

# Ishmael Reed's Mimicry of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Formation of Neo-HooDoo Slave Narrative in *Flight to Canada*

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**Abstract** Postmodernism has as its major tenet the eradication of master-narratives in favor of marginalized voices. In so doing, it puts forward various strategies which, though different in methodology, are all critical of the dominant exclusionary discourses. Parodic mimicry is one of these subversive strategies which allows the anti-establishment artist to employ the discriminatory discursive practices and skillfully turn them on their heads. African American novelist Ishmael Reed adopts the postmodern technique of mimicry to severely criticize and puncture the racist structure of the United States. In his Neo-HooDoo slave narrative *Flight to Canada* (1976), he takes to task the traditional historiography, showing how a so-called anti-slavery novel like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* employs racial essentialism to reinforce the stereotypical representations of blacks and distort history to the benefit of white dominators. Through a parody of Stowe's canonical work, Reed's novel provides a space for the black consciousness to serve as an agentic subject and re-narrate the history of slavery, abolitionism and the Civil War. This paper aims to depict how Reed manages to rewrite the history of slavery in *Flight to Canada* via mimicking Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

**Key words** *Flight to Canada*; *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; Harriet Beecher Stowe; Ishmael Reed; mimicry

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## **Introduction**

History has always been a moot point for postmodern thinkers. The traditional

view of history as a linear, teleological and progressive movement would not certainly appeal to the disgruntled postmodernists who denounce any homogenous presentation of “facts” as spurious and power-laden. Before the rise and popularity of deconstruction, it was not conceivable to undermine the authority and legitimacy of history because its overbearing authenticity, sanctioned by the establishment, granted meaning not only to the past, but also to the present and the future. However, the advent of the postist zeitgeist in the mid-twentieth century dethroned history and all other “official” perceptions of the world, and paved the way for the emergence of the marginalized accounts which were hitherto either simply overlooked or brutally silenced (McCullagh 5-7; Hutcheon 182).

History (and historiography) found a new significance in the Enlightenment era when the concept replaced theology, for long the sole donor of meaning, and turned into a legitimizing factor itself. But why did history come to play such a consequential role in the period? The Age of Reason with its overemphasis upon Deism, scientificity, rationality and empiricism, would need an alternative discourse to justify its fledgling spirit of progress. Basically addressing the “natural” course of civilizational progression, the discourse of modernity presented history as a linear movement which had started in the Orient and would reach its full culmination in the West. Such a Eurocentric conception of civilizational history was of grave importance in the era of modernity which was witnessing the unprecedented expansion of the Western empire. As a result, it is no exaggeration to say that the empiricist, modernist historiography transformed into an effective instrument in the hands of the Western imperialist to legitimize his expansionist agenda. This notorious complicity between historiography and power was highlighted to a great extent in the postmodern thought which has as its priorities the decentralization of conventional power structures and the reclamation of suppressed peripheral positions (Southgate 27-31).

African American novelist Ishmael Reed is one of the postmodern figures whose preoccupation with history is evident in most of his novels, particularly in his neo-slave narrative *Flight to Canada*, first published in 1976. Reed and lots of other postmodern writers such as Pynchon, Barth, Doctorow and Roth were skeptical of what was presented as historical reality and also the verisimilitudinous mode of its representation (Bergmann 200). According to Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, Reed is vehemently against reading signs as representing “a given reality” (112), an oppositional gaze which makes the novelist a staunch critic of Eurocentric historiography.

Reed is well aware of the fragile shaky position of his race in the

discriminatory United States. As a mode of resistance, he opts for a third choice other than the two widely employed strategies of assimilationism and Pan-Africanist nationalism, and hence goes for what Homi Bhabha, the Indian postcolonial thinker, calls “mimicry” or “sly civility.” Reed, a postmodern author, knows that the total repudiation of black heritage and the absolute rejection of the white culture are both detrimental to African Americans’ quest for freedom, and will only strengthen the dominant racist structure’s grip on power. He thus steers away from direct confrontation, à la the Black Power Movement, in favor of a less costly and more expedient strategy. Similar to those whom postcolonial critics denigrate as “brown sahibs,” “house negroes” or “captive minds” (Marandi and Pirnajmuddin 23), Reed seemingly remains within the limits set by the dominant order by choosing to write in such Western genres as detective fiction. Nonetheless, he resorts to parody as a powerful instrument which effectively undermines the racist atmosphere with its sharp satirical edge. This means that he intentionally and consciously uses the master’s tools to turn the dominant discourse on its head and raze the master’s house, hence the ultimate liberation of the “house negro.”

In his other novels *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, Reed mimics such genres and concepts as detective fiction and the Arthurian quest for the Holy Grail. Nevertheless, the list of items parodied in *Flight to Canada* includes not only literary genres (such as realism and traditional slave narrative), but also canonical books and writers (such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*), political figures (such as Abraham Lincoln) and historical events (such as the Civil War). Earlier in the paper, it was discussed that the postmodern thought rejected the official historiography for its disregard of the “unofficial” accounts of events. Reed’s Bhabhaesque revisionist strategy also falls within this category. He not only rejects the conventional political history of the Civil War and its acclaimed hero, Lincoln, but even undermines the literary history and its practice of canon formation by criticizing Stowe and her renowned anti-slavery novel. Below is provided a brief analysis of the mid-nineteenth century abolitionist school and also of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The discussion aims to shed light on the problematic aspects of her novel which despite its alleged support for the emancipation cause, was still imbued with the racist zeitgeist of the age.

### **Abolitionist School and Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin***

The Abolitionist literary school appeared during the period of mounting political tension in the mid-nineteenth century United States, and is mostly known today by Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, first published in 1852. The school, which was in

fact the literary wing of the anti-slavery movement, depicted blacks as the victims of white slave owners' brutality and racist maltreatment. According to the *official* political and literary history, the abolitionist school, and particularly Stowe's novel, helped mobilize the northern opposition to slavery which ultimately resulted in the Civil War (Washington 18).

Stowe's principal purpose in the novel was to convince her readership that the institution of slavery was corrupt and evil, and thus must be eradicated. However, although Stowe sympathized with the slaves, at least on the surface, her commitment to disrupt the concept of black inferiority was frequently undermined by her own employment of racist stereotypes (Piacentino 135). She assigned the eponymous character a number of quite degrading attributes which were associated with the presumably intrinsic features of his racial identity and essentialized blackness (Robbins 44). Impersonating "the soft, impressible nature of his kindly race, ever yearning toward the simple and the childlike" (Stowe 192), Uncle Tom is shown to receive the Gospel with enthusiastic meekness and be satisfied with his conversion by saying "what a thing 't is to be a Christian!" (Stowe 545). An image of total subservience, he refuses to defend himself or to escape after being heavily tortured on Legree's plantation. Surprisingly enough, Tom tells Legree, who has come to murder him, that he is ready to sacrifice even the last drop of his blood if it would help to salvage Legree's valuable soul: "Mas'r, if you was sick, or in trouble, or dying, and I could save ye, I'd give ye my heart's blood; and, if taking every drop of blood in this poor old body would save your precious soul, I'd give 'em freely, as the Lord gave his for me" (Stowe 537-538).

Serving as a Christ-like figure, Uncle Tom docilely embraces suffering, endures the blows of racism and does not assault back, forgives the people that torture him, worries about the endangered souls of white slaveowners and ruthless overseers, and even converts the savage slaves Sambo and Quimbo like a dutiful messiah. For these reasons, the protagonist is far from a realistic character; he is rather a stereotypical package of virtues (Otter 19-20), who seems palatable to Stowe's white audience because he can never pose a threat to their sense of powerfulness and superiority. As Trudier Harris maintains,

The image of the harmless darky came to epitomize the black man who was socially and psychologically emasculated. Hand-me-down hat in hand, baggy pants slightly torn at the knee, stooped shoulders, head bowed, without sexual consciousness or ability, eyes forever on the tip of the master's shoe, a 'yessuh' forever on the tip of his tongue, this character soothed white consciences and

justified their claims to superiority. (29)

Notably, Tom is not the only character in the novel whose representation echoes demeaning stereotypes of the time. It seems as if Stowe could not eschew the detrimental influence of the racist images of popular minstrel shows and characterized some of the novel's male personages based on the minstrelsy "types" which were firmly established in the nineteenth century American culture (Cimprich 207-208; Richards 204). For instance, in the middle of the tragic occurrences of the novel which invited the audience to sympathize with the predicament of George Harris, Harry and Eliza, Stowe all of a sudden lets in the shuffling, happy-go-lucky, comic characters of Sam and Andy. As a result of the caricatured portraits, the reader's empathy for the fugitive slaves was, at least temporarily, upset by the distancing effect of such minstrel-tinged comic reliefs (Robbins 45). In fact, the characterization of black characters in line with the minstrel tradition is significant in that it inculcates in the mind of the white readership that slavery is not after all a distressing and macabre situation. As Piacentino puts it, Stowe's adoption of minstrel stereotypes was her conscious attempt to pander to southerners' degrading perception of blacks and in this way, to appease their anger at her writing an anti-slavery novel (135).

Stowe's affirmation of colonization was also explicitly interwoven into the plot of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a stance which further reveals the hegemonic and racist implications of the novel. At the end of the story, Stowe notoriously uttered her view about colonization in the form of a letter written by George Harris to one of his friends. This letter clearly shows that to Stowe, blacks, no matter free or enslaved, had no place in the so-called progressive United States and had to return to their ancestral homeland. Totally hopeless with the prospects of emancipation in the United States, Harris comes to view repatriation as the only remaining way to get rid of America's prevalent racism and hence calls for the creation of an African country with a Christian destiny, i.e., an Americanized Africa, by which he meant the colony of Liberia (Otter 20). Having totally accepted white America's cultural and religious superiority, he concludes that

to the Anglo-Saxon race has been intrusted the destinies of the world, during its pioneer period of struggle and conflict. To that mission its stern, inflexible, energetic elements, were well adapted; but, as a Christian, I look for another era to arise . . . I trust that the development of Africa is to be essentially a Christian one. If not a dominant and commanding race, they are, at least, an

affectionate, magnanimous and forgiving one. (Stowe 565-566)

Although many African American leaders and intellectuals, such as William Still, William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass, acclaimed the novel's contribution as propaganda to the anti-slavery cause, there were many others, including Martin Robison Delany, George T. Downing and William G. Allen, who critiqued *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for its degrading depiction of black characters and the racist attitude underlying Stowe's stance with regard to colonization and repatriation (Robbins 106). To these critics, Stowe's characterization "simply replaces one racist stereotype with another that is equally condescending and unacceptable" (Charles Johnson, qtd. in Allen xviii); in other words, although Stowe's plan to promote black American characters to leading roles in a work of art was unprecedented and groundbreaking considering the overpowering Negrophobia of her age, she deserves criticism for her replacement of classic racism with what can be called romantic racialism (Otter 20).

It can be asserted that the characterization of Uncle Tom was a defense mechanism created by white America as a reaction to its own doubts and fears, a reflection of "its own mawkish tears and its own mawkish laughter over the black man, incarnation of its sentimentalized version of slavery" (Slide 26). That was why black activists of the early twentieth century, including W. E. B. Du Bois and Richard Wright, rejected "Uncle Tomism" in favor of a more active and assertive position; as Wright (1965) stated in the epigraph to his renowned collection of short stories *Uncle Tom's Children*, released around eighty five years after Stowe's work, "Uncle Tom is dead!" (1).

### **Reed's Mimicry of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Promotion of Neo-HooDoo Slave Narrative**

Reed uses Stowe's novel as the background for his postmodern satire, mimicking both its content and style only to subvert whites' cultural hegemony and undermine their negative representation of blacks. He knows that Stowe's work turned over time into the touchstone against which blacks' accounts of slavery, known as slave narratives, were evaluated and received. That is to say, following the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, only those slave narratives which abided by the novel's stereotypical representation of blacks were deemed as veritable and legitimate by the white-centered literary canon. The critics maintain that the novel, in spite of its putative attempt to liberate blacks and put an end to slavery, chained them now within the shackles of a demeaning representational strategy, thus another form of enthrallment. Consequently, Stowe's novel, and her representation of Uncle Tom as the epitome of the "good" slave became the yardstick which regulated the

production and reception of all upcoming slave narratives written by both blacks and whites. So the work, which allegedly endorsed an emancipatory cause, mutated into an instrument of surveillance, manipulation and confinement, catering to and reinforcing the white cultural hegemony at the end of the day (Carpio 581). It can be stated that, using Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critical terminology, black slaves, and by extension, all blacks, were never allowed to rise up and speak for themselves; they were always "spoken for."

As Christian Moraru states, Reed notes "the interplay of literary history and the history of 'subject formation'" and sets out to rewrite the former in order to redeem the latter. This means that *Flight to Canada* functions as a "rewriting machine" which challenges and revises the metanarratives, metadiscourses, historical figures and canonized literary works to shed light on their *constructedness* and highlights the urgent necessity to purge them of their naturalized, neutralized halo (99). By casting serious doubts on Stowe's centrality as a white activist for black freedom and also on her novel's canonicity as the ultimate paragon of such a supposedly altruistic political and ideological movement, Reed relentlessly pursues "the symbolic relocation of the subjects that history itself has marginalized" (Moraru 101).

To Reed, Stowe exploits the black slaves' history and silences their authentic voice because "she does not even conceive of the possibility of slaves themselves writing their own stories." For this reason, she regards her narratorial voice as "the only appropriate scribe" to recount and convey the black message (Levecq 286). Moreover, Reed accuses Stowe of stealing the plot of her renowned novel from Josiah Henson's slave narrative *Life of Josiah Henson: Formerly a Slave*. He later admits that the allegation is unfounded: "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" (qtd. in Walsh 186). However, the point is that to Reed, Stowe's agency as a white novelist to address black material while black themselves are deprived of such an opportunity is an incontestable example of theft and unlawful confiscation.

It is worth mentioning that Stowe's opportunistic representation of blacks did not go unanswered as very many writers of the period set out to parody Stowe and her *Uncle Tom* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Reed imputes this retribution to the power of "spirits" who saw Stowe's prosperity and Henson's extreme poverty, and decided to wreak vengeance on her. That is, Reed's *Flight to Canada* falls within the category of vindictive (re-)writing against Stowe and other like-minded white activists and writers who used black material only to serve their

narrow interests (Moraru 102). As the novel reads, Guede, the loa of death and fertility, “got people to write parodies and minstrel shows about Harriet. How she made all that money. Black money. That’s what they called it. The money stained her hands” (9; italics original).

Moreover, the postmodern novelist knows that employing tragic elements in a slave narrative would allow the white abolitionist to enter the equation and “patronize the slaves for their helplessness,” so he opts for satire, parody and comedy as unorthodox, but subversive, choices to disrupt the paternalistic agency of the white culture. As a result, instead of using pathos and sentimentalism à la Stowe to portray black slaves living in abject misery and thereby evoke sympathy and catharsis in the readers, Reed depicts blacks as agents which actively participate in and even change the state of affairs, and in this way, frustrates the reader’s typical expectations of a slave narrative (Bergmann 203).

By undermining the Stowesque representation of blacks and replacing it with a postmodern slave narrative, Reed audaciously rises against any portrait of the black life as homogenous and monolithic, and thus dislocates the presupposed relationship between the signifier and the signified. That is to say, by writing a postmodern slave narrative, he provides a view of the institution “from the other side of the whip,” and besides, employs a style that has not hitherto been exploited by white monopolists, a style which can capture the black experience in all its diversity (Rushdy 115).

To mimic and parody Stowe’s generic and representational strategies, Reed got help from his native culture without which the process of postmodern, postcolonial appropriation would remain abortive. Cognizant that a realist abolitionist novel and slave narrative is forever stained with Stowe’s racist essentialism, he employs Voodoo, an African religious practice which has as its main tenet the conjuration of the spirits of the dead and their perpetual influence on the lives of the living. However, the novelist is also aware that like all other religious and spiritual rites and sects, Voodoo can be manipulated by the opportunistic and the wicked who would misuse its supernatural power and turn it into black magic to satisfy their insatiable lust for power. The consequence of such a draconian manipulation is the zombification of the living which makes them metamorphose into soulless, vegetative beings with no independent existence of their own. In stark contrast to the absolutely dependent zombies, there are people who are “possessed” and guided by the spirits and thus can garner unique advantages unavailable to the ordinary untouched people (Carpio 564-565). In *Flight to Canada*, Reed portrays both zombies and possessed souls to demonstrate how the powerful grip of racist stereotypes on blacks can be countered through the Bhabhaesque “sly civility.”



Reed's obsession with the rites and practices of the black culture, and specifically Neo-HooDoo, the domesticated version of Voodoo among African Americans, gives rise to "a new cultural field at once appropriative, multivocal, and constantly in flux." He contends that Neo-HooDoo is a unique form of African American creative and artistic expression as it is the upshot of the confluence of the African mores and the black slave culture in the United States. Being syncretic, Neo-HooDoo allows for an incremental accumulation of knowledge from a wide and diversified variety of cultures which are all regarded equal and valuable (Mielke 4). This polyphonic ideology, which was primarily a religious mode of seeing and interpreting the world, was employed in Reed's oeuvre to satirize and dethrone different kinds of Western "monisms" which systemically prioritized the white discourse over Otherized worldviews. So for the novelist, Neo-Hoodoo is not merely a means of religious expression, but also an effective strategy "to marry his artistic and his political imperatives" (Rushdy 113).

In addition, the novel's shift of point of view is in line with Reed's preoccupation with the "spirit possession" as one of Hoodoo's integral aspects. The story starts with Raven's first-person interior monologue which is supplanted after around five pages with a third-person omniscient point of view, hence a sign that Reed, as the novelist, or Raven, as his alter ego in the story, were "possessed" by Hoodoo spirits who helped these resistant figures to develop an insurgent text in terms of both content and style (Rushdy 131-132).

Before we get to the analysis of Reed's parodic mimicry of Stowe's novel, we had better provide a synopsis of the story. As its name suggests and closely similar to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Reed's novel describes the lives of three fugitive slaves who flee the unbearable atmosphere of a southern plantation in the hope of finding salvation and liberty in the North. The main plotline of the novel concerning the runaway slaves, and its subplot about the lives of black slaves and their master, Arthur Swille, in the plantation, presents a number of black characters who adopt different survival strategies in the face of prevalent racism, discrimination and white cultural hegemony.

On the one side, we find characters like Mammy Barracuda (the name clearly denotes her subscription to the "mammy" stereotype), and the fugitive slave Stray Leechfield who entirely assimilate white cultural norms and disregard their own distinctive ancestral traditions. There is also 40s, another runaway slave, who resorts to weapon to maintain his newly found freedom and repel the attacks of notorious slave hunters. And most notably, Reed introduces Uncle Robin, named after Stowe's Uncle Tom, who acts out the role of a faithful, selfless and submissive

house negro in the presence of whites, but is in fact surreptitiously practicing sly civility to ruin the white mastery and save himself and all other slaves toiling in the plantation. Befuddled and disgruntled among all these contradictory survival skills is the protagonist Raven Quickskill who, unlike Uncle Robin, refuses to stay in the plantation and escapes with Leechfield and 40s only to find out that the northern United States and Canada are not so much different from the racist South, a revelation which makes him return to the plantation at the end of the novel, then bequeathed to Robin after Swille's death.

A close reading of the above-mentioned characters' responses to the questions of slavery and freedom would shed light on where the novel stands amidst this irreconcilable array of choices. For one, Leechfield Stray, upon finding his freedom in the North, falls prey to the capitalist scheme and gets involved in the pornographic industry. Blindfolded due to the irresistible lure of financial prosperity, he just replaces the chattel slavery's objectification in the South with the capitalist commodification of love and sexuality in the North. In a passage reminiscent of the way minstrel actors played to appeal to the whims of the white audience, Reed explains how Stray posed for pornographic shoots: "Leechfield was lying naked, his rust-colored body must have been greased, because it was glistening, and there was ... there was – the naked New England girl was twisted about him, she had nothing on but those glasses and the flower hat ... And then there this huge bloodhound. He was licking, he was ..." (71).

As his first name and surname imply, Stray has totally deviated from the right path of self-recognition and self-esteem, and now lives like a parasite (leech) which feeds the popular white fancy and is, in return, fed by the wealth coming from the whole demeaning enterprise. As an agent and victim of capitalism, Leechfield thinks nothing of perpetuating the prevalent negative stereotypes about black sexuality since economic profit is the only thing that matters to him at the moment (Carpio 577-578). He even brings himself to earn money as a sex slave, releasing ads reading, "I'll Be Your Slave for One Day ... Humiliate Me. Scorn Me" (80).

His total recapitulation to and assimilation of the dominant order is further highlighted in his conversation with Raven who has come to inform him that slave hunters are in the city to find and return them to the South upon Swille's order. There, he reassures Raven that he has accumulated enough wealth to be able to buy his freedom. Raven protests that paying the ransom money is tantamount to demoting oneself to the level of a tradable commodity: "It's not that simple, Leechfield. We're not property. Why should we pay for ourselves? We were kidnapped." However, he nonchalantly answers, "I sent the money to Swille. I

bought myself with the money with which I sell myself. If anybody is going to buy and sell me, it's going to be me" (73). As a "thing" totally dissolved and absorbed in the racist and capitalist order of the American society, Leechfield fails to bring about any practical change with regard to his low status as a black object. Moreover, he does not care about what happens to other members of the black race since he basically has no racial consciousness. To him, blackness is merely a chromatic denominator of difference with which he can titillate and appease white sexual fantasies.

It goes without saying that the main feature of chattel slavery was its "reification" of the human subject. So the assumption that the process of desubjectification and nullification of human agency ended with the official declaration of the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century is certainly fallacious because as Reed demonstrates via the character of Leechfield and his profession as a priceable sex slave in the pornographic industry, reification and objectification still take place on a daily basis even in the postmodern era (Bergmann 203; Carpio 563).

Reed's characterization of 40s further depicts how a revolutionary and anti-establishment African American worldview, as reflected in the Black Power Movement, can expedite the process of zombification of blacks which started with the inception of the slave trade. While Raven is a poet and wishes to change the world through his art, 40s succumbs to another stereotype which depicts black men as aggressive and violent. Clearly having the black nationalists of the mid and late twentieth century in mind, Reed shows 40s as so implicated in racial hatred and violence that he is totally inseparable from his gun: "I got all these guns. Look at them. Guns everywhere. Enough to blow away any of them Swille men who come look for me" (78-79). Raven censures 40s's attachment to weaponry and violence, reminding him as a writer that "words built the world and words can destroy the world" (81). But 40s does not take him seriously, a motion which demonstrates the widening schism among different African American political and ideological groups: "You got to be kiddin. Words. What good is words? ... Well, you take the words; give me the rifle. That's the only word I need. R-i-f-l-e. Click" (81).

The protagonist was strongly obsessed with the hegemonic process of objectification and zombification by the ascendant ideology and its complicit agents such as Stowe. He notes that "books title tell the story," thus her novel, which was originally titled "The Man Who Was a Thing," can by no means be the harbinger of racial equality (82). Vigorously critical of Stowe, Raven believed that the novelist addressed the plight of black slaves not to improve their living conditions, but

to derive economic profit by prostituting the mid-nineteenth century abolitionist vogue: “*Harriet made enough money on someone else’s plot to buy thousands of silk dresses and a beautiful home*” (9; italics original). The postmodern slave narrative frequently emphasizes that Raven has been trying to find a way to become an active, agentic subject rather than a passive, obedient object like Mammy Barracuda and Leechfield who seem to be irredeemably entangled in the restrictive molds of clichéd stereotypes: “Quickskill thought of all of the changes that would happen to make a ‘Thing’ into an ‘I Am’” (82).

Realizing the futility of his facile optimism about racial equality in the northern United States and its neighbor Canada, Raven eventually comes to this conclusion that freedom is not bound to and conditioned on one’s place of residence, but as stressed in the novel, is “a state of mind” and can be realized only if one manages to liberate his consciousness from the chains of dominant restrictive conventions (Weixlmann 42).

As mentioned earlier, it is one of the main features of both postmodernism and postcolonialism to disrupt the linear pattern of historicity and replace it with a volatile timeframe in which the past incessantly informs the present. This concern with an uninterrupted flow of time is also reflected in Reed’s novel in which he tries to imply that slavery, oppression and freedom are NOT antiquarian issues belonging to a remote past. On the contrary, Reed treats them as contemporary problems which still plague the human society and interpersonal relations because he contends that although the age of chattel slavery is over, the intellectual bondage is still powerfully in place. To notify the readership of the applicability of the slavery/freedom debate to the contemporary society, Reed skillfully and extensively takes use of anachronism to displace the traditional conception of time and place: Raven flies to Canada on a jumbo jet; he and his mistress Quaw Quaw watch the scene of Lincoln’s assassination on television; the characters have access to telephone, car and Xerox machine; etc. All these instances help Reed’s rendition of historical and political events to find cogent and contemporary relevance (Weixlmann 42). By setting history originally in the nineteenth century and then extending its implications to today’s world, Reed is in effect relocating history “from within” (C.W.E Bigsby, qtd. in Rushdy 114). So it can be asserted that he not only rewrites the history of slavery to shed light on its neglected aspects, but also traces its legacy nowadays (Carpio 563). That is to say, Reed’s parody of Stowe and her submissive protagonist along with his frequent employment of anachronism serve “to negate the sense of history as a linear evolution, a measure of progress, and to undermine the war’s conventional significance as a watershed in Afro-American history” (Walsh

58).

Though a classic slave narrative (like those of Stowe and other black writers who followed her example) recounted the black slave's difficult but successful struggle to move out of the hands of the white master and win freedom, Reed's novel has its protagonist return to his place of enslavement and objectification, a gesture conducive to the fact that Reed is presenting a metaphorical reading of slavery and freedom. This figurative interpretation thus nullifies the conventional view of slavery as an extinct nineteenth century edifice and provides a "contemporary frame of reference" for the events of the novel which seemingly take place around the American Civil War (Walsh 59).

By portraying the war as a battle over economic profit and political power, Reed deliberately cuts through the American national identity which has been self-assuredly viewing the final outcome of the war as the victory of the philanthropic, altruistic North over the racist, supremacist South. He was well aware that "the development of a national identity depends on the offsetting of whiteness against otherness through a supposed process of transcendence", so he set out to show that the myth of the white race's "transcendence" (i.e., natural superiority) over all other racial groups had been launched and popularized only to serve capitalist and imperialist purposes. So through showing the limitations and prejudices of history, Reed shatters the possibility of national self-confidence (Levecq 281). Moreover, the white race, represented in the novel by Arthur Swille, supposed to be a replica of King Arthur, the mystical father of the race, is depicted as lasciviously indulging in the same objectionable qualities that were for a long time imputed to blacks: hypersexuality and lechery.

Swille is a sexually pervert slave-owner who sleeps with black women, eats two gallons of slave mothers' milk each morning, practices incestuous necrophilia by having intercourse with the corpse of his dead sister, Vivian, gets sadistic pleasure by watching the films of the torture of black slaves, and is addicted to opium. By demystifying the myth of whites' moral superiority and blacks' sexual and ethical degeneracy, Reed is in effect exposing the bankruptcy of any kind of racial essentialism, promulgated either by Stowe or his contemporary black nationalists. Reed's struggle to stay away from racial homogenization can also be detected in his representation of black characters who unlike those "type" characters advertised by the black exponents of racial uplift, are not flawless and immaculate, but are subject to diverse vices like any other racial group.

Reed's reconstruction of the concept of slavery enables the writer to replace the supremacist white American national consciousness with "a new global vision,

epitomized by Canada” (Levecq 281). The point of note here is that Canada, as a country with the prospect of racial equality and economic prosperity, turns out to be a mirage because the black slaves who went there were the butts of ruthless racist attacks, hence their great disillusionment and dissatisfaction. While in Canada, the protagonist meets Carpenter, another black expatriate, whose “head was bandaged” and “walked with the assistance of a cane.” The wounded man tells Raven how “some mobocrats beat me up” and “left me in the street unconscious” when “I was going back to the hotel after being denied this room I wanted to rent” (159). When Carpenter notices Raven’s disbelief and consternation at the occurrence of such assaults in the so-called free land, he points to the close relationship between capitalism and racism, citing that Canada is no different from the United States in that it is similarly governed by large companies, and moreover, is under the considerable sway of its southern neighbor: “Of the ten top Canadian corporations, four are dominated by American interests. Americans control fifty-five percent of sales of manufactured goods and make sixty-three percent of the profits ... Man, Americans own Canada. They just permit Canadians to operate it for them” (160-161).

With the collapse of the vacuous image of Canada as a free promised land and the later recognition by the protagonist that Canada, as the emblem of liberation for black slaves, is a state of mind rather than a physical tangible entity, Reed touches upon the pointlessness of the concept of nation as a geographical, segregating demarcation. It is exactly for this reason that Levecq calls *Flight to Canada* a “post-national” novel which rejects “race-based nationalism” in favor of “a form of internationalism less bent on national sovereignty than on social equality” (281). In other words, while the novel is strongly particularist, in the sense that it is basically embedded in and tied to African American weltanschauung, it also transcends racial essentialism in favor of “internationalism” and “multiculturalism,” which harkening back to Bhabha’s theories, make possible the symbiosis of differential structures and positions (Levecq 296).

The dénouement of the novel is of grave significance as it demonstrates how Bhabhaesque sly civility benefits a black slave who behaves like an Uncle Tom, but at the same time aspires to white power and authority. Undermining the mentality of Uncle Tom whose subservient and passive demeanor towards the white master makes him an easy target of injustice and discrimination, Uncle Robin “symbolizes the slave whose apparent submission to Master and Church ... is an elaborate and profitable ruse.” Unlike Raven who decides to pursue freedom elsewhere, Robin stays in the notorious place under the veneer of an obsequious loyal servant and at

the end of the day, wins the whole plantation (Mielke 4).

Robin deals the final blow to Swille's legacy and the entire white race when he manipulates his master's will in such a way that the whole plantation is legally bequeathed to him. Interestingly enough, Stowe once again appears at the end of the novel where she telephones Robin to ask for permission to write the story of his lofty rise from rags to riches. Aware of Stowe's exploitative and opportunistic background, he dismisses her offer and when she insists that she needs the money because she wants to purchase "a new silk dress," he hangs up the phone on her (174). Robin has in fact commissioned Raven to compose his story because unlike Stowe, who zombifies characters into fixed stereotypical clichés, the protagonist provides panoramic and polyphonic accounts of the black community and its diversity. The noteworthy and distinguishing feature of Raven's story is that its originality and syncretism makes it impossible for white opportunists to steal and exploit it as they did in the case of Henson's slave narrative.

### **Conclusion**

According to Mielke, "resourceful artists can harness stereotypes for their own purposes" (4). In line with this subversive spirit, Reed managed through his mastery to prove that "the dispossessed can manipulate stereotypes, turning them into weapons with which to destroy those who impose them" (Carpio 577). In other words, it is via his artistic juxtaposition of fact and fiction, historical figures and literary myth, realism and parody, and verisimilitude and exaggeration that Reed draws our attention to the preposterousness of absolutist modes of thinking and their limitations (Bergmann 200).

One might construe Reed's employment of Western genres like detective fiction or texts of conventionally monologic nature like the slave narrative as the evidence of his dependence on the mainstream culture. However, Reed's relationship with the power structure is totally different from that of Leechfield and other assimilationist characters of the novel because his seemingly imitative aesthetic strategies are devised from the beginning with the intention of puncturing the very imitated genres and by extension, the discriminatory atmosphere of the racist and capitalist American society. As Moraru states, it is true that Reed "parasitizes" on the Western "host" culture, but he does it with the purpose of "subverting it as another, apparently paradoxical 'master narrative'" (101); Reed is the real mimic man.

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