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THE RETURN OF THE DEAD: POSTMODERNIST POLITICS OF RE-VISIONISM AND AFRICAN/ AMERICAN HISTORY OF DIFFERENCE IN ISHMAEL REED'S *FLIGHT TO CANADA*

In Flight to Canada the author exploits a particular African American form of rewriting – Signifyin (g) - and a postmodernist distortion of the slave narrative genre in the attempt to write a revisionist history of one of the most important historical events in African American history, the Civil War. He combines certain aspects of NeoHooDooism, Reed's literary method based on African American oral tradition of folk tales and religious practices such as Voodoo, with a wide range of postmodernist strategies. This is how he manages to make us feel the past in the present and, at the same time, to underscore a hidden political agenda and his concern with a true meaning of political and cultural emancipation of African Americans in the past as well as in the 1960s. Tied with a (postmodernist) need to question the real nature of the world we all live in, Reed's novel opens up some new horizons and sheds light on both African American and our own history.

Key words: NeoHoodoo, rewriting of African American history, postmodernist strategies, distortion of slave narrative genre, political and cultural emancipation of African Americans, past in the present

"Time past is time present," remarks Ishmael Reed (1978:6) in the introduction to *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*. Maybe it is this simple sentence that best encapsulates his politics of narrative representation in *Flight to Canada* – the novel which most literary critics see as a "climatic moment of his adventures into history" (Moraru 2000). Here the author employs a particular African American form of rewriting – Signifyin (g) - and a postmodernist distortion of the slave narrative genre in the attempt to write a revisionist history of one of the most important historical events in African American history, the Civil War. As in *Mumbo Jumbo*, the author combines certain aspects of NeoHooDooism with a wide range of postmodernist strategies creating a feeling of the "presence of the past". It is this presence that allows Reed to lay out his hidden political agenda and his concerns with a true meaning of political and

cultural emancipation of African Americans in the past as well as in the 1960s.

McGee (1997:26) claims that Reed's choice of Haitian vodun as the basis of his aesthetic justifies his postmodernist politics of representation in the political realm as well; Haitian art is like Reed's writing because it combines universal forms with the individual artistic aspirations. Like their African ancestors, Haitian artists offer a distorted picture of reality and primarily keep their focus on form more than on content. It is important to keep in mind that Haiti is inscribed in history as the first slave colony to attain independence, and thus functions as a beacon of possible autonomy and social liberation.(McGee 1997:27). While I find McGee`s assertion with regard to the focus on form significant for this novel, I disagree with the implied view that Reed is less concerned with the content of his novels. It is the overlapping of the form and content (and the underlying historical and ideological context) that plays the crucial role in *Flight to Canada.*

The plot revolves around the three slaves, Leechfield, 40s and Quickskill, who have fled the plantation of their slave owner, Massa Swille. A true embodiment of the Old Southern culture, Massa Swille is attached to his property, slaves included, and cannot stand the idea of disobedience. Three of his slaves are servile and obedient: Cato, his illegimate son; Uncle Robin (who is loyal only on the surface while in reality he is plotting against his master); and Mammy Barracuda, a real mistress of the house. Mrs Swille is a well-mannered Southern lady who is too weak to run the household possibly because of her signs of anorexia. The plot reaches its peak when the Master gets mysteriously killed and the whole estate, by means of a skillful scheme, gets in the hands of Uncle Robin and his wife. The new owner invites Quickskill to return to the plantation and write his biography.

It is clear that a distorted presentation of reality as linked with the focus on form occupies the forefront of the novel. What immediately attracts the reader's attention is a three-fold configuration of the novel - the three parts which overtly ridicule the history of the genre and the course of African American political history: "Naughty Harriet," "Lincoln the Player" and "The Burning of Richmond." From the onset Reed reveals a (distorted) picture of historical reality of the first run-away slaves whose stories were appropriated either by abolitionists, or white authors like the "naughty" Harriet Beecher Stowe. In this respect, one cannot overlook Reed's postmodernist insistence on the demystification of myths that stem from African American tradition including the sacred status of the first slave narratives. The apparent fragmentation of

Flight to Canada draws attention to the impossibility of telling an authentic slave narrative – at least in the peculiar historical and political moment of its appearance. But Quickskill sheds light on the other side of this historical moment which eventually turned into a profitable source of income for some anti-slavery lecturers who "often mounted the platform and talked about their treatment from hickory whips, lashes made of rawhide strands, so convincingly, it was difficult to tell the real sufferers from the phony ones" (Reed 1967:91). It seems that those who wanted to exploit the original slave narratives for their own purposes came from both sides.

The author engages in another postmodernist experiment by displacing the chapter titles and their contents. "Naughty Harriet" predominantly features a Lincoln-Swille meeting whereas "Lincoln the Player" focuses on Quickskill`s stay in the Emancipation City and the latest developments on the Swille plantation, including Swille`s inexplicable death. Instead of dealing with the Civil War theme, "The Burning of Richmond" revolves around Quickskill`s anti-slavery lecture in New York and his arrival in the alleged slaves` paradise – in real Canada. However, Reed misleads the reader at first. The first few opening pages always follow the theme indicated by the title, but then Reed drifts off into different topics. For instance, at the beginning of "The Burning of Richmond" there is an excerpt from the newspapers about Jefferson Davis that was evidently made up by the author himself. The first chapter opens up in the same manner by retelling the capture of Davis and the fall of the South. But the next chapter is immediately cast in a different setting, and takes place at the anti-slavery lecture in Buffalo, New York.

In fact, the strategy of displacement actually points to the underlying convergence of aesthetics and politics provided that there is some sort of connection between the narrative parts and their titles. The character of President Lincoln occupies the major part of "Naughty Harriet" because the historical records consider her book to be the cause of the Civil War. "So you`re the little woman who started the big war," President Lincoln was supposed to have said" (Reed 1967:7). McGee (1997:37) makes a convincing remark that although the book did not call to arms, "it certainly helped to shape the perceptions of social reality without which the war would have been unthinkable". What Reed seems to target is this process of shaping the perceptions of social reality through speech and writing that can be influenced and manipulated by the (literary) authorities. By exposing the historical relation between Stowe's book and the larger historical context, he emphasizes the effects of historical violence that writing and speech have to bear in the process of expropriation

(Reed 1967:37). The author advocates the same idea in *Mumbo Jumbo* in the image of the Talking Android (Reed 1972).

It is not surprising that the novel`s second part, "Lincoln the Player," mostly centers around the nature of slavery as tied to the destiny of fugitive slaves in the novel. Since President Lincoln is revealed as a skillful politician, Quickskill, 40s and Leechfield suffer the historical consequences of his indecisiveness concerning the abolition of slavery. This unfortunate situation prolongs their status as Swille`s material property devoid of any human dignity – the theme that the novel repeatedly brings up. Hence, Quickskill refers to himself as a "thing," a "property," and finally as a linguistic presence in the text itself –"It" (Reed 1967:82-85).

The last part, "The Burning of Richmond," alludes at a different kind of war that was won on a fictional battlefield. When Quickskill`s friend Carpenter gets beaten up in "free" Canada, he realizes that winning the war on slavery would not necessarily bring freedom. Historical change is a continuous process in time before it can manifest as a new social reality. This is probably the reason why Reed has a house slave Uncle Robin get the plantation, and literally win his own war on freedom. It is Uncle Robin`s act of stealing from his master ("The Burning of Massa Swille`s Plantation") that sets Quickskill, 40s and Leechfield free. Although this new position would make Uncle Robin and his wife culturally and socially influential, they quickly decide not to follow the Swille tradition by hosting some artistic workshops in the vacant rooms of the castle.

Reed contrasts Uncle Robin and Quickskill with Leechfield and 40s with regard to their understanding of the historical force of slavery that holds them in its grip. Uncle Robin is actually a trickster figure whose origin may be traced to folk tales of African American oral tradition (Gates 1988). Uncle Robin has a dynamic vision of the present and the future because he systematically undermines the foundations of the system that holds him in bondage. Even though his elaborate scheme of forging Massa Swille`s signature and "dabbling" with his last will is successful, the fact is that he has obtained his fortune by fraud. Uncle Robin has figured it all out: the best way to beat the enemy is to think like him. He has stolen from his master in the same manner as his master has stolen from him by using the letter of the law. As already suggested, the author engages in the same deflation of white/Eurocentric ideologies of domination in *Mumbo Jumbo*. The whites are keen to make African Americans adopt the "white" reasoning and "white" values, and thus "have the white talking out of black" (Reed 1972:80).

This is certainly true of Leechfield, an entrepreneur and a representative of black middle class, who is keen to integrate into the

dominant white society and acquire a lot of money. 40s is a militant nationalist whose dominant drive in life is a selfish need for self-preservation. Obviously, this character was designed to launch Reed`s critique of the Black Power Movement in the early 1960s. In line with its militant rhetoric, 40s also relies on the power of weapons and preaches total separation from the Whites and their way of life (Martin 1988:14). He too has a limited vision of his own history because he willingly supports his status as a fugitive, and has no intention of becoming truly free.

But Quickskill, Reed`s literary analogon, is different. He is a writer whose act of writing literally and metaphorically sets him free. Quickskill finds his own voice that makes him fully aware of his own past and present. However, Harris (1988:119) remarks that Quickskill is the most interesting character because he shares some qualities of the other two fugitives by being both integrationalist and nationalist. I strongly disagree with Harris because I cannot find any evidence in the novel that might confirm such a claim. It is true that he wishes to break free and to integrate into American society as a free individual, and that he is primarily concerned with raising the (historical) consciousness of his fellow comrades. But Quickskill`s understanding of the relevant African American issues is not based on integrationalist intentions such as Leechfield`s who is more than willing to renounce his own cultural heritage at the expense of becoming a "true" American. Unlike 40s, Quickskill does not resort to arms as a principal means of fighting back against the oppressive white society, and does not withdraw into isolation. In his own quest for freedom and literacy, Quickskill has realized that the key to authentic emancipation does not lie in assimilation or violent separation. The key lies in (creative) individualism which is based on a profound awareness of one`s own cultural heritage, both African American *and* American. Politically and culturally speaking, Quickskill`s writing has made him into a free agent and an active participant in a dynamic totality of the past and the present moment:

> *It was his writing that got [Quickskill] to Canada. "Flight to Canada" was responsible for getting him to Canada. And so for him, freedom was his writing. His writing was his HooDoo. Others had their way of HooDoo, but his was his writing. It fascinated him, it possessed him; his typewriter was his drum that he danced to*. (Reed 1967:88-89).

Clearly the political impact of free writing is very important to the author. He counters Quickskill`s dynamic role in the process of literary emancipation with static historical perspective of Mammy Barracuda and Cato, who are keen to maintain the slave-master relationship and

to justify its necessity (Harris 1988:118). It is important to see that they do not view their position in history in the same way. Whereas Mammy Barraccuda obeys her master in order to have power over other slaves, Cato knowingly serves his own father who actually holds him in a voluntary confinement. It seems that both slavery and emancipation are matters of choice and power and that they mean more than simply the condition of being enslaved or free. Reed indicates that the condition of slavery actually stands for Mammy Barracuda`s and Cato`s unreserved support of a slaveholding system and a total disrespect for their own tradition. It is obvious that their perception of the (white) culture is devoid of "any knowledge of their own history," so they "glaringly and humorously illustrate the maladaptive tradition in Afro-American political history" (Harris 1988:115). The underlying irony that Cato was given a Ph.D. only reinforces the author's idea from *Mumbo Jumbo* that the aim of educational and institutional manipulation in a predominantly white society is to prevent young African American intellectuals from becoming aware of their own heritage and developing critical reasoning (Reed 1972:80). This naturally makes them "slaves" to the institutions of the dominant culture.

Like Quickskill, Reed himself has violently defied artistic slavery by refusing to adhere to the rules imposed by white and the New Black aestheticians (Martin 1988:1-21). His NeoHoodoo "aesthetic disobediance" seems to be the only way to emancipation because it "functions as a political trope" (Moraru 2000:108). As already suggested, Reed revises the slave narrative genre by destroying its formal structure. But in this process he signifies on the distorted perceptions and misrepresentations of African Americans in the Western literary canon, as exemplified in the classic *Uncle Tom`s Cabin*. The author subverts the credibility of the novel in the character of Uncle Robin. He plays the role of Stowe`s Uncle Tom so convincingly that he manages to deceive the whites. Although he knows that he has inherited the Swille estate, Uncle Robin sits peacefully in the courtroom "gazing at the ceiling. His arms [are] folded"(Reed 1967:166). The image of "a simple creature" and a docile master`s servant is reinforced when Robin promises Swille`s relatives that "[He`s] going to run it just like my Massa run it," he [says], clasping his hands and gazing toward the ceiling (Reed 1967:34). "If the God Lord would let me live without my Massa – Oh, what I going to do without him?"(Reed 1967:167-168). The image of "gazing at the ceiling" is repeated twice as if to emphasize Reed`s subversive process of signifying on the (white) image of African Americans as being docile, superstitious and dependant on the whites, as the last quotation ironically indicates.

The canonical status of *Uncle Tom`s Cabin* is further undermined by revealing a true identity of its author. It seems that "naughty" Harriet Beecher Stowe had appropriated some material from Josiah Hanson`s book as a source for her novel. Although she paid Josiah Hanson credit in her *The Key to Uncle Tom`s Cabin*, the source has been practically forgotten. The damage has been done because Josiah Hanson`s story "was all he had. His story. A man`s story is his gris-gris. It`s like robbing a man of his Etheric Double." (Reed 1967:8). The reader also learns that the principal motivation behind this theft was Harriet`s desire to buy more silk dresses. But the price she paid was too high, as the author notes:

> *Harriet paid. […] Guede 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. (…) When Lord Byron came out of the grave to get her, the cartoon showed Harriet leaving her dirty stains all over Byron`s immaculate and idealized white statue. Did Josiah Hanson do this?* (Reed 1967:8)

Harriet`s misconduct arose the anger of Voodoo gods, such as Guede, who took revenge on her by making her the object of scorn and ridicule: "When you take a man`s story, a story that doesn`t belong to you, that story will get you" (Reed 1967:9). But Reed hints at another reason for the Voodoo revenge against Harriet. The old gods may reveal themselves only to those who are not "too hard-headed and mean-minded to see" (Reed 1967:10). Although Harriet claims to have received divine inspiration to write the novel ("I was an instrument of the Lord"), the author points to Christian beliefs as a possible source of her narrow-mindedness and moral corruption (Reed 1967:10). Obviously, Reed intends to avenge Josiah Hanson through his process of rewriting: Quickskill will put "the wichery on the word," so that the whites would not be able to appropriate his story. (Reed 1967:66).

Both Quickskill and Uncle Robin attain freedom that would have remained unattainable if it had not been for their effort to become literate. But the Judge reading Swille`s last will wonders if Uncle Robin will be able to run the plantation. According to science "the Negro doesn`t …well, your brain – it`s about the size of a mouse`s. (…)Are you sure you can handle it? Juggling figures. Filling out forms" (Reed 1967:167). The new owner`s answer to this absurd scientific finding is even more ridiculous. Uncle Robin`s brain has grown a lot over a long period of watching Master Swille, so now he can run the estate all by himself. By overtly ridiculing science, one of the main master narratives of Western culture, Reed wants to debunk the white misconceptions of

African Americans as incapable of abstract thinking, and of producing literary works in general. Swille`s catchers are not entirely convinced that Quickskill might possess some "poetic abilities," and that "[African Americans] are not literal-minded, as Mr. Jefferson said" (Reed 1967:63). This is why Swille says that the worst betrayal of all is his "trusted bookkeeper" Quickskill who forged passes and destroyed invoices of slave purchases (Reed 1967:35). Swille complains to Lincoln: "We gave him Literacy, the most powerful thing in the pre-technological, pre-post-rational age – and what does he do with it? Uses it like that old Voodoo - that old stuff the slaves mumble about" (Reed 1967:35-36). The juxtaposition of literacy and Voodoo receives further emphasis when seen as a comparison between the status of literature and the non-canonical status of Reed`s slave narrative as well as Quickskill`s Hoodoo writing (McGee 1997:38).

The author signifies on the slave narrative at the stylistic level as well. Strikingly enough, his narrative blends formal and colloquial language to form a mixture of "contemporary bathetic language" that is composed of the discourse taken from popular culture (Martin 1988:71). The syncretic blending of contemporary lexicon (by use of anachronisms) grounds the narrative in reality providing for a satirical view of the present. But it also creates and evokes the oral background of African American literary tradition. Ostendorf remarks that performance and style are of central importance in oral culture, which allows for constant linguistic invention by means of hosting loan words, slang and neologisms (Martin 1988:71). Unlike the first slave narratives, Reed`s narrative renders typical Southern register and intonation, black slang, and neologisms which create "the fictive illusion of real speech" (Martin 1988:72). The reader can certainly imagine Uncle Robin express his gratitude for being given the master`s plantation in the following words: "I deem it a pleasure to be so fortunate that God would ordain that I, a humble African, would be so privileged as to have a home in Virginia like this one. Why, your Honor, it`s like paradise down here. The sun just kinda lazily dropping in the evening sky. The lugubrious, voluptuous tropical afternoons make me swoon, Judge. Make me swoon" (Reed 1967:167). The instant recognition of a typical manner in which a black person addressed a higher authority is interrupted by formal words such as "lugubrious" and "voluptuous." It is clear that, by putting these words into the mouth of Uncle Robin, the author both mimes and parodies the pre-war Southern literary style. "The swooning effect" of the South may be felt in the scene in which Uncle Robin and his wife enjoy their first breakfast in a new home while "The whippoorwills were chirping outside. In the distance a Negro

harmonica could be heard twanging dreamily" (Reed 1967:170). "The whipporwills" and "yokel dokel" are only two examples of Reed`s lexical experiments in this novel. He employs these diverse lexical, orthographic and stylistic devices with syncretic freedom and chooses only those "which are most effective in illuminating the fictional situation he has created," as the courtroom scenes illustrate. (Martin 1988:74).

The courtroom scene ironically points to a fact that the novel Signifies on the tradition that arose of the attempt to counter the Western views (of Hegel and Locke, among others) that the persons of African American descent could not produce literary works (Gates 1987: 54). Although Quickskill earns the reputation of a distinguished poet whom President Lincoln invites to a reception at the White House, his main concern is existential; he is anxious to avoid getting caught by Swille`s catchers. In other words, Quickskill is free from the values and limits posed by the Western canon. He neither seeks recognition nor official status from his masters on the basis of his writing skills. Writing as Voodoo means a refusal of canonical norms and aesthetic values that determine the reception of a text within certain literary tradition (McGee 1997:39). For Quickskill, his Voodoo writing incorporates his own rules of artistic freedom because "His words are his weapons. He is so much against slavery that he has started mixing the genres, including both prose and poetry, "so that there would be no arbitrary boundaries between them" (Reed 1967:88-89). Moreover, Quickskill prefers Canada to slavery, even if Canada might turn out to be death or exile.

The novel signifies on "artistic slavery" to white aesthetic values that began with the first slave narratives, and has been haunting Quickskill (and the black writers) ever since. In choosing death over slavery, as McGee (1997:40) claims, Reed`s novel and the tradition of slave narrative and history defy the instrumental logic of reason that has dominated the age of modernity ever since the Enlightenment. Hegel`s description of the master-slave relationship, in which the slave would prefer bondage to death, marked the peak of the Enlightenment`s principle of reason. Inherent in the African American historical experience of slavery, the notion of death resurfaces in this novel as an antithesis to artistic slavery. As Reed himself experienced, this death can also take the shape of a voluntary literary "exile" of African American writers who are not willing to abide by any kind of (white) literary rules (Martin 1988: 22-46).

Relatedly, the novel Signifies on the history of all those who chose death over bondage, which is what Quickskill would have done if he had been caught by Swille`s men. By rewriting history from the African American perspective, the author Signifies on the (literary) history of the

United States that is monolithic and oppressive (McGee 1997:41). But his revisionist history, rendered through the eyes of Quickskill, Uncle Robin and other characters, undermines the traditional status of history as a master narrative. His postmodernist rewriting is made possible by the fact that it is "Strange, History. Complicated, too. It will always be a mystery, history. New disclosures are as bizarre as the most bizarre fantasy…Who is to say what is fact and what is fiction?" (Reed 1967:7-8). Bearing in mind Ostendorf `s claim that history is (re) written from the perspective of the winners, it is not difficult to see the underlying motif for Reed`s deliberate lack of distinction between historical facts and fiction. By analogy, the author uses historical facts as tropes (to support his fictional ends) because the production and reception of the first slave narratives, and possibly the whole African American tradition, have been strongly influenced by the whites in power and their perceptions of social reality. The power inevitably lay in their freedom to create and fabricate historical facts that were often biased (Martin 1988 84-90).

This is the reason why Reed`s narrative is practically grounded in a subversive postmodernist strategy of apocryphal history (McHale 1989). His version of African American history abounds with absurd situations depicting the historical personages from a completely different angle. The best example is Abraham Lincoln who pays Swille a visit and is "fiddling around and telling corny jokes" (Reed 1967:22). Swille criticizes him for his lack of refinement and culture: "And your speeches. What kind of gibberish are they? Where were you educated, in the rutabaga patch? Why don`t you put a little pizazz in your act, Lanky?" (Reed 1967:24). The simple-minded Lincoln calmly withstands Swille`s insults (the worst probably being that haughty aristocrats, like Mr and Mrs Davis, call him the "Illionois Ape"), and fights back only when Swille makes some indecent comments about his wife (Reed 1967:26). But "Old Abe" is actually a cunning politician, "the player" as Reed calls him, because his main intention is to get Swille finance the war at all costs.

Reed turns to the postmodernist strategy of anachronism as a source of humour by having the twentieth century material culture superimposed upon the old South (McHale 1989: 93). Quickskill escapes from his master`s plantation on a *jumbo jet,* and General Robert E. Lee receives a *telephone call* from Swille (Reed 1967:3, 30: emphasis added). The slaves at Massa Swille`s plantation secretly listen to Lincoln`s Emancipation Proclamation broadcast on the *radio* whereas his assassination is covered live on *television* (Reed 1967:57, 103; emphasis added). The tension between past and present is mirrored at the structural level in the form of a non-linear plot development. For instance, the reader is aware that

the poem "Flight to Canada" is actually written afterwards, even though it features as a prologue to the novel *Flight to Canada*. At the beginning of the novel, Yankee Jack and his Native American wife Quaw Quaw are happily married, although she has already realized that he uses her father`s skull as an ashtray. As Martin (1988:74) points out, this and other Reed`s novels exhibit signs of dystaxy – the disruption of linear narrative – which functions in accordance with the Voodoo synchronic vision of time as "a circle of revolving events, while past and present are simultaneous". It is this meeting point between past and present that allows the author to mimic the African oral culture and construct historical parallels for present-day events, as implicit in his use of the Voodoo concept of necromancy. This vision of time teaches that past can be our present because "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" (Walsh 1993: 60).

The future, in *Flight to Canada*, are the turbulent 1960s which marked the beginning of political emancipation of African Americans, just as the Civil War brought the institution of slavery to an end. For example, the scene of the Swille-Lincoln encounter is actually a realistic portrait of the Lincoln administration, and a witty satire of contemporary political life. Although President Lincoln tries to sound determined about the Union cause when he enters Swille`s study, the whole issue of slavery is exposed as a mere political strategy that has nothing to do with true emancipation. "The Great Emancipator" is indecisive and "a little washy-washy" concerning the abolition of slavery because "if you`ve read my campaign literature, you`d know that my position is very clear. What a man does with his property is his business" (Reed 1967:35). But Reed`s satirical edge cuts even deeper. Lincoln has some nationalist tendencies, as he explains to Swille:

> *I got it! We buy up all the slaves and then tell them to go off somewhere. Some places like New Mexico, where nobody`s hardly ever seen a cloud and when they show up it looks like judgement day, and where the cactus grows as big as eucalyptus trees, where you have to walk two miles to go to the outhouse (…) Other times I think that maybe they ought to go to the tropics where God made them.* (Reed 1967:32)

This passage ridicules the myth of the Civil War as a war for freedom, and ruins the historical aura of "a black Republican" Lincoln (Reed 1967:27). But one can also notice a possible comparison between African Americans and Native Americans. A deserted land of New Mexico

openly alludes to the historical plight and confinement of Native Americans to reservations.

Swille, the incarnation of a modern politician, tries to bribe Lincoln to sign the Fugitive Slave Act by offering him a position with his Canadian mills. He is also portrayed as a powerful Confederate and an influential businessman who pulls the strings of the current war because "everybody salutes our (Swille`s) flag. Gold, energy and power: that`s our flag" (Reed 1967:38). He has even thought about becoming a president but "that office is fit only for rapscallions, mobocrats, buckrahs, coonskinners and second-story men" (Reed 1967:20). Lincoln is of the same kind as the most ruthless slave owners: he too bribed some delegates (with cigars!) to win the second presidential elections. It is significant to note that Lincoln`s leading Republican Party is disclosed as a "grotesque institution," and the same can be said for the institution of slavery (Reed 1967:28). The principal motivation behind the icon of American past such as the Civil War, Reed suggests, was neither ethics nor morality. In the characters of Swille and Lincoln, Reed warns against a dangerous conflation of business and politics.

The author resorts to a favourite postmodernist strategy of intertextuality to launch a double critique of Western culture and contemporary America. The world of the dead, tombs and ghosts, aristocratic allusions and incestuous relations appear as frequent intertextual references to the works of E.A. Poe. An extensive parody of Poe, *Flight to Canada* rewrites and alludes to "Annabel Lee," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Ligeia," "Berenice," and others (Moraru 2000:104). The morbid and sinister world of his novels serves as an excellent background for Reed`s portrait of a slaveholding South. Indeed, Poe`s short stories that primarily deal with "masochism, fetishism, crepuscular sexuality, melancholia, self-destructiveness etc." share some fundamental characteristics with the Southern slaveholding culture (Moraru 2000:105). The following description undoubtedly echoes these themes:

> *Raised by mammies, the South is dandyish, foppish, pimpish; its writers are Scott, Poe, Wilde, Tennyson (…) Davis, who was accused by The Charleston Mercury of treating Southerners like "white Negroes," misread his people. It wasn`t the idea of winning that appealed to them. It was the idea of being ravished. Decadent and Victorian writing both use the romantic theme of fair youth slumbering. Fair youth daydreaming. Fair youth struck down.* (Reed 1967:141-42)

In such an atmosphere of decadence, the reader is not surprised to find out that master Swille has an incestuous relationship with his dead

sister Vivien. He inexplicably dies in a fire scene that might have been taken from a gothic novel. Swille I, the founder of the plantation and a slaver, was "indescribably deformed". Swille II, a hero of the Battle of Buena Vista, succumbed to "inexplicable malady" which ever since runs in the family (Reed 1967:15). But Reed also makes a parallel between the South, "the fairest civilization the sun ever shone upon," and the feudal European civilization as depicted in the tales of King Arthur (Reed 1967:10). The reality of both cultures was cruel and merciless: the knights exploited their serfs and tortured those who resisted their rule just as the slaveholders exploited the slaves and whipped the runaways. They share another common interest: while King Arthur`s task was to destroy "the heathen art," his descendants in America continued the tradition with Indian and African gods (Reed 1967:15). It seems that the strain of bloodthirstiness, the will to power and oppression runs both in the West and in the South. This is why Reed vigorously asks:

> *Why isn`t Edgar Allan Poe recognized as the principal biographer of that strange war? (…) Where did it leave off for Poe, prophet of a civilization buried alive, where, according to witnesses, people were often whipped for no reason. No reason? Will we ever know, since there are so few traces left of the civilization the planters called "the fairest civilization the sun has ever shone upon," and the slaves called "Satan`s Kingdom." Poe got it all down. Poe says more in a few stories than all the volumes by historians."* (Reed 1967:10)

The image of Poe as a prophet in a tomb immediately evokes the author's concept of necromancy. Poe is entitled to be a biographer of the war because of the postmodernist view of historical records as arbitrary. Reed purposely negates the historical veracity of all "the volumes by historians" by comparing them to Poe`s fiction. However, the most conspicuous satire of the 1960s occurs when Quickskill escapes from Swille`s "nigger catchers", NEBRASKA TRACERS INC., and suddenly remembers a poem. The poem is formally and stylistically a parody of Poe`s "Annabel Lee" but it also incorporates the language of abolitionists with that of the 1960s human rights debate. By analogy, the result is a twofold critique of Poe`s model and "contemporary libertarian discourse" (Moraru 2000:106).

Referring to the war as the "War of the Spirits," the author exploits the war theme to speak about the issues of religion and contemporary cultural position of African Americans (Reed 1967:23). According to him, the war started because of Harriet Beacher Stowe`s publication of *Uncle Tom`s Cabin*, and vindictive Voodoo gods who avenged Josiah Henson. But Cato and Mammy Barracuda work very hard to suppress

the African religious practices (the "old filthy fetishes") at Swille`s plantation in order to keep the slaves obedient:

> *It was mighty helpful of you and Barracuda to end all them cults and superstitions and require that all the people follow only the Jesus cult. That make them work harder for you, Boss. The women especially be thrilled with the Jesus cult. They don`t ask no questions any more. They`ve accepted their lot. Them other cults, Massa…there was too many of them. Horn cults, animal cults, ghost cults, tree cults, staff cults, serpent cults – everything they see they make a spurious cult of it.* (Reed 1967:53)

As with the Atonists in *Mumbo Jumbo*, the power of dogmatic Christianity becomes an important tool for subduing different religious practices. But the conversation between Uncle Robin and his wife emphasizes an important aspect of the process of African American cultural emancipation. Commenting on a strange reversal of luck, Uncle Robin admits that he prayed to his gods and asked for permission to forge Swille`s last will. The gods approved and one of them even advised Robin to steal from Swille because he "should work Taneyism right back on him." Uncle Robin explains to Judy that Taney was "The one who said that Dred Scott was property. Well, if they are not bound to respect our rights, then I`ll be damned if we should respect theirs" (Reed 1967:171). As if echoing the last quotation, Aunt Judy almost immediately labels his deed as "un-Christian." Uncle Robin promptly defends himself by claiming that he would like to bring the old religion back, and that Christianity "can stay, but it`s going to have to stop being so bossy…This Christian isn`t going to work for us. It`s for desert people. Grey, arid, cold. It`s a New Mexico religion" (Reed 1967:171). As seen in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed has transfigured the opposition between Vodun religion and Christianity into two distinct sets of literary norms: his Neo-Hoodoo as literary method and the Western canonical methods (Martin 1988:82). The conflict is played out not only at the formal and thematic levels of the novel, but also on a larger plane of political and ideological differences. NeoHooDoism may be perceived as Reed`s postmodernist "strategy of resistance in late capitalist society, just as Vodun was in revolutionary Haiti" (McGee 1989:32). It is clear that the author subverts the basic ideology of a monotheistic American society by making his narrative different from the original slave narratives and the prescribed norms of novelistic tradition in every respect.

He spins out the relationship between Quickskill and his Native American girlfriend, Quaw Quaw, to emphasize an important goal of his writing: internationally and multiculturally-orientated contemporary America. His Neo-HooDoo aesthetic is the best tool for this task because

its basis, the "eclectic vodun" religion of his ancestors is counterrational, whereas the American civilization rests on a long canonical tradition, the faith in ratio and one God (McGee 1997:16). As Harris (1988:122) sees it, such multiculture will be "a HooDoo influenced rainbow coalition in which everyone is encouraged to use his or her own culture (and history) as a basis". However, Reed also points out one important difference between Quickskill and Quaw Quaw, which hinders her full appreciation of cultural heritage. Quaw Quaw has consented to become that kind of a Native American that the dominant white society desires. She complains that Quickskill is "too ethnic" and should be "more universal" (Reed 1967:73). One might wonder if this complaint contains Reed`s allusion to the notion of a "true" black aesthetic, which used to be based on instructions coming from white critical elite. They demanded that African American writers should write about universal and not African American themes (Martin 1988:1-21). Upon meeting a famous anti-slavery lecturer and writer William Wells Brown, Quickskill compares his work to Brown`s but claims that "I`m sure the critics are going to give me some kind of white master. A white man. They`ll say that he gave me the inspiration and that I modeled it after him" (Reed 1967:121). Similarly, Quaw Quaw`s notion of "universal" reveals her willingness to forget the essence of what it means to be an Indian and become a Native American. This is why Quickskill shouts at her "Whenever someone confuses you with some other race, why don`t you tell them you don`t care about your race and that you don`t have time to fool around with any such subjects as race; and that you don`t identify with any group. Ha. Tell them you don`t identify with any group" (Reed 1967:165).

It is clear that in *Flight to Canada* the history (of literary tradition) and the history of race converge and merge. This is precisely the point where we can connect Reed to postmodernist readings of history and a broader socio-political context. I cannot but approve of postmodernist realization that the issues of race, sexual orientation and gender are "constructed" and historically conditioned (Hutcheon 1988:22). However, what I find very relevant in *Flight to Canada* is the assertion of power as immanent to the institution of slavery. Thus, the construction of race "as either `blackness` or `whiteness, ` is the knowledge of one`s relation to power, or to the absence of power, over others; and this power is always the power of life and death" (McGee 1997:24). As in *Mumbo Jumbo*, African Americans have been powerless on the grounds of their racial difference which has placed them outside the centre of dominant culture and ideology (Reed 1972).

It is this position that Reed acknowledges in *Flight to Canada* in the character of Quickskill. He discovered his own means of empowerment in his writing, and thus had to become "his own master" at all costs. His quest for literacy actually led to his own authentic awareness of what it means to be literally and metaphorically free. But Quickskill wonders if it is possible to attain (artistic) freedom; to his utter disappointment, Quickskill arrives to (real) Canada only to find out that slavery has continued to exist there too. It seems that Reed wants us to realize that slavery is more a state of mind and that there are undoubtedly different kinds of slavery, as the Russian immigrant Mel Leer concludes: "There are more types of slavery than merely material slavery. There`s cultural slavery. I have to wait as long as two weeks sometimes before I can get a Review of Books from New York. This America, it has no salvation" (Reed 1967:67-68).

Is there no salvation for America? Is there a way out of history? Is there no end to slavery, as Quickskill remarks, upon realizing that some former slaves tend to enslave other slaves? Or some become slaves to other things, such as material comfort and acquisition of money? Maybe this is what Reed wants us to understand when depicting the encounter between Uncle Robin and Leechfield, who thought he could buy himself out from his slavemaster because "(…) money is what makes [slavemasters] go. Economics" (Reed 1967:74). But Uncle Robin possesses the knowledge of a true meaning of slavery and, consequently, history and emancipation:

> *Did you really think that it was just a matter of economics? Did you think you could just hand history a simple check, that you could short-change history, and history would let you off as simple as that? You`ve insulted history, Leechfield. The highest insult! (…) He was going to return you the check. He had money. He didn`t want money. He wanted the slave in you. When you defied him, took off, the money was no longer an issue. He couldn`t conceive of the world without slaves. That was his grand scheme. A world of lord, ladies and slaves. You were showing the other slaves that it didn`t have to be that way. The old way. That the promised land was in their heads. The old way. The old way taught that man could be the host for God. Not one man. All men*. (Reed 1967:177)

Flight to Canada unmistakably teaches us that history is important. It is this historical perspective that enables us to become conscious of our true identity and to shape our present and future upon the lessons of the past. It is because of novels like *Flight to Canada* that we are inclined to reconsider our position in the dynamic totality of history, and open up to a continuous (postmodernist) interrogation (Marshall 1992:184). As the author stresses, "One thing common to my fiction, essays, and

poetry; they don`t claim to know all of the answers" (Reed 1978:6). Maybe some of them can be found in the African American past that Reed revisited in this novel.

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ПОВРАТАК МРТВИХ: ПОСТМОДЕРНА ПОЛИТИКА РЕВИЗИОНИЗМА И АФРИЧКА/АМЕРИЧКА ИСТОРИЈА РАЗЛИКЕ У РОМАНУ ИСМАИЛА РИДА *ЛЕТ У КАНАДУ*

Резиме

У роману *Лет у Канаду* Исмаил Рид користи посебну афроамеричку методу „поновног писања повијести", zvanu Signifyin(g), заједно с постмодернистичким искривљавањем књижевних врста, у овом случају приповијести робова, да би написао нову повијест једног од најважнијих догађаја у америчкој повијести - Грађанског рата. Аутор комбинира одређене аспекте NeooHoodoo-а, своје посебне књижевне методе која се темељи на афро-

америчкој усменој предаји садржаној у народним причама и вјерским обичајима попут Voodoo-a, с многобројним постмодернистичким стратегијама. На тај начин он постиже „присутност прошлости у садашњости" те, у исто вријеме, наглашава скривену политичку проблематику као и право значење политичке и културне еманципације Афроамериканаца у прошлости, као и 60-их година 20. стољећа. Везан уз постмодернистичку потребу пропитивања праве природе свијета у којем живимо, овај роман отвара нове хоризонте и пружа нови поглед на повијест Афроамериканаца у САД-у, као и нашу властиту.