Chapter-VII

FLIGHT TO CANADA

Slavery, the Civil War and assassination of Lincoln provide material for countless contradictory theses but these aspects of the past have always been considered either tragic or epic. However, Reed has little use of the romanticism or social realism traditionally associated with slave narratives. Instead of concentrating on the gruesome realities, horror and pain the slave experienced at the hands of the slave master or glorification of Lincoln as an Emancipator of slavery, Reed makes Flight to Canada a broadly comic satire. Since the sixties the historians have been reexamining slavery, seeking alternatives to the concept of objectively deprived slave, deprived of heritage and will. Reed translates a new interpretation of American past into a new form of historical novel.

Edmund White remarks that Flight to Canada is a comic exploration of slavery. It is genuinely ironic that Reed never concentrates on rendering faithfully the horrors of

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servitude but on creating a grotesque of Civil War America out of scraps and snippets of the present, the past and the mythic. In the process he has put together a brilliant montage of scenes, potent with feelings and thought. Throughout the tale the narrative alternates scenes back at the plantation in Virginia and scenes of Quickskill's freedom. Edmund White remarks that Reed's fantasia on the classic theme of black suffering is a virtuoso performance. Allen Belkind observes that through parody, exaggeration, anachronism and the juxtaposition of literary myths, Reed transforms the experiences of slavery and the Civil War into comedy.

Reed in one of his interviews acknowledges his growing interest in the subject of slavery. He says:

"I am getting more and more interested in slavery as a metaphor for how blacks are treated in the civilization."

Reed wants us to understand that slavery continues to inform American social, political, economic and cultural

\[\text{References}\]

2Ibid., 355.
3Allen Belkind, rev. of Flight to Canada by Ishmael Reed/ World Literature To-day 52.4 (Autumn 1978) 479.
dynamics although the war which was to have ended slavery was fought more than a hundred years ago. Joe Weixlman remarks that slavery and its corollary freedom are Reed's true subjects in *Flight to Canada*.⁵

Reed's poem entitled "Flight to Canada" which was part of his contribution to William Hegin's *Anthology of Poets* in 1976 forms a sketch for his novel. The fugitive slave is here named John Swell. Reed in an interview said that the novel "came out of a poem".⁶

The book functions not only as a distorting mirror held up to the continuing history of servitude but also as the record of a simple consciousness attempting to kill off the slave within. Roger Rosenblatt remarks that Reed points out the impossibility of escape from bondage except by way of oneself and exposes the conception of North Canada as heaven.⁷ Jerome Charyn remarks that *Flight to* 

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Canada is a demonized Uncle Tom's Cabin, a book that reinvents the particulars of slavery in America with comic rage.  

Reed feels that genre is one of many capricious restrictions which Western culture has attempted to establish as meaningful. Like Reed, the protagonist of the novel, the fugitive slave Raven Quickskill is much against slavery of all kinds. So he includes prose and poetry in the same book so that there would be no arbitrary boundaries between them. The narrative begins with a poem written by Quickskill. Joe Weixlmann remarks that for Reed generic distinctions foster a kind of literary Jim Crowism and they would fragment what is or should be united, restrict the writer's sense of identity, individuality and the freedom to create.  

Flight to Canada violates traditional generic classification for it is in part socio-political historiography, part poetry, part drama and part autobiography. But Reed's deconstructionist impulses tend

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to get a bit lost amidst the book's fabulous action with its free wheeling satire and abundant anachronisms. As a promoter of multiculturalism and practitioner of syncretic art, Reed has drawn forms and materials from a variety of sources. In one of the interviews Reed says thus:

"Flight to Canada uses European forms, Native American forms and African-American forms. It is syncretic."  

"One senses here a sort of ending of things and aspects of his earlier fiction. For, search for the word which Reed began in Mumbo Jumbo has realized itself finally in the successfully search for the text in the very text of Flight to Canada, the text that points and comments upon itself, a self reflexive text"  

Keith E. Byerman remarks that in Flight to Canada Reed becomes more metaphysical than ever. References, texts, descriptions of writing and a range of forms of expression are present throughout the narrative.  

The genre most obviously being used is the slave narrative but it emerges not so much parody forms as in dialectical opposition to Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin which is

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itself seen as a distortion and plagiarism of the narrative of the former slave Josiah Henson. Authentic black forms of expression are set over against false sentimental exploitative forms whether Black or White.

Flight to Canada pinpoints several ways in which minority cultures have been aesthetically victimized by European and American cultures. It is the story of a household slave Uncle Robin on Virginia plantation written by the fugitive slave Raven Quickskill. The novel turns on the relation between the demonic and decadent slave holder Arthur Swille and his slaves. Henry Louis Gates remarks that oddly enough it is the relationship between the slave holder and his loyal slave which is drawn most compellingly in Reed's novel. Reed presents the difference between a decadent mainstream culture represented by the slavemaster Arthur Swille and American President Abraham Lincoln on the one hand and more rigorous minority cultures represented by the blacks Raven, Robin and Quaw Quaw on the other. Sharon Jessee

But Lincoln is a player and is opposed

Swille

maintains that the contrast between the two cultures is central to the novel.13

Flight to Canada does not concern itself with the history or nature of HooDoo but with the equation of multiculturalism with emancipation and of America's monoculturism with slavery. Naomi Jacobs criticises Flight to Canada for its lack of both fictional and conceptual unity.14 He further remarks that the mixture of fiction and social comment does not work well in Flight to Canada. In his view it is marred by much dull editorializing, mere exposition without offering the complexity of thought.

While the book lacks the visual dimension of Mumbo Jumbo, it employs situations and effects borrowed from the electronic media, especially television. It juxtaposes prior texts, plots, landscapes, icons, historical and other invented identities, poems, songs, puns and sight gags in a dazzling shift of time and perspective. Hortense J.Spillers remarks thus:

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"Reed's work is closer in spirit and technique to an evening American television. In actuality it is a media event."¹⁵

The novel uses the African-American slave experience with its attendant paraphernalia of masters and plantations as setting.

Set during the civil war, Flight to Canada is narrated by Quickskill, a slave poet, who having escaped from the Swille plantation in Virginia and crossed America's Northern border, discovers that freedom does not reside in a place but is a state of mind. Also pursuing his freedom is Uncle Robin, a household slave whom his master Swille perceives to be a faithful retainer, comparable to Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom. Unlike Quickskill who is always on the move, Robin uses his obsequious demeanor to trick his master into writing him the plantation. The plot turns upon the trickery of various kinds with events carrying the story from South to North and back again with startling rapidity. Thus the movement of the plot is cyclic.

Reed distinguishes between the cultural aspect of emancipation and the long established equation of a slave's freedom with his education. Reed cites Frederick Douglass whose autobiography emphatically links literacy with freedom. The novel presents a literate slave Cato who remains absolutely servile.

Dynamic and dialectical relationships between the seen forces of current events, the world that is immediately perceivable and the unseen forces of history as projected by the ancestors or the gods is the central conflict in the novel. The world developed in Flight to Canada asserts that the optimal place for individual and racial development is at the intersection of the seen and the unseen forces. Because the conflicts in the novel are developed from the intersection of seen and unseen forces, the plot and actions of the characters become useful to understanding aspects of African-American political history. The progressive or adaptative trait in African-American political history is portrayed by characters who are closer to the intersection whereas the conservative or maladaptive tradition is portrayed by characters who are farthest from the intersection. Unlike the realist or naturalist characters in much of Richard Wright's fiction
or in Gloria Naylor, references to material conditions do not clearly explain decisions characters make.

Richard Walsh remarks that in *Flight to Canada* the Civil War and the Emancipation of slaves are equated with the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist Movements of the 1960s, the social upheaval in both cases leading to an apparently considerable amelioration of the rights of Black Americans. But Reed regards these as limited advances in the progress towards true emancipation. In fact they have succeeded only in making the mode of oppression more abstract/shifting it from the material to the cultural realm. He portrays the emancipation of the slaves as merely a form devoid of any moral interest - a publicity stunt by which Lincoln isolates the South in a war over other issues. He suggests that neither the Emancipation Proclamation nor the reforms of the 1960s indicated any fundamental transformation in the way in which Blacks were perceived in society. The lack of any revisionary consciousness behind the Legislative ensures that in the cultural sphere Black experience is subjected to continuing marginalisation.

According to Robert Stepto the African American quest for freedom has been more precisely a quest for freedom and literacy and this dual quest has provided not just a subject but a narrative structure for much of the culture's written literature. Here freedom means the ability to conceptualize the world in ways continuous with one's history, and literacy means the application of historical knowledge as the confluence of personality and situation dictates.

The major part of the plot involves the escape of Raven Quickskill, a fugitive slave, from his master, Massa Arthur Swille's efforts at returning Quickskill to captivity and the encounters Quickskill has. Quickskill's flight from slavery is twice enacted in the book, the first time in his poem "Flight to Canada", and the second time in the narrative.

The historical Canada is the eventual destination where Quickskill, 40s and Leechfield wish to arrive when they flee from South. But, initially, they flee to the West of America where they hear that Canada is not as free as they thought it to be. A freed carpenter returns.

from Canada beaten and crippled. So the historical Canada was not the heaven the slaves thought of. Wherever the blacks go they remain black nevertheless, and one consequently penalized for being black. Cato, the household slave doubts even the existence of material Canada. 40s warns Quickskill about the danger of thinking that there is any place where black Americans can live as simply human beings. He too doubts the existence of a place of refuge. 40s says "Virginia is everywhere" (p. 87).

Even Yankee Jack dissuades Quickskill from going to Canada. But in spite of the revelations of Carpenter, Cato and 40s, Quickskill will not relinquish his dream of Canada as a place of happiness and freedom. For him, Canada is personified beyond the physical plane. In Canada, Raven hopes to find perfect freedom/social, political and intellectual. When he goes there and sees the conditions of the non-whites he realizes the historical and contemporary actuality of Canada is far from his ideal and so he gets disillusioned. Roger Rosenblatt remarks that Reed's central literary joke is also his most sober point: the impossibility of escape from bondage except by way of oneself and the attendant conception of North (Canada) as heaven. 18

According to Reed, there exists a metaphorical Canada, one which has only tenuous connections with the geographical and political actuality which we call by that name. This "other Canada" is an aesthetical ideal, not a place but a state of mind in which there is freedom and fulfillment. Robert Elliot Fox remarks that Reed would have us understand that slavery and freedom are not geographically determined. Quickskill's experiences in Canada make him realize that "Canada is a state of mind" (p. 178). Suzanne Henning Uphans remarks that *Flight to Canada* operates on two planes; the literal level and the metaphorical level.

The literal level takes up most of the action of the novel and on this level Canada represents the political liberation which it has given to the refugees from America. Slavery, the South and Canada are states of mind no longer limited by time and space. Even as Canada can be anywhere, Southern masters are not restricted to plantation in Virginia. Canada is used in the novel on various levels of meaning. First, it is used as the

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literal historical region where slaves might flee to be free. Secondly, Canada is used as a metaphor for happiness and freedom—that is, any set of physical constructs or circumstances which combine to make an individual character happy or satisfied may be referred to as Canada. Robert Elliot Fox remarks that Canada stands for the North which was the dream of both slaves and post Emancipation Blacks—a dream, which, like the American Dream, itself proves false and elusive. In a sense, then, the flight to Canada is a flight to nowhere; to nothing.

What *Flight to Canada* offers is through its movement among a broad assortment of literary genres is an emblem of author's need to be independent of restrictions. It does not merely examine the effects of genre based distinctions, but produces an overt representation of freedom. It clearly eradicates the distinction between what passes for truth on the one hand and imaginative fancy on the other. Quickskill, the fugitive slave-poet, who narrates the life of Uncle Robin, asks "who is to say

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what is fact and fiction\(^{(p.7)}\). Reed blends historical and fictional characters and accounts and liberates himself from the arbitrary enclosures which society attempts to erect around the writer to explore the full range of human thought and knowledge.

**Flight to Canada** is a successful attempt by Reed to deconstruct a variety of cultural assumptions including what the novel is or should be. Reed's novels are books of redefinition of artist's declaration of aesthetic, political and philosophical independence. They not only transform a variety of literary genres but also deny the wisdom of making generic distinction. Joe Weixlmann remarks that Reed's project is pre-eminently epistemological and ethical, designed to return the reader to questions of belief and value.\(^{22}\)

The whole project of modern and Post-Modern African-American literature is to get out of the sentimental and conventional, in terms of voice and then of content. It is initially necessary that one be allowed to tell one's own story. One has to find one's speaking voice - what

Chorus is seeking in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, what Jes Grew is seeking in *Mumbo Jumbo* and maintain its *good* integrity.

As much as about /good-evil dichotomy, Reed's novel is about authorial control - the possession of one's own story. He wants to wrestle the text from those who would control it—be it Harriet Stowe, or even Clio, the Muse of History. Reed directly confronts the mandates of traditional narrative-structure in an attempt to go beyond it. He asserts his artistic freedom to the fullest extent in *Flight to Canada*. Reed's fictionalized slave-narrative attempts to liberate the slaves, not so much from their ostensible masters as from the restrictions of voice and motive. Reed attacks Harriet Beecher Stowe and other appropriators of black history:

"A man's story is his gris-gris. You know. Taking his story is like taking his gris gris. The thing that is himself." 23

Reed exploits Native American Tlingit myth and Raven's myth especially, in the depiction of the character of Quickskill. Zamir points out in Reed's work behind the

African exterior, there is a Native American. In one of the interviews Reed says:

"Raven Quickskill in Flight to Canada was based more or less on a Tlingit legend — a raven myth."25

In the second chapter of the novel, Reed alludes to Tlingits, a native American tribe situated in Alaska.

The mythology of the Tlingit revolves around the adventures and deeds of Raven. The fundamental concept is as raven lived and acted so must we behave. The Tlingit's Raven is a creator, the source of earth's waterways, the one who like Prometheus in Western lore brought man fire and less happily the one who originated sickness in mankind. The mention of raven invokes Edgar Allen Poe. Flight to Canada contains repeated allusions to Edgar Allen Poe. The Raven of the Tlingit Indians is not only a trickster figure like Esu in Yoruba mythology on which Reed develops the character of La Bas in Mumbo Jumbo and The Last Days of Louisiana Red, but also giver of great gifts. He is the bringer of light to the tribe. It is


this opposition which best encapsulates the difference between the Quickskill in the poem and Quickskill who wrote it. In the poem he is simply a trickster using his guile to achieve material ends. But as its author he is a creator and asserts his freedom more completely. Quickskill knows that his poem Flight to Canada is responsible for getting him to Canada.

"And so for him freedom was his writing. His writing was his HooDoo".26

The Trickster figure is prominent in Reed. Shamoon Zamir remarks that the trickster is the heart of Reed's celebration of satire and carnival.27

Reed in one of the interviews says thus:

"You see a lot of trickster imagery in my work without being named that."28

Shamoon Zamir observes that keeping with Reed's ideas about the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic and the multiculture perspective, the trickster-figure serves as a structural element that allows for cross-cultural translation or

28Ibid., 1145.
Raven produces coarse humour and is known for his sensuality, a strain found in African life. It has affinities with Neo-HooDoo also. In "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto" Reed says thus:

"Neo-HooDoo is sexual, sensual and digs the old heathen good good living." 30

Joe Weixlmann remarks that the behaviour of Quickskill accords closely with that of trickster/hero of the Tlingit myth. 31 Robert Elliot Fox remarks that Reed's allusion to Tlingit Indian myth is significant, not only in view of the decimation and dispossession of Native Americans at the hands of Europeans but also in the context of the slavery motif in the novel. 32

The narrative device of Flight to Canada traverses a complicated repertoire of textual references that loops in sources as disparate in context as Tennyson's "Idylls of the King Arthur", Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher".

29Ibid., 1148.


histories of American Reconstruction and the gossip concerning Abraham Lincoln, Mrs. Lincoln, Jefferson and Davies. Hortense J. Spillers remarks that the multiplying textual allusions and freedom of movement that is granted to the spatio temporal economics of the work would suggest that, narrative for Reed is not imagined as a linear progression alone. Reed’s narrative imitates the tricks and intricacies of the loop.

Reed’s Flight to Canada especially the creation of Swille’s plantation known as Camelot with its echoes of Arthurian legends and Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King Arthur” invokes Edgar Allen Poe. The representative of the Southern master, Massa Arthur Swille, seems to prefer death-wrapped, romance and self-abasement. Borrowing freely from Poe’s Annabel Lee, The Fall of the House of Usher and Ligeria, Reed portrays Swille’s rejection of his emaciated wife, his necrophilic longing for his sister. Swille expresses his wish to be buried in his sister’s sepulcher by sea, joined (with Vivian) in the Kama Sutra position. The dual identity theme of Ligeria (the spirit

of Ligeria infusing the corpse of Rowene) and the sister-brother death embrace of The Fall of the House of Usher also come into focus in the novel’s climactic scene in which the spirit of Vivian grabs her brother. Poe’s poem "The Raven" Shadow hovers over Swille and his plantation throughout the novel.

Reed, in his fictional and nonfictional writings, uses the term Neo-HooDoo to describe his reliance upon some spiritual forces. Neo-HooDoo is both a means by which Reed can assert his deeper and abiding sense of freedom and the method which he has selected to create distinctively Black Art. His Neo-HooDooistic approach to fiction emphasizes magic, instead of rational causality, the jumbling of chronological time in the interests of reasserting the presence of the past and also as a means of implying prophecy. It encourages the artist to use whatever he wishes, in whatever combination he wishes, in order to tell a story. Barbary Foley remarks that Reed valorizes HooDoo as a privileged discourse that can through mystical insight penetrate the opacity of a racist and consumerist culture.34

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Reed's *Flight to Canada* reveals the Neo-HooDoo aesthetic in its purest form. It has a multifocal point of view that through epistemological democracy challenges the reader both to determine whom to believe and to question what is real. Fictive characters and historical characters such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Josiah Henson and Abraham Lincoln occupy the same reality. Norman Harris remarks that the juxtaposition of fictional and real characters encourages the reader to employ rational and intuitive modes of knowing in order to assemble as many of the various meanings the juxtaposition suggests.

HooDoo surfaces in *Flight to Canada* as a corporeal force. Quickskill asks himself if it is HooDoo that is writing the poem *Flight to Canada* and punishes Stowe for stealing the plot of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from Josiah Henson. Swille says that HooDoo is "Nigger fever" and he anthropomorphises HooDoo as a strong, real influence carried by Blacks. Uncle Robin says that it is the power of HooDoo which has allowed him to dabble with Swille's will and triumph over him in the end. In highlighting the character of a successful household-slave, Reed brings

self-reliance and Neo-HooDoo together in Uncle Robin. Norman Harris remarks that in Reed self-reliance and Neo-HooDoo merge to create a kind of practical/supernatural Horatio Alger story. In much of Black fiction the writer concentrates on exposing and depicting various injustices done to the Blacks. Linda Sheel Bergmann remarks that Reed's Slaves are not liberated by the Civil War or the Great Emancipation, but they liberate themselves. But Reed concentrates on Neo-HooDoo necromancy.

*Flight to Canada* is the novel in which Reed most effectively uses and experiments most freely with HooDoo concept of time for literary ends. HooDoo time is liberally dispersed throughout the novel. The opening of the novel which is the poem *Flight to Canada* mixes the time of the novel in 1860 with the present time. A fugitive slave belonging to antebellum period travels in a jumbo jet plane and the copies of the poem are xeroxed and distributed. In one of the interviews Reed says thus:

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36 Norman Harris, "Politics as an Innovative Aspect of Literary Folklore - A Study of Ishmael Reed," *Obsidian* 5, i-ii (1979) 47.

"According to Vodoun the past is contemporary. In Flight to Canada I tried to make novelistic use of the concept though everyone called it anachronism. I was trying to work with the old Vodoun theory of time. It never ceases to amaze me how contemporary the past is in our culture."\(^{38}\)

Apart from its concept of time HooDoo is principally used in Flight to Canada as a kind of force which gives the Black protagonist the strength to survive in the face of seemingly hopeless situation. It becomes a kind of faith which sustains and uplifts him. HooDoo is the unseen force behind Lincoln’s plunge into the Civil War and his signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Quickskill attributes his freedom to things unseen. Reginald Martin remarks thus:

"All the black characters turn to this unseen base of theirs as their shield against the harsh aspects of reality. The ability to rely upon the metaphysical saves their lives as well as their dreams."\(^{39}\)

Compared to Mumbo Jumbo, Flight to Canada suggests a greater confidence in its aesthetic capacity to stand by itself, allusions to HooDoo being mainly confined to the novel’s first few pages. These references are simply


pointers and their place is quickly taken by the polemics of Reed's central theme, the critique of monoculturalism. Gerald Duff remarks that in *Flight to Canada* there is an absence of Neo-HooDoo as a primary subject. Only passing references are made to VooDoo, Osiris, Guede and other constituents of the Black Aesthetic. He maintains that the result of Reed's decision to concentrate on satire at the expense of the Neo-HooDoo programme is a real gain in narrative movement and a clarifying of targets of his attack. Matuz Roger too is of the opinion that Reed in *Flight to Canada* abandons Neo-HooDoo and combines satire, allegory and farce to lampoon the slave narratives, particularly Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Reed's basic strategy is an equation between the Civil War and the civil unrest of the 1960s, a parallel impressionistically caught in the images of Lincoln's assassination being endlessly replayed in slow motion on the Late News. Upon this foundation, he builds an elaborate network of connections across a century in the

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situation and experiences of African-Americans. Reed explains this narrative procedure in terms of his concept of Necromancy:

"Necromancers used to lie in the guts of the dead or in tombs to receive visions of the future. That is prophecy. The black writer lies in the guts of old America making readings about the future."42

The metaphorical dimension of the narrative attention upon the present as much on the period of action is proclaimed by one of the novel's most pervasive comic devices - the use of anachronism. It involves a fundamental disregard for the sequence of historical events.

Reed's most obvious method of presenting slavery as a metaphor for the contemporary treatment of Blacks is to present all figures and their contexts as both historical and contemporary. Thus the whole novel juxtaposes the pre-Civil War period with the present, the historical actuality of slavery and with the contemporary cultural slavery to which Reed feels Black Americans, particularly artists among them, are subjected. The effect is incongruous and entertaining. The slave master Swille

lives in an archaic dream-world of Caraelot. The other characters, especially the runaway slaves, lived in a thoroughly modern world of high technology and raised consciousness. Jerome Charyn remarks that time becomes a modest, crazy fluid in Reed's head, allowing him to mingle events in the last one hundred and fifty years in order to work his magic.43

Since Reed perceives slavery and the South as a state of mind rather than spatial and historical entities, he can be liberal in the use of anachronism. Fixed categories of time and space are obliterated. Modern technology co-exists with the frontier primitivism of the plantation and a twentieth century consciousness appears in the mentality of the Black characters of antebellum period. Charles De Arman remarks that Reed's anachronisticality conflates time as a means of quickening his Menippean satire.44 The novel exists at the intersection of the seen and unseen forces and thereby changes many received versions of historical events. This placement also affects the chronology of the plot. As a

function of plot, chronology or time is cyclic. Thus the conflicts the novel develops are not tied to linear time. Norman Harris remarks that the cyclic plot in which technologies and situations of the present intermingle with the slave past illustrates the still politically dominant relationship of Whites and Blacks. 45

Though the historical people and events generally remain within the Civil War period, the trappings of the fictional world are contemporary. TV, helicopters, telephone, golf, waterbeds, elevators, gasolines, Vitamin C, pick up trucks, The New Yorker, Ford Cars and Holiday make their appearance in/antebellum world. Naomi Jacobs remarks that the mingling of the past and present works to evoke the eternal present of slavery in America. 46

The novel manipulates narrative time as an eternal present. The past is subject to change, as certain well-known historical episodes are reinvented in contemporary perspective. The novel freely juxtaposes antebellum


figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Edgar Allen Poe, the Marquis de Sade, Jefferson/Davis and Captain Kid with references to post-cultural phenomenon such as Buffalo Bill, Wild West Show, Radcliffe College and figures like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. The antebellum fugitive slave Quickskill can watch Our American Cousin on Educational Television. The poem which Quickskill leaves behind is xeroxed and distributed to slave catchers across the country. Swille III, the plantation slave-master in Virginia, is translated into a slaveholding multinational corporate head. His estate called Camelot is equipped with telephones and sophisticated electronic devices. Stray Leechfield’s carriage is provided with factory climate control, air conditioning, Vinyl top, AM/FM stereo radio and power windows. Men wear leisure-suits and take coffee-Mata. A fugitive slave travels in a jumbo jet. Barbary Foley observes that the text's numerous anachronisms underline its critique of complacent liberal progression. When house-slaves watch TV on waterbeds in the quarters and fugitive-slaves travel by jet planes, the text's pretensions to depict and resolve historically specific social contradictions are lampooned.

The anachronic setting is not a simple funny backdrop for a minstrel show. It suggests the clustered paraphernalia of our past, present and future are interchangeable. The disruption serves both to negate the sense of history as a linear evolution, a measure of progress and to undermine the Civil War's conventional significance as a watershed in African-American history. Reed's stunning anachronisms resituate variously precise portions of cultural content so that we gain a different cartography of historical fiction. Keith E. Byerman remarks that the games played with time, character and form serve to point out the deceptiveness of conventional perception by foregrounding its arbitrary nature.48

Reed's Flight to Canada can be termed as fiction-history. It maintains an ironic distance from the historical characters and uses inaccuracies and anachronisms to create a suspension of disbelief. Reed feels no obligation to a sound historical method. He refuses even to confine himself to plausibility in his descriptions of historical figures/words or actions for he sees all history as essentially fictional. He plays with

history and even invents facts. Barbara Foley remarks that Reed posits the radical indeterminacy of all historical discourse including his own.49

In Reed's hands history becomes essentially static, a realm of endless and absurd recurrence that is more appropriately a subject of Black humour than of sober consideration. He employs the play of free imagination to manipulate historical facts and events. He debunks both specific historical accounts and the myth of historical progress. Naomi Jacobs remarks that Reed trivializes or transforms the political and cultural significance of historical figures, reducing them to comic characters or simply to common citizens.50 At work here is the voracious imagination that ignores, defies, parodies or reorganizes history because he no longer finds it coherent and explicable.

The inaccuracies and anachronistic use of historical facts and figures in the novel serve a pedagogical


purpose. Based on this non-linear concept of history, the writer invites comparison between their fictional versions of the past and their personal versions of the present. There is a mixture of seemingly accurate detail and fantastic invention. There is an interaction of historical characters with fictional characters. The historical events are interwoven with fictional ones. Quicksill muses who is to say what is fact or what is fiction. This proclivity towards a highly subjective epistemology accompanies an often dubious critique of the content of historical process. C.W.E. Bigsby remarks that the intermingling of fact and fiction in Reed's Flight to Canada is designed to subvert history from within. Recognizable historical figures provide one very effective way to maintain a simultaneous awareness of past and present.

The setting of historical characters against fictional characters results in anachronism. Reed maintains an ironic distance from the characters. This distance is achieved through the caricature or stereotyping of a narrator/ most often third person omniscient on the action and characters. Reed's novel

demolishes the stereotypes of countless historical novels routing Uncle Tom, Scarlett O'Hara and Nat Turner. Here, he is concerned with the unmasking of history and the construction of new paradigms of the past to protect the individual and the race from the evils of more conventional historical fetishism.

Reed's historical characters are, to use his own VooDoo terminology "Zombies", corpses animated by a supernatural spirit, who do the magician's bidding and then return to the grave. Though they have the demonic energy and power of the tribal fetishes upon which they are modelled, they have only the most stylized connection with the real people whose names they bear. And this stylization reflects Reed's particular concepts of character and history. Reed stresses recurrences, the inimitable patterns underlying those shifting configurations and his characters are patterned accordingly. Reed's manipulation and mockery of the historical characters is not an intellectual exploitation of lacunae in the historical records but a flagrantly unhistorical force.

In *Flight to Canada*, Reed parodies the classical historical novel inviting the reader to flout the very
The chief historical character in *Flight to Canada* is the American President Abraham Lincoln whose yokel doke act outwits Swille into financing the North. The Lincoln

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characterization invokes several twentieth century equivalents. Like Lyndon Johnson he is crude and contrived. Like Ford, he is mocked for his clumsiness. His televised assassination reveals the most publicized of killings—Kennedy's. Reed has intentionally avoided establishing a single equivalence between Lincoln and some contemporary President. The character of Lincoln shows Seed's abbreviated gestural method playing against the grain of the archetypal image of innumerable Hollywood and TV Lincolns. The novel shows Reed to be thoroughly conversant with that historical view of Lincoln which depicts him as a conman and schemer who during the Civil War used slavery as an ace of trump in his on-going card-game with the rebellious South. Richard Walsh remarks that Reed's caricature of Lincoln is a paradoxical combination of the idiot yokel of his humble origins and the cunning politician "Abe the Player".\textsuperscript{53}

The attitude of the Great Emancipator towards slavery is vague but he builds it into a moral stance on the basis of pure rhetorical appeal. Joe Weixlmann remarks that the Great Emancipator Lincoln is for Reed "Lincoln the

Lincoln's exploitation of the slavery issue is masterful and shows the President at the height of his powers of deception. He lacks even lukewarm feelings for Blacks. He calls them a curious tribe. Reed's Lincoln toys with the policy of Compensatory Emancipation of Blacks and wishes to colonize the newly emancipated. Quickskill hallucinates that Lincoln drags him and sets him up to be recaptured by Swille. Sharon Jesse remarks that Reed debunks the image of tragic and gaunt Midwest Messiah that historical myth has made out to be.55

The other historical figure vilified is Harriet Beecher Stowe who wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin. Reed views her as he does Lincoln as an exploiter of the Blackman. Stowe pirated Josiah Henson's account in creating her portrait of Tom. This appropriation of white Americans of the blackman's story is an example of the aesthetic servitude which Reed feels African-Americans have been subjected to. Richard Walsh remarks that the question of the cultural element of slavery and the problem of the true nature of the road to emancipation are united in the novel in the


Her implied presence in *Flight to Canada* can be felt throughout the novel, apart from the direct reference to her. Stowe is herself made to represent cultural slavery by her dependence on Josiah Henson's narrative as source for her novel. She tries to persuade Uncle Robin to give her his story so that she can pilfer it just as she had done earlier to Henson's story. But Uncle Robin flatly refuses to give her his story. On the other hand, he hires his fellow slave Quickskill to write his story. It is curious to note that Reed acknowledges in one of the interviews that his charge of plagiarism against Stowe is a tongue in cheek of the scant evidence behind Henson's later reputation as the original of Uncle Tom. In one of the interviews Reed says thus:

"I was having fun with Harriet Beecher Stowe saying that she took her plot in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from Josiah Henson. You know they did meet when she was four." 

But the fiction provides Reed with a paradigm of his concept of cultural slavery. This plagiarism, therefore, stands for the cultural appropriation by which minority

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cultures are suppressed and for the consequent oppression of their people, the essence of Reed's metaphor for slavery.

Arthur Swille, the slave-holder who is directly identified with Rockfellers, runs the country through the manipulation of the economic system. He has even Lincoln under his control. He puts himself above the President of America, the Queen of England and even God. He gambles away his anthropologist-son Mitchell's existence. Robert Elliot Fox remarks that Swille is an extreme example of the monopolizing tendencies.

Imperial, paternalistic, incestuous, sadomasochistic and a drug-addict, Swille has Poe-like fantasies which, in Poe-like fashion, culminate in his destruction by the ghost of his sister. Joe Weixlmann remarks that retributive justice strikes him as it had done Lincoln and Stowe before him when the ghost of his sister Vivian throws him into fire. He engages in necrophalic incest.

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with the body of his sister and forces his wife into the shape of a Southern belle. Swille dies according to the contentions of a Poesque Gothic tale, the decadent culture collapsing from the violence of its own internal contradictions. Linda Shell Bergmann remarks that Reed's slave-masters expose their corruption in their own features and actions. Unlike in the conventional slave-narratives, they need no crushed and humiliated slaves to expose their guilt. 60

Swille as a typical Southern slave-holder cannot conceive of his world without slaves. He believes that the Uncle Tom image of black slaves makes it impossible for them to be anything other than loyal and subservient. Robert Elliot Fox remarks that the obscenity of the Southern slavocracy, a self-styled continuation of the old European feudal order combined here with the callous arrogance of present day multinational capitalism, the power of monoculture signified in the novel by the culture of the antebellum South is embodied in the character of Swille. 61

60 Linda Shell Bergmann, rev. of Flight to Canada by Ishmael Reed, Chicago Review 28.2 (1976) 479.
There lurks in Swille's character a masterful depiction not of mere evil but of the hubris demanded to defy the natural order. He transgresses human limits and constructs a nightmare world to justify that transgression. He turns Camelot into the House of Usher. He resembles Yankee Jack in his eagerness to suppressing all minority cultures. He survives by the power and autonomy of monoculture. He lacks moral scruples and ethical values and is of demonic nature. Linda Shell Bergmann remarks that finally no longer an object of fear and hatred, Swille loses his power and becomes an object of comedy.

The slave community that constitutes Flight to Canada resembles those commonly found in slave narrative and the Plantation Novel. Like the other black characters in the traditional slave-narrative, Reed's characters are not plausible. Addison Gayle likens them to those characters portrayed in the works of Thomas Nelson Page, Van Vectiven and William Styron. He believes them to be nothing more than grotesque caricature of blackmen and

women. There is a hierarchical class-structure among the slave community. They are categorized as House slaves, Craft Slaves and Field Slaves. The House Slaves are loyal, faithful, humorous, lazy, supernatural and docile.

Of the reader of Flight to Canada, Reed demands that he strip his mind of traditional slavehood images and focus on the text because some of the African-American images presented in the novel defy usual categorization. As slave narratives demonstrate, slaves were not one dimensional. For Reed, the Slave's private attitude need not necessarily coincide with his public image. The dissemblance between the two images was a major mode of being for the African-American slave.

Reed’s choice of the anti-hero over the heroic slave image makes it possible for him to question the heroic status of the runaway slave and question the concept of freedom. Through juxtaposition, acts and thoughts of the slaves, he makes the reader understand the peculiar condition of slaves in the plantation society. Charles De Arman remarks that Reed demolishes the preconceived

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Leechfield, one of the fugitive slaves who escapes with Quickskill from the Swille plantation is a player with a good deal of apparent freedom. Yet he prostitutes his talents and joins with the Jewish Mel Leer in a variety of shady demeaning business deals and pornographic pictures. The rewards he reaps money and sexual favours of white women are not enough to justify the self-depreciation he undergoes. He believes that freedom from slavery can be attained through entrepreneurship. Leechfield is deluded by materialistic equation between money and freedom. He finds it impossible to climb out of slavery on the black material success because slavery is not wholly a material condition. Henry Louis Gates remarks that Stray Leechfield exploits the exotic blackness to satisfy the fantasies of a repressed Calvinistic culture. He indulges in blackmarketing. He turns to selling himself, the only property left available to himself. He attempts to purchase his freedom accepting


his status as merchandise. Norman Harris remarks that Leechfield is an entrepreneur with nationalist tendencies. He believes that he can cash his way out of history.

40 is a fugitive slave who escapes from the Swille plantation. Once he escapes slavery, he ceases to advance the quest for freedom and literacy. He feels that it is impossible for Blacks to organize themselves into a unified lot, a problem confronted by nationalists in sixties. 40s simply decides to go it alone. The solution he projects for the conflict he encounters in advancing the quest for freedom and literacy is a powerful one. Norman Harris remarks that whereas Leechfield believes he can cash his way out of history, 40s believes he can shoot his way out of history. In other words, he believes that freedom from slavery is possible only through violence, use of guns. Richard Walsh remarks that 40s reliance on violent means provides his oppressors with a


67Ibid., 121.
Along with Quickskill, Leechfield and 40s are closer to the intersection of the seen and unseen and they represent two different ideologies regarding the means of achieving freedom from slavery. Leechfield and 40s hold nobody, either ethnicity or history, responsible for their position. They want to be loosed from their identity. They are bound by the Southern Planter's socio-cultural framework of ideas and it destroys the self in them. They believe that to retain their self-esteem they must relinquish their racial identity and become raceless individuals.

Cato the Graggado is an overseer on the Swille plantation and a foil for a good deal of Reed's satire against Black, possessed of false consciousness. He is educated but his learning has merely made him more subservient to Western mastery. He is devoted to eradicating heathenism among the slaves. He outlaws

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polygamy, arms and women slaves. Cato is a staunch supporter of Atonism. Like Swille he takes all the slaves to be stupid. Quickskill in his poem "Flight to Canada" refers to Cato as "Yellow Judas" who betrays his fellow slaves to the White master. He demonstrates a lack of commitment to slave community. He betrays the whereabouts of the fugitive slaves and outlaws religious activities of slaves on Swille's plantation. He directs all his energies to please the slave master. He identifies himself with the social ideology of the antebellum South.

Mammy Barracuda is a dominant character, a Machiavellian-like figure capable of doing anything to achieve her goals. She is loyal and devoted to Swille, faithful to the ideals of the antebellum South and contemptuous of Blacks. She accepts slavery as God ordained. She presents herself as the manifestation of the social consciousness of the antebellum South on the Swille plantation. Cunning, exploitation, struggle for power and prestige are the main traits in her character. Charles De Arman remarks that her image is that of a consummate mammy dedicated to the plantation tradition of keeping her male and female counterparts in their place.\(^\text{69}\)

She resembles Nanny in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. Henry Louis Gates remarks that Barracuda is a parody of Henry Bibb's unfaithful wife. Cata and Mammy Barracuda are characters who cannot imagine or idealize reality. The world perceived through their senses is never filtered through any knowledge. Norman Harris remarks that these characters illustrate the maladaptive tradition in African-American political history. They have unswoering dedication to the status quo and they use science, religion and common sense to justify their stand. The poverty of their point of view is humorously illustrated through the novel's point of view and the cyclic nature of the plot.

Reed offers many sorts of models of cultural pluralism as praxis but they contain no easy or certain pattern of solution. He is careful to show the dangers and failures as well as the achievements and rewards of bringing together different cultural orientations. There are more personal modes of cultural exchange like the

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relationship between Quickskill and Quaw Quaw just as we have in *Mumbo Jumbo* the conflicting cultural orientations between the Wallflower Order and Jes Grew. There is little romantic communion here, even though there is a high melodramatic potential for it in this plot of star-crossed lovers - a run-away Negro slave-poet and an Italian princess, their desperate cultural orientations. They discover that they can understand and respect each other better by first of all understanding themselves. Interestingly, a large part of their problems has to do with their conceptions of their ethnic identities within the mainstream culture. Princess Quaw Quaw is an Indian princess, the daughter of a tribal chief. She enjoys the fame that comes from performing ethnic dances at college campuses. Reed shows that the oppression of the people can be turned into a career. Her name suggests 'Squaw' a raven's cry and flightiness tralaralara.

Yankee Jack, an alleged supporter of minority cultures in America actually loots those cultures in order to fill his coffers. Like Hinckle Van Vampton in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Yankee Jack makes a living by pirating minority writing. A translator and purveyor of Oceanic poetry, Jack marries an Indian princess Quaw Quaw Tra laralara in order to gain land-rights from her father and he trains
the girl in the finer things of life so as to rob her of her cultural heritage. He kills her father and makes an ash-tray of his skull, sells her mother’s hand-crafted robes to Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show and buries her brother alive in the Museum. Sharan Jessee remarks that Yankee Jack is a dastardly figure and one of Reed’s most evil characters. He expected his wife to forgive his murder and his plunder of native American culture—in the name of feminism. Only Quickskill is aware of Yankee Jack’s rape of ethnicity.

Aunt Judy’s public image which is defined by her long service of servitude differs from her private attitude. Image of domesticity and housewifery dominate her public image. She helped her children purchase freedom. She wants to dissociate herself from the traditional plantation mistress duties romanticised by Barracuda. She wants to maintain individuality and a sense of identity.

Raven Quickskill is a fugitive slave-poet who escapes from Swille’s plantation. The major part of the plot forms his escape to Canada and the subsequent trails of

his slave-master to trace him and bring him back to Virginia. Quickskill, along with his fellow slaves, 40s and Leechfield, is closer to the intersection of the seen and unseen forces. He is an integrationist and nationalist. Norman Harris remarks that Quickskill's movement towards the intersection takes him to the point where he discovers his voice. His writing becomes a way to achieve freedom from slavery. A black literary artist's struggle for self-definition is well expressed in Frederic Douglas' Narrative: "I might have occasion to write my pass" (p.35). It is writing as escape, a pass-out of subjugation, to liberation from object to subject. Quickskill escapes in his poem, before he escapes in his person. In the fugitive slave-narrative it is the other way round. The slave longs for freedom, then repeats, gives voice to act in the narrative. At the beginning of the narrative, he is under an illusion that Canada is a haven for slaves. He persists in believing that Canada matches the image of his mind. Like Swille, he assumes no difference between the signifier and the signified. Like his master, his misreading brings him to the brink of disaster. But his experiences in Canada make him realize that Canada is not a haven as he thought of and it is not a geographical reality but like freedom, Canada is a state of mind. So, finally, he returns to
‘Ole Virginny’. It suggests that there is no place like home. It is an acknowledgement of one’s own roots. In Harlem, the Invisible Man finally comes to embrace his Southern peasant roots.

While Quickskill is historically speaking a fugitive slave, he is also a black poet looking for liberation from the confines of the Tennyson oriented plantation of Camelot which symbolises the suppressive Judeo-Christian monoculture. Quickskill reveals the actual resourcefulness of individuals in achieving their freedom in such ways that it cannot be misconstrued as Uncle Tomming. He states that he wants to protect Uncle Robin’s story, and by extension his own, from the kind of pilfering Harriet Beecher Stowe had done to Josiah Henson’s story. Quickskill’s dedication to the redefinition of Black literature by writing the story of Uncle Robin is then his real flight to Canada, his achievement of aesthetic freedom.

Quickskill’s works have the power to transform reality. His poem "Flight to Canada" has an interesting

relationship to the novel. It earns him literal freedom by providing him with $200 for his trip to Canada. He realizes that his real freedom, his own Canada is his writing. The writing of the poem is the flight to freedom. Sharafan Jessee remarks that the individual in Reed's fiction finds restorative powers in his art for it can provide him an area in which the imagination is free to transform experience. The poem serves as a synopsis of the action prior to the beginning of the narrative in Chapter-I which opens with Quickskill's reflecting on the writing of the poem. Gerald Duff remarks that the poem functions for him as his aesthetic escape from his old slave-identity. Art sets him free. The notion that the poem is designed to attest its author's independence is fiction for both make it possible for Quickskill to go to Canada and it also sets slave catchers on trail.

Robert Elliot Fox views the poem as more of a reading than a writing providing the same divinatory and interpretable function that Tarot cards, Carrie Shells and


similar tools offer. Quickskill's growth is evident in the difference between the image of his self emerging from the poem and the image from the novel. In the poem, Quickskill is bitter, cynical, vengeful and murderous. He robs his master Swille and seduces his favourite Quadrán. But in the novel he moves beyond anger, vengeance and bitterness and tries to seek liberation through the assertion of self.

Quickskill's work of art changes his life/getting him an invitation to the White House and providing him with money to go to Canada. It parallels with Reed's career as an artist. Reed's *Flight to Canada* got him invited to Alaska by the Raven's Bones Foundation of the Tinglits. Robert Elliot Fox remarks that the publication of Quickskill's poem which puts the slave catchers on his trail symbolizes for Reed the way in which hostile criticism has rendered to catch black artists.

Like *Mumbo Jumbo*, *Flight to Canada* is a text about a text, but in the latter work the Text is not only present

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77 Ibid., 71.
Quicksill's poem "Flight to Canada" is a living organism. It embodies the spirit that makes things happen. Writing about a flight to Canada is what brings the flight to Canada into being. Keith Byerman remarks that Quicksill's poem both makes it possible for him to go to Canada and at the same time compels him to go there since its publication puts slave catchers on his trail. The words of the poem are not referential. The poem does not so much express Quicksill's identity as an independent human being as it embodies that identity. Raven's story is "his gris-gris, the thing that is himself." Language is the instrument of power here, the manipulation of which not only evokes the identity of the spirit but generates the necessity for interpretation of that spirit. Even Swille is forced to take cognizance of Raven as an individual than a piece of property. Thus in Flight to Canada the ability to write is the ability to control one's own identity. "For him (Quicksill) freedom was his writing. His writing was his HooDoo." 79

78 Keith E. Byerman, Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985) 231.

Reed makes the distinction that the only writing which liberates is writing which is itself free from tyranny of conceptual overdeterminations. Raven's writings, like Reed's, dismantle literary conventions:

"He was so much against slavery that he had begun to include prose and poetry in the same book so that there would be no arbitrary boundaries between them." 80

Quickskill also insists on freedom of interpretation. "He did not want to have a cult." (p. 144). At first Quickskill believes in the fixed relationship between the sign and the signified. He believes that the image of the physical Canada matches the image of Canada conceived in his mind. By the end of the novel Raven has come to recognize the arbitrary relationship between the sign and signified and realizes that Canada, like freedom, is a state of mind.

The spirit which the poem conjures is autonomous and dependent neither on the intentions of the signifier nor on any reference to the signified. The freedom of Canada conjured by the poem is entirely separate from, though no less real than the physical Canada. Quickskill writes himself into existence as a human being rather than a property. Writing is his existence and identity. But the earlier

80 Ibid., 88.
slave - narrators, though they wrote themselves into existence and achieved freedom and identity through writing, had to work within the tradition of Euro-American literary conventions. Swille and his cohorts live in a world of Romantic literary convention -- which assumes referentiality, such as Arthurian legends, Scott and Poe.

Uncle Robin is a house-slave in Swille's plantation. Leechfield calls him "House Nigger". His children chastise him about his old ways. His public behaviour differs from his personal attitude. His loyalty to his master appears to be unquestionable. He buys his children freedom and falsifies the accounts. His name has multiple associations. It suggests domesticity. It may also be an allusion to Robin, Good Fellow or Puck, a mischievous figure, a trickster and legendary Robin Hood who took from the rich to aid the poor. All his private acts contradict his public behaviour. He creates the illusion that he is faithful, loyal, docile and unintelligent. He maintains a meek, submissive exterior. But while playing the role of Uncle Tom he is plotting for the take-over of Swille's plantation and Swille is no match for him. Norman Harris remarks that Uncle Robin is a character who epitomizes the slave tradition of knowing how to exploit the
contradictions between appearance and reality. Peter Nazareth remarks that Reed shows that Uncle Tom's technique played an essential role in the survival of black Americans by remaining in the shadows and tomming when necessary. He mixes the slow poison Coffee-Mate in the milk consumed by Swille and tampers with his will. Like Lincoln he is a player. Charles De Arman remarks that Reed by using the contours of the loyal, house-slave stereotype, creates a character who gives the impression of being devoted to his master without actually being so. Suzanne Henning Uphans observes that Reed, in his portrayal of the character of Uncle Robin, redefines the figure of Uncle Tom.

Uncle Robin is not an Uncle Tom but an unreconciled slave with a long-term strategy. Uncle Robin never tries to run away or confront his master with his true feelings.

84Suzanne Henning Uphans, "Ishmael Reed's Canada," Canadian Review of American Studies, 8, 98.
He also convinces his fellow-slaves of his simple mindedness. Everyone on Swille's plantation thinks that he is an Uncle Tom. Swille's Dyslexia makes Swille almost illiterate and totally depend upon Uncle Robin for keeping accounts. Uncle Robin achieves his freedom by never leaving Virginia. He reaches his goal by rewriting the will of his master. Keith E. Byerman remarks thus:

"We have here a version of literary tricksterism." 85

Making a naturalistic reading of the novel, Sandra O. Neale comments that the ending of the novel, especially Robin inheriting Swille's estate is unconvincing. 86 But Peter Nazareth maintains that within the work of art Robin inheriting Swile's estate is entirely plausible. 87 Uncle Robin rejects Harriet Beecher Stowe's attempts to buy his story and hires the services of his former slave Quickskill to write his story. After taking over the plantation, he reduces the role of Christianity and brings

85 Sandra A. O'Neale, "Ishmael Reed's Fitful Flight to Canada: Liberation for Some, Good Reading For All," Callalo/ (Oct. 1978) 176.
87 Keith E. Byerman, Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985) 231.
"the old cults back" (p.171). Uncle Robin finds his Canada without ever leaving the South by creating it out of his own ingeniousness. Suzanne Henning Uphans remarks that the former slave who finally inherits Camelot is a historical paradigm of the contemporary Black cultural scene. Uncle Robin knows that Canada, like freedom, is an idea, a state of mind and not a geographical and physical reality.

Richard Walsh observes that Reed sets the vilified Uncle Tom against the more heroic mode of Nat Turner as paradigms of the slaves, inside and outside the system. Uncle Robin knows all along that Camelot was his Canada. He says "this (Virginia) is my Canada" (p.19). For him, slavery is not a physical condition that is limited by time and space. It is a state of mind as well. He says "Well, I guess, Canada, like freedom, is a state of mind". Robert Elliot Fox remarks that Uncle Robin is intended to be a subversive version of Stowe's Uncle Tom. Whereas


Stowe's Uncle Tom triumphs by dying for his principles, a model of Christian sacrifice, Reed's Robin survives and flourishes by rewriting his master's will. Robin, in fact, has created, through resourcefulness marked by studied duplicity, what we might call "Robinocracy" where freedom functions behind the facade of tyranny and subversion. Joe Weixlmann observes that Robin turns out to be one of the best gamesmen of all times. Power of literacy combined with the aid of HooDoo gods helps him to dabble with Swille's will. Quickskill was right when he says, "Words have the power to build or destroy" (p. ).

Uncle Robin is the focus of Reed's enquiry into the forms of Uncle Tomism. Liberating himself from literary servitude, Reed rewrites the character of Uncle Tom, rescuing Tom from the meek and submissive reputation perpetrated by Stowe, the White author. Uncle Robin's story is a black author's getting right of Uncle Tom's Cabin, bringing the Uncle Tom figure up to the present.

It is only in Flight to Canada that Reed most fully examines the very concept of genre. Related to his asserted freedom from anger and protest and a narrowly

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defined social responsibility and social realism is his rejection of conventional western literary forms. Having explored some of the possibilities inherent in the Gothic, the Western and the detective story pattern, Reed in *Flight to Canada* turns to an indigenous black pop cultural form—the slave narrative. Linda Hutcheon remarks that Reed's *Flight to Canada* signifies upon or parodies the historical and literary versions of the slave narrative as written by both blacks and whites. Reed proposes to renew the genre by replacing the Euro-American generic imperatives with the Post-Modernist construction. Acknowledging his interest in the slave narrative and their influence on his work, Reed in one of his interviews says that:

"I am always reading slave narratives and using materials from them as found in *Flight to Canada*. I am also influenced by slave narratives."

The earliest slave narratives and plantation literature was written in Euro-American literary modes and they served thematically to reinforce the values of the plantation class. Slave narratives bridged the gap

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between the modes of semi-documentary and romance, between the factual and visionary which American fiction had been struggling to reconcile. Many of the slave narratives were given literary shape by white abolitionists. The language was literary and sentimental.

The autobiographical form is one of the ways that Black Americans have asserted their right to live and grow. Stephen Butterfield observes that autobiographical form is a bid for freedom, a break of hope cracking the shell of slavery and exploitation. The slave narrative give us eye witness accounts of the furnace of misery in the Old South. The identity of the slave narrator grows around his desire for freedom. The most common method of dealing with force is by means of guile. To avoid punishment, the slave has to learn to wear a mask. He has an identity of his own. But he should behave as if he were a docile slave. He maintains a double identity and is in a dialectical state resulting in the split-identity experience. Stephen Butterfield remarks that the influence of the split identity experience offers a partial explanation for the predilection towards irony and

When guile and double identity as in Uncle Robin were not sufficient, the slave resorts to violent resistance as the means for getting freedom as in the case of 40s. Leechfield uses black entrepreneurship as a means of liberation from slavery.

Stephen Butterfield remarks that the geographical movement of the fugitive from South to North is the structural spine, the definite feature of the slave narrative as a genre. It involves ruse, pursuit, confrontation, double identity, escape, capture and renewed escape. Slave narratives generally have linear plots. The flight is used as a conscious metaphor for the fugitive slave’s personal and social movement from anonymity to identity, from self-contempt to self-respect, from ignorance to enlightenment and from sin to salvation. The metaphor of flight is applied for the quest for identity. There is a preoccupation as in the case of Swille with whips, paddles, gags and cowhides. The early slave narratives present a picaresque pattern. Like the Spanish rogue the slave narrator tells his life story in retrospect after having triumphed over the brutalizing

95 Ibid., 20.
96 Ibid., 27.
circumstances of his youth. In *Flight to Canada* the fugitive slave-poet Raven Quickskill who escapes from Swille's plantation, finally returns to Virginia and writes the life story of Uncle Robin.

The writer presents a welter of realistic detail designed to drive home the brutality and inhumanity of his experience as a victim. It is episodic in form, disregards causality and exploits the use of coincidence and chance. The individual is engaged in a desperate struggle for survival. His effective modes of expression are irony, satire, paradox, sarcasm, exaggeration and *inneundo*. He survives by strategems. As a trickster he adopts protean roles. The slave-narrative is rarely comic and its personae have a curiously double vision. The slave narrative is designed to destroy the idyllic setting and cultivated society created by Southern romance. It invariably portrays the rude and violent behaviour of the master class and the inhumanity of the plantation system. Didactic purpose is achieved by expository passages formalized by repetition and the focus of the narrative is on heroically individualized character. Several

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introductory documents are incorporated to give authenticity to the text. Douglas' Narrative has several segregated narrative texts, a preface, a prefatory letter, a tale, an appendix, syncretic phrasing, introspective analysis, and internalized documentation.

Robert B. Stepto remarks that the strident moral voice of the former slave is the single most impressive feature of the slave narrative. Once the slave escapes from slavery, he acquires a voice of his own. There are other voices belonging to various characters or appended documents written by slave holders and abolitionists which authenticate the narration of the slave. They create a dialogue of voices. But in Reed's Flight to Canada we have a unified single Text and a voice which Robert Stepto calls "an Integrated Narrative" (p.3).

The language was standard, written English often embellished with rhetorical effects of apostrophe or pathos. The slave narrative rhetoric stems from the writers' Christian perspective. Concrete diction, ironic humour, understatement, polemics and epithet appear in

98 Ibid., 3.
99 Ibid., 3.
slave narratives; even the black writers imitated the standard English of American Whites. The syntax of the slave narrative is usually formal and periodic. At times authorial intrusion is also found.

The language is close to the material facts of experience though it is far from idiomatic and colloquial. The use of description, detail and concrete language are prominent in slave narratives. Use of understatement, parody, irony and shifts in tone between satire and rage are explicit. Stephen Butterfield remarks that the slave experience affects the style of the narrative by impelling it in the direction of parody, irony and indignation. Humour arises out of resistance to racial oppression. The slave responds to tyranny with laughter. Most of the irony and parody stem from social contradictions.

Reed's slave narrative does not follow the simple linear form—that of the protagonist's difficult progress toward freedom from a condition of slavery by which the genre is conventionally structured. He divides his attention between the experiences of two principal characters, the fugitive slave Quickskill, and the

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houehold slave Uncle Robin who remains behind on the master's plantation in accordance with the model of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He uses this opposition to develop a two-pronged argument about the true nature of emancipation and the means by which it is to be obtained and this argument is enriched by a metaphorical interpretation of slavery which anchors it finally to a contemporary frame of reference. Because Reed refuses to depict abject misery and subjection of the slaves, *Flight to Canada* arouses neither sympathy nor guilt nor pity.

Linda Shell Bergmann remarks that Reed liberates the material of slave narratives from the form exploited and imposed by writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe. Hortense J. Spillers remarks that *Flight to Canada* intrudes on the linearity of syntagmatic movement and that Reed and Stowe have nothing in common in either subject or aesthetic object or language. What are in Stowe Yokes and crucifixion of discourse undergo transformation in Reed into the jokes and liberation of discourse from the


system of slavery. Reed defies the norms of the genre in almost every aspect of his novel. The conventional slave narrative is constrained by its moral seriousness, realistic and sentimental portrayal of the brutal conditions of the slaves in Southern plantations whereas Reed's slave narrative relies on fantasy, satire and humour. He gives a satirical and humourist twist to received texts. Richard Walsh remarks that Reed's text effects a transformation of the reverent tone handed down in their text by subverting the dignity of its icons. Reed exhibits a complete lack of concern with the criteria of realism upon which the slave narrative depended.

Reed's artistic concerns place a lower value on the surface coherence of his narrative than on imperatives of his fictional arguments or the opportunistic satirical points to which he continually sacrifices narrative-continuity. As a result of these priorities, the novel unconsciously displays its inconsistencies of character and motivation, of illogical narrative developments, loose ends and mismatched plot lines.

Richard Walsh remarks that Reed's aesthetic decisions are motivated by his concern with affirming the multiculture in the form of his novel, a function for which the form of the original slave narrative is inadequate because of its appropriation as documents for the Abolitionist cause. The Slave narratives were denied the freedom of form through which their authors could have expressed their culture. Reed insists that this co-opting of black literature by white liberals is a contemporary problem. The radical liberals are interested in the social, realist experience of black people and this treatment limits the blacks and enslaves them.

Reed's revisionary interest in the Slave narrative arises from his belief that forms of slavery still exist in modern America under the guise of the monoculture's institutionalized subordination of all other cultures. The material of the slave narrative allows Reed to practise his necromancy/ exploring the analogies it generates in the relative positions taken by various factions of contemporary culture. Here Reed is engaged in the struggle of getting aesthetic Canada by asserting in the novel's form his emancipation from the dictates of the dominant culture.

104Ibid., 62.
Thus Flight to Canada is an intriguing parody of the Slave narrative and Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin as well as a demythicizing irreverent satire on Abraham Lincoln, Southern culture, Civil War and Canada. Reed presents literature as artifice and the priority of the creative artist’s imagination is established. Reed’s work shows that literary language can be used as a transparent medium through which a glimpse of so-called objective reality is perceived. He moves into the realms of conscious history, not through advancement of political programme but through reconstruction of his unique materials: the language, the technique and the genres of literary art.

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