup garou, ju-ju) and Egyptian mythology (Ra, Isis, Osiris, Set), foreshadowing his second novel, the postmodern Western, *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*, and the struggle at the core of his third and most highly acclaimed novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*. The poem's anachronistic landscape spans across eras that include Moses, the apocryphal Pope Joan, Wells Fargo banks of the Old American West, LP records, and the boogaloo dance craze. Though most criticism of Reed focuses on his novels and the provocative claims he often makes in his essays, one important article, Shamoan Zamir's "The Artist as Prophet, Priest and Gunslinger: Ishmael Reed's Cowboy in the Boat of Ra" (1994), sees "Ra" as appropriately participating in the spiritual and psychic zeitgeist of the 1960s. He writes, "In a move characteristic of the 1960s, Reed conflates Vodoun and gnostic traditions into a subculture of heresy as a reservoir for his poetic mythology" (1209). Indeed, the 1960s saw an explosion of spiritual movements and charismatic leaders that blended heretical rebellion, countercultural politics and lifestyles devoted to interpretations of various scriptures.

However, there is one detail that Zamir and other critics have neglected to point out. The title and refrain of the poem (which is repeated eight times) bares a striking resemblance to Bing Crosby's 1936 hit song "I'm an Old Cowhand (From the Rio Grande)", composed by Johnny Mercer:

I'm an old cowhand from the Rio Grande

I am a cowboy in the boat of Ra

While Ishmael Reed might have heard Bing Crosby's hit on the radio or on old 78 RPM shellac records during his formative years, one can speculate that Sonny Rollins' 1957 recording of "I'm An Old Cowhand" had much more of an impact. Rollins, like Reed after him, had a fascination with the Old West. As a youngster, Rollins adored Western movies and serials. He tells Eric Nisenson, "I loved the old cowboy movies I saw as a kid, Tom Mix and Ken Maynard and Hoot Gibson" (107).

By 1957, Sonny Rollins, the tenor saxophonist and composer from New York City was predicted by many cognoscenti to be the logical successor to Charlie Parker as the premier jazz saxophonist. A life-long New Yorker (whose parents were from St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands), he made his first visit out West in 1957 with drummer Max Roach's group. While in California, he was contacted by Lester Koenig of Contemporary Records to cut an album. Instead of adopting the West Coast jazz sound of white musicians like Dave Brubeck, Gerry Mulligan and Chet Baker, Rollins came up with the idea of recording an album with a Western theme.

To realize this blend of Western music through the prism of jazz, Rollins made an important decision about the instrumental arrangement of his group. Rollins eschewed piano, an instrument practically omnipresent in jazz up to that point. With only drummer Shelly Manne and bassist Ray Brown to back him, Rollins daringly became a jazz outlaw, an exhibitionist willing to expose himself and his horn without the traditional harmonic accompaniment of the piano. If, as Nisenson says, Rollins "associated the West with freedom and new frontiers," the musical approach to *Way Out West* was the perfect embodiment of this sentiment (107).

This new liberating sound was not the only unconventional thing about the resulting album. Along with standards such as Duke Ellington's "Solitude" and Isham Jones' "There is No Greater Love," Rollins cut the Western-themed "I'm an Old Cowhand" and "Wagon Wheels," along with the eponymous, self-penned closing track. While some of Rollins's material "might seem good for a giggle," as one critic put it, the cover image also risked being the subject of ridicule (Palmer 46). On what would become one of the most memorable of jazz album covers, Sonny Rollins appears in full Western attire (including cowboy hat, boots, a rugged brown suit and a holster), leaning back slightly, with a glare radiating confidence. Rollins holds his horn on his left hip as if it were a drawn pistol. As his shadow stretches across the scene, he stands alone against the backdrop of the Mojave Desert (complete with Joshua trees, creosote bushes, sagebrush and the skull of a steer) underneath an untainted blue sky. On this album cover, Rollins acknowledges the African American presence in the West, one all but erased by the predominantly white representations of cowboys in mainstream films, novels, serials and television programs.

Reed attempts the same thing in his pre-*Mumbo Jumbo* writing, especially in "Ra." The symbolic importance of *Way Out West*'s music and its cover art could not have escaped him. In "Ra," he observes that many people "cannot see ...the hawk behind Sonny Rollins' head or / the ritual beard of his axe" (*Conjure* 17). This brief section from the poem is densely populated with figures from Egyptian mythology and the history of jazz music. The sun god Ra is often depicted with the head of a hawk or a falcon. "The ritual beard" alludes to the ancient Egyptian belief that beards were sacred (Mercatante 21). Shamoan Zamir claims this brief passage "encapsulate[s] an entire

musical history (indeed a musical genealogy if not an ornithology) from pre-bop jazz to free jazz” (1212). While Sonny Rollins’ name itself contains both the sounds “sun” (Sonny) and “ra” (Rollins), Zamir also points out, “‘hawk’ resonates with the names of other jazz musicians: Coleman *Hawkins* ... Charlie ‘*Bird*’ (or ‘Yardbird’) Parker, the most celebrated of these revolutionaries, and most obviously *Sun Ra* and his *Arkestra*” (1212). The reference to Rollins in the poem is telling.

That Reed would seriously integrate elements of a gimmicky Bing Crosby hit from the 1930s into one his most complex poems seems curious. Crosby is an obvious target for the satire of Reed’s work because of his safe, iconic status as a lily-white establishment singer. But Reed’s invocation of Mercer’s already ironic lyric by way of Sonny Rollins’ transformation of “I’m an Old Cowhand” exposes an overlooked component of Reed’s early work: the figure of the cowboy. However, by coding his cowboy protagonists black, Reed’s cowboy is freed from the racist, capitalistic and colonizing elements attributed to the figure, and, instead, positively viewed as an outlaw, rebel, entertainer, loner, self-reliant individual, and a god!

Though Reed obviously sought to (re-)introduce the black cowboy into the literary discourse, following in the footsteps of Herb Jeffries, Sonny Rollins, and, later, Bo Diddley, the move must have seemed bewildering to many of his contemporaries. As Will Wright contends, the commitments of the mythical cowboy figure include “the need for an open frontier, violence as a civil necessity, white male superiority, and an endlessly productive environment” (1-2). Since the cowboy undoubtedly represented, to many African Americans in the late 1960s, whiteness, imperialism, and hegemony, the literary appeal of the cowboy figure for Reed may be viewed as a sincere, but contrarian

move. By coding the cowboy protagonist in “I am a cowboy in the boat of Ra” black, he eliminates some of the racial satire of the cowboy one might expect from Reed. Reed’s sincere appropriation of the cowboy in his late 1960s works, including “The Jackal-Headed Cowboy,” “The feral pioneers,” and *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*, defamiliarizes the white construction of the figure, placing the cowboy in the diachronous context of African American hoodoo and popular music, Black Power rhetoric, Egyptology, and American popular culture of the twentieth century. So if the mythical cowboy is stripped of the symbolic markers listed above, what essential qualities of the character could have appealed to a young Ishmael Reed?

Reed’s most anthologized poem first appeared in a small periodical called *Noose* (June 1, 1968) just as his second novel was in its final stages of composition. The eponymous first line of the poem instantly announces Reed’s use of the American West and Egyptology. In the poem, the (first-person) cowboy even mentions “the untrustworthiness of Egyptologists / who do not know their trips,” calling them out for their historical erasure of the obvious geographical fact that Egypt is in Africa (17). The cowboy also brags of “bedd[ing] / down with Isis,” diving “down deep in her horny,” and sticking “up her Wells-Far-ago / in daring midday getaway” (17). This coital boast, tellingly, alludes to Wells Fargo Bank, which, although founded in New York City in 1852, first opened for business in San Francisco and Sacramento, California. Aside from the sexual imagery, these lines also bridge two legendary myths from two very different moments and “far ago” places in time: the Ancient Egypt of four thousand years ago and the American Old West of the mid-nineteenth century. In the spiritual realm, Isis, the wife and sister of Osiris, gained her power from Ra, the sun god. His power “lay in the

fact that he alone knew his secret name” (Armour 49). Isis created a serpent—a cobra—made out of clay and the spittle of Ra, and when it attacked the sun god, rendered him defenseless because it contained his own substance (50). Knowing the cure, Isis was able to blackmail Ra for his secret name, thereby gaining the power he had. In the financial world, Wells Fargo gained its power through monopolistic business practices, becoming the Old West’s most powerful banking firm. According to Alvin F. Harlow, in less than a decade, Wells Fargo “either bought out or eliminated nearly all competitors and become the most powerful company in the Far West” (qtd. in Zamir 1218). Within three lines, aided by a pun on a banking company associated with the Northern California Gold Rush of the 1850s, Reed is able to successfully merge these historically distant and functionally different wills to power.

That these avant-garde works fuse elements of the cowboy myth with allusions to hoodoo practices, Egyptology, popular African American dance and music reveals Reed’s intervention: that the cultural expressions of African Americans (and of the African diaspora) as well as the products of the low-culture of the United States should be considered with the same depth as T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, or Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Reed’s deconstruction of the Western reveals that, in all its American-ness, it need not be neglected as a genre because it *is* American in origin. As Blake Allmendinger argues, “In Reed’s case, the black cowboy ‘breaks down’ frontier apartheid, challenges racial hegemony, brings chaos to Western civilization and disrupts narrative rules” (76). To overlook the genre because of its obviously glaring flaws—its racism, manifest destiny imperialism, and sexism—misses not only the linguistic creativity and sociological verisimilitude the western potentially permits, but it also ignores valuable insight into the

ideological desires of those infatuated with the manifest destiny and privileged conception of freedom unwittingly advertised by the notion of the frontier itself. Though it can be argued that his defense of these tropes of American-ness and the cowboy myth occasionally decreased his standing among politically-left writers and critics associated with the New Black Aesthetic and the Black Arts Movement, these theses were also directed at the American literary elites in their own (post-)modernist discourse. In this cutthroat terrain of the literary frontier, Reed is as close to a literary cowboy as any living author. In Wright's introduction to *The Wild West*, he summarizes the myth of the cowboy as follows: "Only [the cowboy] has the strength to defeat the villains, and generally he must fight alone since the citizens are weak and fearful. After he wins he is loved and surrenders that authority by riding away into the sunset" (7). Perhaps for some of the reasons cited above, Reed has rarely returned to the cowboy figure in nearly forty-five years in his creative writing. The innovative black cowboy figures that once populated his work may have rode off into the sunset. In the process, they opened up new avenues of African American poetical and fictional expression and challenged America's Euro-centric critical orthodoxy to rethink definitions of high- and low-brow culture.

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