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"A Man's Story is His Gris-Gris": Cultural Slavery, Literary Emancipation and Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*

RICHARD WALSH

With the emergence of black nationalism in the late sixties, the delineation of a new black aesthetic became an urgent issue: it was first and most persistently raised by Hoyt Fuller in *Negro Digest*, and soon became the staple of radical black little magazines across America. In 1971, the appearance of a collection of essays entitled *The Black Aesthetic* and edited by Addison Gayle brought some coherence to the debate, and sanctified its assumptions.[1] In his own contributions to that book, Gayle recorded the passing of the myth of the American melting pot and the consequent need to repudiate assimilationism. He argued that black nationalism implied the development of a black aesthetic in direct opposition to prevailing aesthetic criteria, in which white cultural concerns were privileged under a guise of "universalism": this bogus universalism actually depended upon the marginalization of black perspectives and black writers by a white literary establishment. Such observations established the need for a new black aesthetic, and prescriptions for its form proliferated. These blueprints were handed down at a series of conferences at which black writers past and present stood trial against the new criteria. The emergent consensus was for writing that directly recreated the black experience out of which it arose; that found its style in the forms of "black folk expression"; that was socially progressive in effect – according to a very literal concept of functional literature; that addressed itself to the common readership of black people; and that assiduously cultivated positive black characters.

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[1] Addison Gayle, Jr., ed., *The Black Aesthetic* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971).

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Ishmael Reed was one of the few young black writers willing to confront this prescriptive agenda, dismissing it as a "goon squad aesthetic,"[2] and explicitly repudiating it in his own writing. While sharing the opposition of the black aesthetic critics to the hegemony of white culture, he considered their narrow prescriptions to consolidate the marginalization of black writing as simply protest literature. Such a rigidly defined black aesthetic, he argued, merely confirmed the white liberal establishment's sub-literary expectations of Afro-American writing. Black writing should be free to explore its own cultural sources and define its own forms, that act itself being the affirmation of a black aesthetic. Reed consequently drew criticism from Gayle for the supposed frivolity and dangerous mythologizing of his novels. He was condemned by both Gayle and Houston Baker for his negative, satirical treatment of black characters other than the universally reviled 'Uncle Tom' figure. Most fundamentally, his rejection of realism was stigmatized as escapism and a neglect of his responsibility to provide for reader identification in a common ground of black experience. But more significantly, these considerations also set Reed against Amiri Baraka, the literary hero of black nationalism and one of its most outspoken theorists; and when Baraka himself came to repudiate nationalism, his criticism of Reed became even more implacable. To Baraka, whose concept of a black aesthetic had now been recast in revolutionary socialist terms with class rather than race defining the arena of conflict, Reed's neglect of the issue of capitalist exploitation and his individualist stance revealed him as a middle-class capitulationist, an archetypal Uncle Tom.

The confrontation between Reed and his black critics was first played out in his early novel *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969). Its cowboy hero Loop Garoo is confronted by Bo Shmo and his "neo-social realist gang," who charge that "your work is a blur and a doodle." Loop's reply encapsulates Reed's rebellion against the constraints upon the Afro-American literary tradition: "What's your beef with me Bo Shmo, what if I write circuses? No one says a novel has to be one thing. It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o'clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons."[3] The peculiar interest of *Flight to Canada* among Reed's novels is its return to the subject matter of the archetype of Afro-American fiction, the slave narrative. He had

[2] "When State Magicians Fail: An Interview with Ishmael Reed," *Journal of Black Poetry*, 1 (Summer/Fall 1969), 75.

[3] *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969; New York: Atheneum, 1988), 36.

renounced the conventions of this form in his first novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967), "a parody of the confessional mode which is the fundamental, undergirding convention of Afro-American narrative."[4] His refusal of this tradition opened the way for Reed to elaborate an alternative in his subsequent novels, the "Voodoo aesthetic" he advanced as a more authentic model of the Afro-American cultural heritage. This project extended through *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974), until in *Flight to Canada* he was able to return and reappropriate the slave narrative on his own terms. Reed's slave narrative does not follow the simple linear form, that of the protagonist's difficult progress towards freedom from a condition of slavery, by which the genre is conventionally structured. Rather, he divides his attention between the experiences of two principal characters: the fugitive Quickskill, and Uncle Robin, the slave 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 firmly to a contemporary frame of reference.

This metaphorical dimension, the focus of the narrative attention upon the present as much as on the period of the action, is proclaimed by one of the book's most pervasive comic devices, the use of anachronism. It is already implicit in the novel's punning title, and combines two distinct aspects: it creates a contemporary atmosphere through the casual use of props such as jumbo jets, telephones, satellite television, *Time* magazine, *New York Review of Books*, and all the paraphernalia of contemporary civilization; it also involves a fundamental disregard for the sequence of historical events. Set in the Civil War period, the novel freely juxtaposes ante-bellum figures such as Edgar Allan Poe, the Marquis de Sade, General Lafayette and Captain Kidd with references to post-war cultural phenomena such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and Radcliffe College, and figures like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. This disruption serves both 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. His basic strategy is an equation between the Civil War itself and the civil unrest of the 1960s, a parallel impressionistically caught in the image of Lincoln's assassination being endlessly replayed in

[4] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The 'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey," *Critical Enquiry* 9 (1983), 701.

slow motion on the Late News. Upon this foundation he builds an elaborate framework of connections across a century in the situation and experiences of Afro-Americans. Reed's own explanation of this narrative procedure would be 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."[5] In *Flight to Canada*, history is of more analogical than causal significance.

Reed's claim to artistic necromancy is an aspect of the Voodoo aesthetic by which he transforms the slave narrative in *Flight to Canada*, as is the non-linear model of history in the novel, for Voodoo "teaches that past is present."[6] His aesthetic use of Voodoo also draws upon several other basic characteristics of the religion: it is syncretic, protean, extemporaneous, intuitive and often combative. The most important quality of Reed's Voodoo aesthetic is its syncretism, because it is at this point that aesthetics and politics meet. He has given it as his main purpose to "humble Judeo-Christian culture," and to affirm instead the plurality of cultures which would characterize more accurately the identity of America.[7] Against the cultural subordination of the "melting pot" he advocates an anti-hierarchical "multiculture." This position originates in his concern to advance Afro-American culture, a concern which is qualified by his recognition that this culture is suppressed not simply by a dominant rival, but by the principle of monoculturalism it propagates. His polemics and his fiction accordingly include other cultures devalued and denied their place by the dominant tradition in America, embracing Native-American, Oriental, South American and African influences. The syncretism of Voodoo makes it particularly suitable as the aesthetic framework for Reed's multicultural stance: "Voodoo is the perfect metaphor for the multiculture. Voodoo comes out of the fact that all these different tribes and cultures were brought from Africa to Haiti.... It's an amalgamation like this country."[8]

The direct source for Reed's aesthetic is actually HooDoo, the Afro-American version of the Haitian original. The importation of Voodoo into America not only provided it with the Afro-American pedigree that allows Reed to advance it in the name of both his own culture *and* the principle of multiculturalism; it also involved a process of distillation

[5] Interview, *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers*, ed. Joe David Bellamy (Urbana: U. of Illinois P, 1974), 133.
[6] *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1978), 233.
[7] Ibid., 133.
[8] Ibid., 232–33.

and accommodation to the existing cultural conditions, which accentuated exactly the qualities Reed values and makes the foundation of his aesthetic. The fusion of an unfamiliar aesthetic with a political position in Reed's "Neo-HooDooism" involved him in extended expositions of the nature and history of HooDoo in his early novels, a process of self-presentation which tended to overshadow the actual use of the aesthetic he was advancing. Certainly his most widely acclaimed novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*, is vulnerable to the charge that it "remains an illustrated HooDoo cookbook" rather than actually being "the dish, a gumbo simmering on the back of a black iron stove."[9] But *Flight to Canada* suggests a greater confidence in his aesthetic's capacity to stand by itself, allusions to HooDoo being mainly confined to the novel's first few pages. Here he affirms the HooDoo inspiration of the poem "Flight to Canada," the Loa Guede is mentioned, and he refers to the terminology of possession by a Loa (the host is called a "horse") in mocking Harriet Beecher Stowe: "*Harriet saying that God wrote* Uncle Tom's Cabin. *Which God? Some gods will mount any horse.*"[10] These references are simply pointers and their place is quickly taken by the polemics of Reed's more particular theme, which concerns not the history or nature of HooDoo but the equation of multiculturalism with emancipation, and of America's persisting monoculturalism with slavery. It is no longer the aesthetic of Neo-HooDooism itself which is being propagated in the novel's argument, but the political values – the critique of monoculturalism – by which Reed was impelled to advance that aesthetic.

By way of Neo-HooDooism, then, Reed is able to return in *Flight to Canada* to the slave narrative he had earlier disowned. The fundamental condition of this return is a transformation of style: he defies the norms of the genre in almost every aspect of his novel. The objectives of the slave narrative were primarily to bear witness to the realities of slavery and to affirm the humanity of the slave against the brutal conditions that enslaved him. The realization of these priorities depended upon the accumulation of detail to give force to the testimony. Reed, however, proclaims himself a cartoonist. The slave narrative is constrained by its moral seriousness, while Reed cultivates irreverent humour: the slave-owner Swille tells Lincoln to "stop putting your fingers in your lapels like that. You ought to at least try to polish yourself, man. Go to the theatre. Get some

[9] W. C. Bamberger, "The Waxing and Waning of Cab Calloway," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 4 (Summer 1984), 204.

[10] *Flight to Canada* (New York: Random House, 1976), 11. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

culture" (28). This disrespect for Lincoln in particular and his non-fictional characters generally is symptomatic of another of Reed's heresies, his abuse of historical veracity. His manipulation of these characters is not an intellectual exploitation of lacunae in the historical record, as it might be in the hands of E. L. Doctorow, but a flagrantly unhistorical farce. His abuses are always grounded to some degree in an assumed familiarity with the received text of history, and feed satirically or humorously upon it: their main function is to effect a transformation of the reverent tone handed down in this text by subverting the dignity of its icons.

Implicit in all this is Reed's complete lack of concern with the criterion of realism upon which the slave narratives depended. His artistic concerns place a lower value on the surface coherence of his narrative than on imperatives of his fictional argument, or the opportunistic satirical points to which he continually sacrifices narrative continuity. As a result of these priorities, the novel unselfconsciously displays its inconsistencies of character and motivation, illogical narrative developments, loose ends and mismatched plotlines. There is little point in objecting that Reed does not reconcile his perspectives on Lincoln as player and fool, nor provide adequately for the swings in the relationship between Quickskill and the pirate Yankee Jack; that he refers back to Quickskill's dream as an event, and has Yankee Jack and his wife Quaw Quaw united at the opening of the novel, chronologically *after* her discovery that he uses her father's skull as an ashtray. The rationale for these aberrations lies on another plane: Reed refuses to be a slave to his narrative.

Reed's aesthetic decisions are motivated by his concern to affirm the multiculture in the *form* of his novel, a function for which the form of the original slave narratives is inadequate because of their appropriation as documents for the Abolitionist cause: "The political use to which the abolitionists put black literacy demanded a painstaking verisimilitude – a concern with even the most minute concrete detail."[11] As such the slave narratives were denied the freedom of form through which their authors could have expressed *their* culture. And Reed insists that this co-opting of black literature by white liberals is a contemporary problem: "In fact, our worst enemies are radical liberals because they have so much influence on how we look in the media and in American culture.... They are only interested in the social realist, the 'experience' of black people. And this treatment limits us and enslaves us."[12]

[11] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., rev. of *Flight to Canada*, *Journal of Negro History* 63 (1978), 78.
[12] Interview, *Interviews with Black Writers*, ed. John O'Brien (New York: Liveright, 1973), 174.

Reed's revisionary interest in the slave narrative arises from his belief that the forms of slavery still exist in modern America, under the guise of the monoculture's institutionalized subordination of all other cultures: the institutional structure of slavery remains in sublimated form, as the machinery of a state of oppression he regards as *cultural* slavery. The material of the slave narrative therefore allows Reed to practise his necromancy, exploring the analogies it generates in the relative positions taken by the various factions of contemporary culture. But, more than just providing a metaphorical map of the system of cultural slavery he sees in modern America, he is also arguing for a direct continuity between the two levels, for an evolutionary transformation of actual into cultural slavery. In doing so, he is also engaging in the struggle "to get to our aesthetic Canada"[13] by asserting in the novel's form his emancipation from the dictates of the dominant monoculture.

In *Flight to Canada* the Civil War and the emancipation of the 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, which 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 intent – a publicity stunt by which Lincoln isolates the South in a war over other issues: "We change the issues, don't you see? Instead of making this some kind of oratorical minuet about States' Rights versus the Union, what we do is make it so that you can't be for the South without being for slavery!" (49). Reed emphasizes the displacement of ethical considerations by political expediency evident in the Emancipation Proclamation, suggesting that neither it nor the reforms of the 1960s indicated any fundamental transformation in the way in which blacks were perceived in society, and in fact occurred for essentially pragmatic reasons. The lack of any revisionary consciousness behind the legislature ensures that in the cultural sphere, which is largely independent of the legal framework, blacks experience continuing marginalization.

Reed's caricature of Lincoln is a paradoxical combination of the idiot yokel of his humble origins and the cunning politician, "Abe the Player, as history would call him" (13). He first appears seeking revenue for his war effort by ingratiating himself with the slave-owner Swille. The

[13] Interview, *The New Fiction*, 138.

description is characteristic of Reed's abbreviated, gestural method, playing against the grain of the archetypal image of innumerable Hollywood and TV Lincolns with a revisionary recasting: "Lincoln, Gary Cooper – awkward, fidgeting with his stovepipe hat, humble-looking, imperfect – a wart here and there – craw and skuttlecoat, shawl, enters the room. 'Mr. Swille, it's a pleasure... I'm a small-time lawyer and now I find myself in the room of the mighty...'" (22–23). It is later made clear that this is Abe the Player, exploiting his image as a backwoods Hoosier, as he reports to his aide: "First I gave him the yokel-dokel – he saw through that" (45). But it is difficult to distinguish this Lincoln from the one who appears when he abandons the ruse: Reed litters his speech with exclamations like "Well, I'll be dull as a Kansas moon" (47), and has him garble speeches, misunderstand words and confuse his own arguments. Reed heads part two of his novel "Lincoln the Player" not because his Lincoln displays much of the cunning the epithet implies, but because that is the emphasis he wishes to place upon Lincoln's role in the emancipation of the slaves. The morality of the issue is always subordinate to the contingency of practical politics and in fact does not feature at all except where morality itself becomes a political tool. So while the attitude of the "Great Emancipator" towards slavery is hopelessly vague, he builds it into a moral stance on the basis of pure rhetorical appeal: "'I haven't made my mind up yet, Mr. Swille. I guess I'm a little wishy-washy on the subject still. But... well, sometimes I just think that one man enslaving another man is wrong. Is wrong. Is very wrong.' Lincoln pounds the table" (37). It is the demagogic appeal of this role, not its ethical soundness, which ultimately supercedes its political expediency and results in Lincoln's assassination. Swille himself, as the incarnation of the Southern culture Lincoln had affronted, is made responsible for the killing. While condemning Lincoln because he "gave away all that property" (130), Swille does not attribute his downfall to any ideological conflict. He hears with sympathy of Lincoln's affliction with "nigger fever" (131): "Toward the end he kept having visions of himself as a statue. Sitting in the chair and staring out over the Potomac. He started to believe it. He began to see himself as a great Emancipator, Mr. Swille. Got hooked by his own line" (130).

Quickskill's flight from slavery is twice enacted in the book, the first time in his poem "Flight to Canada," which opens the novel; the second time in the narrative that poem generates, both in the sense that it is instrumental in Quickskill's escape to Canada and that it is the germ from which the novel grew (Reed has said that the novel in fact "came out of

a poem").[14] The poem's relation to the novel is best understood with reference to Reed's source for the character of his protagonist: "Raven Quickskill, in *Flight to Canada*... was based more or less on a Tlingit legend – a raven myth."[15] The Raven of the Tlingit Indians is a trickster-creator, capable of mean-spirited pranks, but also of great gifts – he is, as Reed notes, the bringer of light to the tribe (13). It is this opposition which best encapsulates the difference between the Quickskill in the poem and the Quickskill who wrote it. In the poem, he is simply a trickster, using his guile to achieve his material ends. But as its author he is a creator, and asserts his freedom more completely in the demonstration it provides of his cultural autonomy. Quickskill knows that "'Flight to Canada' was responsible for getting him to Canada. And so for him, freedom was his writing. His writing was his HooDoo" (88–89). Quickskill's means of escape is cultural; the affirmation of his own aesthetic is a condition of his material freedom.

While it is as a poet that Quickskill achieves freedom, that is insufficient in itself. His relationship with Quaw Quaw, the Indian dancer, presents two attitudes towards the process of emancipation between which Reed wishes to distinguish. Quaw Quaw wants to see this evolution in *purely* abstract terms, but Quickskill knows that his flight to Canada is from the material conditions of slavery, not from a state of mind. *Material* freedom, *social* equality, is fundamental: the point is that it is not enough. If the predicament of the Afro-American people is translated into individual terms, being liberated from material slavery but still existing mentally in its thrall is the condition of the fugitive, a condition in which Quickskill remains as long as Swille lives. This state is one in which slavery, although no longer actual, remains the dominant factor in the status the culture ascribes to the fugitive. The fugitive is dependent upon the prospect of abolition, and this dependency results in a new bondage, to the Abolitionist cause itself. So Quickskill rots in Emancipation city looking after the houses and cats of his liberal patrons: "That's the way it was in the fugitive life. Minding things for Abolitionists and Sympathizers to the Cause" (61). Slavery *is* a state of mind, but in the same way that being in pain is a state of mind: it reflects real conditions. When Quickskill reaches Canada, he learns that material freedom is not a refuge from racial hatred: "Man, they got a group up here called the Western Guard, make the Klan look like statesmen" (160). The attitudes upon which slavery was based still prevail because although Quickskill has crossed a political border, the

[14] "An Interview with Ishmael Reed," *Iowa Review* 13 (Spring 1982), 129.
[15] *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*, 228–29.

culture is continuous: "as soon as you reach the metropolitan areas you run into Ford, Sears, Holiday Inn, and all the rest" (160). As the anachronism implies, if the culture is continuous across political frontiers it is also continuous through time, across such historical frontiers as the emancipation of the slaves.

Quickskill and Quaw Quaw ultimately differ not on the existence of a slave mentality but on the means of escaping it. Quaw Quaw is enamoured of the dominant culture and seeks assimilation, claiming not to "identify with any group" (165), but Quickskill believes that assimilation to the monoculture means subordination, marginalization. Failing to identify with his own cultural heritage is tantamount to joining forces with the dominant culture to reimpose slavery in sublimated form: "Slaves judged other slaves like the auctioneer and his clients judged them. Was there no end to slavery?" (144).

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 by the figure of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Her implied presence in *Flight to Canada* – the whole of Part One is titled "Naughty Harriet," and copies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* make repeated incidental appearances – far exceeds the actual direct attention paid her in the text, which is confined to a few pages at the beginning and end of the novel. But her structurally enhanced role is justified by the dual thematic significance Reed places upon her: she is herself made to represent cultural slavery by Reed's account of her source for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and his examination of the modes of revolt against slavery is conducted in terms of the perjorative meaning of 'Uncle Tom' in contemporary usage.

Reed freely acknowledges that his charge of plagiarism against Stowe is a tongue-in-cheek abuse of the scant evidence behind Josiah Henson's later reputation as the original Uncle Tom: "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. ..."[16] But the fiction provides Reed with a paradigm for his concept of cultural slavery. Against *Uncle Tom's Cabin* he sets Henson's own autobiography:

> *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave.* Seventy-seven pages long. It was short, but it was his. It was all he had. His story. A man's story is his gris-gris, you know. Taking his story is like taking his gris-gris. The thing that is himself. It's like robbing a man of his Etheric Double. People pine away. (8)

This plagiarism therefore stands for the cultural appropriation by which

[16] "An Interview with Ishmael Reed," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 4 (Summer 1984), 186.

minority cultures are suppressed, and for the consequent oppression of their people, the essence of Reed's metaphor of slavery. Set alongside Henson's obscurity, the enormous success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes a sinister allegory of the perpetuation of slavery in cultural terms – a slavery which is no longer confined to the South: "Harriet made enough money on someone else's plot to buy thousands of silk dresses and a beautiful home, 'one of those spacious frame mansions of bland and hospitable mien which the New England joiners knew so well how to build.' A Virginia plantation in New England" (9). Henry Louis Gates rightly sees the issue involved here as political, the control of history being at stake: "Reed is writing about what Robert Burns Stepto has called 'narrative control' – the possession of one's own story, be that our collective history or even one's very own autobiography."[17] But of more particular concern to Reed is the cultural oppression, the exclusion not just of Josiah Henson from his story, but of his way of telling it.

Reed distinguishes between the cultural aspect of emancipation and the long-established equation of a slave's freedom with his or her education. he cites Frederick Douglass, whose autobiography emphatically links literacy with freedom, as a precedent for his own protagonist, who "was the first one of Swille's slaves to read, the first to write and the first to run away" (14). But the novel also presents a literate slave, Cato, who remains absolutely servile. His self-immolation before the monoculture is characterized not only by his repudiation of the sentiments of "Flight to Canada," but also by his disavowal of its style. In the attack upon Quickskill's poem by which he aligns himself aesthetically with his oppressors he unintentionally burlesques the vocabulary of the literary review: "And if you ask me, it don't have no redeeming qualities, it is bereft of any sort of *pièce de résistance*, is cute and unexpurgated..." (52). Cato is a debased version of Quaw Quaw: while she believes her own art has a place within the monoculture, he simply renounces his culture. He regards ingratiating himself with the slave-owners, through the flattery of imitation, as his best chance for self-improvement. But the inevitable transparency of this imitation makes it simply a confirmation of the cultural inferiority to which he has consented: by accepting his masters' evaluation of his culture, he sanctions his own oppression.

The monoculture is signified in *Flight to Canada* by the culture of the ante-bellum South, the incarnation of which is Quickskill's master, Swille. The power of this culture is evidenced by Swille's complete

[17] Gates, rev. of *Flight to Canada*, 80.

autonomy: he stands aloof from the Civil War and condescends to both Lincoln and Davis. The monoculture is sustained by slavery, a denial of the humanity of a people which is itself made possible in Reed's scenario by monocultural dogma: he places the denial of the slaves' cultural validity at the centre of the rationale by which they are oppressed. Quickskill's poetry, he is told by the Nebraska tracers who come to repossess him, is collected in "*The Anthology of Ten Slaves*, they had it in the anthropology section of the library" (63). The same process of cultural disqualification is encapsulated in the suppression of non-Christian religious practices – of the African gods of HooDoo, providing a mirror for the relation of Reed's Neo-HooDoo aesthetic to the contemporary literary mainstream. It is the principle behind the reduction of the slaves' capacity for rebellion to a physiological disorder, a mechanical fault: Reed notes the contributions to medical science of Dr. Samuel Cartwright, who diagnosed rogue slaves as suffering from "*Dysaesthesia Aethipica*," and runaways as the victims of "*Drapetomania*" (18). The desire for autonomy is alien to the constitution of a slave, whose faculties are restricted to those required by the slave-master. This constriction of the slave's cultural and personal identity leads eventually to the legal position Southern culture required: a slave is property, a material thing. Reed satirizes this denial of identity through Swille's attempt at a reasoned response to his runaways, which involves regarding them simultaneously as objects and, for the purpose of moral condemnation, as persons: "Look, Robin, if they'd came to me and if they'd asked to buy themselves, perhaps we could have arranged terms. But they didn't; they furtively pilfered themselves" (19).

Uncle Robin, Quickskill's counterpart, approaches emancipation by a different route, but it is Reed's assertion that the principle of *cultural* dissent remains the same. Uncle Robin parallels Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom in name and situation, and Reed makes the analogy quite explicit by representing him as a rejected alternative protagonist for her novel: the servile house slave Cato goads him, "She didn't even use your interview. Used Tom over at the Legree planation" (55). Uncle Robin is the focus of Reed's enquiry into the forms of Uncle Tomism in the current sense, one who is submissively loyal or servile to whites, a self-interested capitulator to the value system of the oppressor. Reed provides several instances of Uncle Robin tommying to Swille as his position demands, but there is always an undertone of irony which qualifies his behaviour. He extols the comforts of life on the Swille planation: "We gets whipped with a velvet whip, and there's free dental care and always a fiddler case your feet get restless" (37). There is a similar irony in his dealings with

the true Uncle Toms of Swille's household, Cato and Moe, both of whom he aids in their attempts to ingratiate themselves with Swille by providing some spot remover for stains on their clothing: the context of these incidents clearly suggests a metaphorical play upon "skin whitener." And despite his piety in Swille's presence, Uncle Robin does not share the Christian devotion of Stowe's character: when Judy quotes the Bible, "He that knoweth his master's will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes," he responds, "I never read it, but I figured something like that was in it" (57). He is not an Uncle Tom, but an unreconciled slave with a long-term strategy. He has not accepted his servitude any more than the three runaways, Quickskill, 4os and Leechfield; and in fact these three all come to display elements of Uncle Tomism themselves. 4os and Leechfield represent two further types of rebellion, 4os the paramilitary and Leechfield the black marketeer. But 4os runs away only to perpetuate his own oppression by failing to escape the mentality of the fugitive, existing in an outlaw state of armed readiness. His reliance on violent means provides his oppressors with a stereotype of barbarism and abandons the assertion of his full humanity. He has put himself beyond the pale of cultural emancipation, of the power of words upon which Quickskill relies: "you take the words; give me the rifle. That's the only word I need. R-i-f-l-e. Click" (81).

Leechfield's entrepreneurial ability is starved outside the black market context of slavery in which it thrived. He cannot legitimize his talent, and therefore reinvents that context. He turns to selling himself, the only "property" left available to him, and his talent becomes a facet of his disenfrachisement: "'I'll Be Your Slave for One Day.' Leechfield was standing erect. In small type underneath the picture it said 'Humiliate Me. Scorn Me'" (80). He attempts to purchase his freedom, accepting his status as merchandise, and aspiring only to control of the profits: "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). But Quickskill, only able to operate in the shadow of slavery by minding houses for abolitionists and doing anti-slavery lectures, is also effectively selling himself. Like Leechfield, he has been deluded by a materialistic equation between money and freedom: Leechfield seeks to buy himself from Swille, Quickskill to pay his passage to Canada. But Swille does not accept Leechfield's payment, and the material Canada cannot fulfill Quickskill's expectations. Neither finds it possible to climb out of slavery on the back of material success, because slavery is not a wholly material condition. Uncle Robin, in his rebuke to Leechfield, provides the

argument for the spiritual element in social emancipation: "Did you really think that it was just a matter of economics?... He didn't want money. He wanted the slave in you.... That was the conflict between you and Swille. You, 40s and Quickskill threatened to give the god in the slave breath" (177).

Uncle Tomism, Reed is suggesting, has many guises, and often the forms of collaboration with the oppressor are confused with the forms of revolt. By depending on violence, 40s concedes the law to the white establishment; by depending on economics, Leechfield and to some extent Quickskill locate their emancipation at the material level, and acquiesce in a higher, cultural subservience. By compromising and making ambiguous the modes of escaping oppression, Reed subverts the modern consensus that "You have to be angry. There's only one mask that you can wear."[18] In fact it is Uncle Robin's guise which prevails most effectively. Swille dies according to the conventions of a Poesque gothic tale, the decadent culture collapsing from the violence of its own internal contradictions. But the end was near anyway, since Uncle Robin had substituted Coffee Mate (Reed gives a list of ingredients) for the two gallons of slave mothers' milk Swille consumed each morning. Having consulted his gods, Uncle Robin decides to "work Taneyism right back on him" (171), and falsifies the will. On his newly inherited Virginia plantation, Uncle Robin muses upon the nature of freedom and how to attain it: "Yeah, they get down on me an Tom. But who's the fool? Nat Turner or us? Nat said he was going to do this. Was going to do that.... Now Nat's dead and gone for these many years, and here I am, master of a dead man's house" (178). Reed sets the vilified Uncle Tom against the more heroic model of Nat Turner, as paradigms of the slave inside and outside the system. With a little twist, Uncle Tom comes out on top. Robin knows, as Quickskill discovers, that Canada is simply an idea of freedom. Stepping outside of reality in pursuit of an idea is not the way to change that reality: but working on the inside, Robin is able to reach a position from which he can "take this fifty rooms of junk and make something useful out of it" (179). Accordingly, the narrative ends not in Canada, but with Quickskill's return to Virginia. That is the rationale of Reed's revisionary slave narrative: his aesthetic breaks the shackles of the monoculture, but he does not run away.

Reed's position, like Baraka's, constitutes a move beyond the separatist politics of black nationalism: both perceived that nationalism could only be a stage in the struggle of Afro-Americans, and that this struggle was

[18] *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*, 210.

part of a larger conflict. But their responses diverged at that point: while Baraka seized upon class and advocated revolutionary socialism, Reed engaged in a series of editorial and publishing enterprises aimed at the affirmation of a multicultural society.[19] These publishing ventures as much as anything stigmatize Reed as a capitulationist in Baraka's eyes, but in terms of Reed's argument the positions are virtually reversed. Baraka subordinates cultural equality to the realization of a post-revolutionary economic equality: in the interim, black literature should be the servant of the revolution. But for Reed such an aesthetic preserves an outlaw separatist agenda entirely amenable to the hierarchies of the white literary establishment. Since for him culture is not merely superstructure, but the primary repository of a minority group's identity, such an aesthetic effectively capitulates to a state of oppression. Reed's demonstrations of American cultural diversity, on the other hand, confront the monoculture with its own partiality and compel a revolution in America's concept of itself.

[19] Reed was editor of *19 Necromancers From Now* (1970); co-founder of Yardbird Publishing Co. (1971); produced five volumes of the *Yardbird Reader* (1972–76); co-founded Reed, Cannon & Johnson Communications (1973); established the Before Columbus Foundation (1976); served as editor-in-chief of *Y'Bird* magazine (1978–80); and co-founded *Quilt* (1980).