

From Counter History to Narration of Identity: A Postmodernist Reading of Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*

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Abstract

By undermining the fundamental presuppositions of the Enlightenment and modernist approaches to history which had been dominant for centuries, the poststructuralist philosophy offered a new outlook in defining history by foregrounding its ontology. One such poststructuralist approach to history is that of the American philosopher of history, Hayden White. By proposing historical sublime, White challenged the rudimentary assumptions of Enlightenment/modernist philosophies of history to render them ineffectual and insufficient. Parallel to the development of poststructuralist philosophy of history, historiographic meta-fiction burgeoned to criticize the traditional attitudes towards history by, for instance, intermingling the historical and the fictional, as well as by employing narratological techniques of its own. In the present article, while providing a comparative study of the major approaches to history, namely, the Enlightenment and modernist on the one hand and the poststructuralist on the other, it is attempted to analyze Ishmael Reed's 1976 novel *Flight to Canada* in order to investigate the strategies and novelistic techniques by the help of which he manifested the poststructuralist tenets to history. By reading the novel in terms of White's critical key concepts on history, it could be argued that in deconstruction the fundamental conventions of historiography and of the classical slave narrative. Reed constructs an apocryphal history of the American Civil War period. Such a counter-history provides a new narration of history by the help of which Reed foregrounds the history of the black people as a racial minority and makes their silenced

voices heard and acknowledged. This new narration of history in turn leads to a new narration of identity in which Reed distances his narrative from the traditional essentiality accounts of identity and welcomes instead the poststructuralist constructivism.

Key words: Anachronism; Historiographic meta-fiction; History; Identity; Postmodernism; Teleology

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INTRODUCTION

The poststructuralist movement of the latter part of the twentieth century which drastically altered the previously firmly settled ideas regarding the nature of language, and consequently of truth, resulted in turn in a radical reconsideration and redefinition of history, its function, and its epistemological status amidst the larger humanistic disciplines; a redefinition which undermined the empiricist, metaphysical (logocentric), and positivist modernist and Enlightenment presuppositions. Postmodernist and poststructuralist philosophers of history, particularly Hayden White, challenge the traditional approaches to history as deficient and positivistic. These traditional outlooks include the Enlightenment as well as the modernist tenets regarding history which Munslow labels "empiricist" in his book *Deconstructing History* (2006). They are labeled empiricist in that despite all the differences and incongruities between the two, what links them deeply together is their common presupposition concerning the nature of language as a sufficient and unproblematic medium for representing (versus constructing) the past objectively, transparently, and disinterestedly.

Poststructuralist philosophers of history, including Foucault and White, on the other hand, regard these positivistic attitudes on history simplistic in that for them not only language is not a transparent and impartial instrument for representing the historical Truth but that the whole idea of a historical truth which can exist as a “transcendental signified” outside the realm of language is totally unacceptable. According to them, history does not follow a linear, rational, progressive, and teleological trajectory but is essentially a discursive practice (White, in Domanska, 2008, p.9). History of White is basically a narrative text the meaning of which is determined by the type of tropology and mode of emplotment that is superimposed by the historiographer upon the formless, meaningless, opaque, and sublime content of the past (Munslow, 2006).

On the other hand, parallel to the emergence and development of the poststructuralist approaches to history, in postmodernist historical novel—what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic meta-fiction and Brian McHale labels postmodernist revisionist historical novel—traditional assumptions and attitudes to history are likewise undermined. An example of such historiographic meta-fiction is Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976). By employing postmodernist novelistic techniques and strategies, particularly those practiced in historiographic meta-fiction, Reed deconstructs and questions the Enlightenment and modernist presuppositions concerning history.

Reed's *Flight to Canada* whose fame is much overshadowed by *Mumbo Jumbo* (which is considered to be Reed's greatest novel) is like the latter a postmodern historical novel, although its postmodernist narrative techniques are less revolutionary than those of the latter. It is described by many critics as a parody of traditional slave narratives. It is the story of the escapes of three slaves—Raven Quickskill, 40s, and Leechfield—from their master (Arthur Swille)'s plantation and their interminable pursuit by their master's agents who are determined to deliver them back to Swille. Here, as in *Mumbo Jumbo*, the concepts of history and time are manipulated, played with, and altered in order for Reed to propose an alternative account of the nineteenth century American Civil War and antebellum period. *Flight to Canada* has two time lines which move in parallel, one being the 1860s (the American Civil War period) and the other in the 1970s (the author's contemporary America). This multi-layeredness of narrative and Reed's creative anachronisms cause the blurring of time which confuses the reader about the exact time of each incident.

The present article seeks to read *Flight to Canada* in terms of the key concepts of White's critical approach to history in order to explore how this novel, as the alternative history of slavery, departs its narrative from the traditional understandings of history and welcomes Whitean poststructuralist history. It is also attempted to

examine whether Reed's treatment of history in *Flight to Canada* is simply carried out to proffer his acceptance of the poststructuralist philosophy of history or he has had a more profound purpose in mind in deconstructing history the way he did in *Flight to Canada*.

1. FICTION AS HISTORY, HISTORY AS FICTION

One of the key tenets of the poststructuralist critics of history, particularly that of Hayden White, regarding the nature of history and historiography is its inevitable narrative structure which links it to the realm of literature and fiction. For White the narrative structure of the historical accounts makes historiography “a literary enterprise” (Munslow, 2006, p.152), and knowledge of the past “a poetic act” (p.153). White argues that both writing and reading—i.e. interpreting—history are ‘poetic’ acts: in the act of writing one superimposes a tropological device, a mode of emplotment, a mode of argument, and an ideological tactic—i. e., a specific form—on the formless and meaningless content of history, which resembles to what a novelist or a fiction writer does in superimposing a syuzhet on the raw fabula. Interpreting a historical document or a historical event is, likewise, a “literary act” in which one constructs or invents a meaning for a phenomenon which lays itself to different, even contradictory, interpretations. Viewing history as a linguistic practice that is textually structured in the form of a narrative problematizes the classical transparently defined boundaries between literature and history. Such a problematization of the borderlines of fiction and reality is especially exploited in historiographic meta-fiction as a way to object to the so-called scientific history which claims to distance itself from fiction and to scientifically and experimentally reconstruct the authentic account of the past by reference to the survived historical archives.

In *Flight to Canada*, Reed embraces the poststructuralist tenets regarding the inevitable interconnectedness of history and fiction. From the very first pages of the novel, through the long interior monologue of Raven Quickskill who is pondering on the poem “Flight to Canada” he wrote a while ago, the narrator's contemplation on the nature of history and its relation to fiction is manifested: “Who is to say what is fact and what is fiction?” (FC 7). Elsewhere he contemplates, “Strange, history. Complicated, too. It will always be a mystery, history. New disclosures are as bizarre as the most bizarre fantasy” (p.9). He also ponders, “Why isn't Edgar Allan Poe recognized as the principal biographer of that strange war? Fiction, you say? Where does fact begin and fiction leave off?” (p.10), or “Poe says more in a few stories than all of the volumes by historians” (Ibid.).

In *Flight to Canada* from the intermingling of history and fiction is conducted in two ways. First of all it is practiced through constructing a fictional history where the *real* American Civil War is reconstructed and reinterpreted in a fictional way. The omniscient narrator mentions reasons for a war which culminated in the abolition of slavery completely different from those mentioned in the recorded history of America. This new narration of the lived past brings to mind White's idea of the 'Historical Sublime' according to which the past has no inherent meaning or form in itself; it is, on the contrary, opaque, grotesque, uncontrollable, open-ended, and in one word sublime (Munslow, 2006, p.14) and its meaning is rather "invented" or "imagined" (p.149).

The second way through which the integration of history and fiction is conducted is the fabrication a fictional world where historically real and completely fictional characters co-exist. In *Flight to Canada* there are frequent references to Queen Victoria (FC 8), America's sixteenth president Abraham Lincoln, or "Abe the player" as he is called in the novel (p.7, 11, 13, 22,...), Harriet Beecher Stowe, the famous American writer of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (p.7, 8, 9,...), Lord Byron (p.8, 9, 10,...), Walt Whitman (p.63, 83,...), and to the American poet and short story writer Edgar Allan Poe (p.10, 126, 135, ...). Queen Victoria and Lincoln are especially shown as having interactions and meetings with such fictional characters as the slave owner Arthur Swille:

This Swille, Swille III, Arthur Swille, obeyed no nation's laws and once flogged Queen Victoria, a weekend guest at his English Country Manor, after a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* turned up in a search of her room.

Others say it was because Victoria refused to sell Swille III a barony; according to insiders, Victoria stuck to her guns, moaning, "Europe is not for sale, Mr. Swille," grunting, "Europe is not for sale, Mr. Swille," as Swille's stud, Jim, brought the lash down upon the red striated back of the Queen of England. A proud day for the British Empire. (FC 16-17)

The nineteenth century queen of England, Queen Victoria, as it is mentioned in the above extract from the novel, is flogged by the fictional character Arthur Swille for refusing to give him a barony.

There are also occasions in which Lincoln comes to Swille's plantation to meet him personally. In their first formal meeting in Swille's state, a long informal conversation happens between the two the outset of which is as follows:

"Mr. Swille, it's a pleasure," he [Lincoln] says, extending his hand to Swille, who sits behind a desk rumored to have been owned by Napoleon III. "I'm a small-time lawyer and now I find myself in the room of the mighty, why—"

"Cut the yokel-dokel, Lincoln, I don't have all day. What's on your mind?" Swille rejects Lincoln's hand, at which Lincoln stares, hurt. (FC 23)

There are frequent meetings and long conversations between the two and they have some dealings regarding

the war which is going on in America at the moment, the war which Lincoln calls "the Civil War" (FC 23) for the victory of which he is even tempted to get a loan from Arthur Swille!

Another example of this merging of history and fiction which is conducted through the encounter between historically real and completely fictional characters is Raven's encounter with Lincoln in the White House where he "shook hands with Lincoln" (FC 82), and "exchanged nervous smiles with the President" (p.83). Raven was attending the "White House reception honoring the leading scribes of America" (Ibid.), a gathering in which the American poet Walt Whitman also attended (Ibid.). Even the same night Raven lied down in the President's bedroom due to his stomach ache! (p.84) Yet, another example of such a merging of the historical and the fictional is where Mitchell, Swille's son, appearing one night as an apparition to his mother after his murder, recalls his father's frequent invitations of the eminent American poet and writer Edgar Allan Poe to the Swilles plantation: "Your husband, my father, is one macabre fiend. No wonder he has Poe down here all the time" (p.126). Furthermore, in some pages of the novel Swille is described as being an intimate friend of such historical figures as the King of Belgium and the emperor of France Napoleon Bonaparte III (FC 24).

2. THE LOGOCENTRISM OF EMPIRICIST HISTORIANS

Literally meaning "centered on the word," (Cuddon, 1999, p.477) logocentrism in Derridean and, accordingly, in the poststructuralist sense "implies all forms of thought based on a desire for truth" (p.477). "Logos, or presence," as Abrams and Harpham (2012) interpret Derrida, provides the linguistic system with an "ultimate referent" or "a language-independent reality [which] Derrida calls a transcendental signified" (p.77). According to the pre-poststructural linguistics, it is this 'language independent reality' or 'transcendental signified' which organizes and provides meaning for any utterance—spoken or written—within the linguistic system. Adapting such ideas regarding the nature of language and the process of meaning construction, Enlightenment and modernist historians, according to Munslow, believe that there is an ultimate transcendental historical Truth outside the realm of language which is to be discovered or recovered and represented by the historiographer. For them, "it is the material nature of the real world that makes the claims of historians true or false, not the nature of language or representation" (Munslow, 2006, p.51). This is particularly because the Enlightenment and modernist eras the basic questioning of language as the immediate sufficient, disinterested, and effective medium for writing historical narratives has not overwhelmingly occurred yet.

Unlike modernist assumptions that hold that there still exists an ultimate Truth “out there” which can be discovered by the historian, although it may be distorted, garbled, or repressed,—under the pressure of the consciousness or the dominant ideology—postmodernism does not believe in a unified Truth. Rather, to postmodernists, the concept of Truth is now, to borrow Derrida’s term, *under erasure*; “there are only truths in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness per se, just others’ truths” (Hutcheon, 1988, p.109) all of which are simply linguistic constructions. This means that to poststructuralists there is no ultimate Truth or ‘transcendental signified’ outside the realm of language. This is, they argue, due to the very nature of language itself: “language constitutes and represents rather than transparently correspond to reality” (Ibid., p.27). In the case of history, it follows “that there is no ultimate knowable historical truth, that our knowledge of the past is social and perspectival, and that written history exists within culturally determined power structures” (Ibid.). As a consequence, what postmodernist history offers is “a recognition of the relativism of meaning, determined by where one stands and the dissolution of source-derived certainty in historical representation” (Ibid., p.28) — reflected especially in Foucault’s view regarding the “presentism” of the historiographer. It also suggests that “written history is open rather than closed in meaning” (Ibid.) — reflected in White’s Historical Sublime. For White, the (historical) truth is constructed by the historian through the narrative/story that s/he projects for the past events or through her/his interpretation of the survived historical evidences which is itself a discursive practice.

Flight to Canada welcomes the poststructuralist assumptions regarding language. In order to fulfill this purpose, Reed takes advantage of the Voodoo aesthetics by the help of which he constructs his Neo-HooDoo literary practice. *Flight to Canada* is said to be “a hybridized HooDoo literary text” (Mvuyekure, 2004, p.214). This Neo-HooDooism, however, as both Schmitz (1974, p.127) and Rushdy (1994, p.113) assert, is not considered by Reed as a “school” or a “philosophy” with a set of rigid principles. For him, “it is rather a characteristic stance, a mythological provenance, a behavior, a complex of attitudes, the retrieval of an idiom” (Schmitz, 1974, p.127) to which any poet or practitioner can add her/his contribution. *Flight to Canada*, as Rushdy argues, “provides us with a singular example of Neo-HooDoo as a practice” (p.114). As Lock (1993) maintains, one of the key features of Voodoo or Neo-HooDoo art is that it rejects the “subordination of sign [by which she means the signifier] to signify” (p.69). Consequently, “it revitalizes the independence of the sign” (Ibid.). One of the “noteworthy features” of Reed’s Neo-HooDoo practice is his “insistence that we also not treat signs as representatives of a given reality or referent” (Rushdy, 1994, p.112). Neo-HooDooism actually suggests that

“there is more than one reality” (Jessee, 1986, pp.5-14). Reed’s *Flight to Canada*, as Rushdy maintains, “disturbs the relationship of the ‘signifier’ to the ‘signified’” (p.112). When 40s asks Raven, “Words. What good is words?” Raven states, “Words built the world and words can destroy the world” (FC 81). Accordingly, it can be argued that *Flight to Canada* embraces the poststructuralist assumptions about language.

In *Flight to Canada*, “language is the instrument of power” (Lock, 1993, p.73); it constructs the reality itself rather than translucently and unproblematically reflecting it: Raven’s composition of the poem “Flight to Canada” is what brings such a flight to Canada into being: “It was his writing that got him to Canada. ‘Flight to Canada’ was responsible for getting him to Canada” (FC 88-9). As it is observed, for Reed, it is the language itself which gives existence to reality rather than reflecting it. As a corollary, Reed’s employment of language, particularly the way it is reflected in Raven’s poem “Flight to Canada” and Robin’s writing of Swille’s will, renders any notion of an ultimate referent which is self-certifying and present outside the play of language completely irrelevant to Reed. When language is regarded constructional rather than referential, the whole idea of an ultimate historical Truth as history’s “transcendental signified” is rejected.

3. THE OBJECTIVITY OF ENLIGHTENMENT/MODERNIST HISTORIANS

White rejects the possibility of objectivity and disinterestedness of historians. He believes that historical facts are not given. Rather, they are constructed by the kinds of questions the historian asks of the relics of historical documents (White, 1999, p.43) as well as by the historian’s use of figurative, as opposed to technical, language (Ibid., pp.6-8). As a result, the process of writing history is always a process of selection/ exclusion in which the historian imposes certain types of argument and emplotment on her/his narrative. In such a practice the historiographer superimposes on a chronological sequence of events a specific kind of meaning by giving particular events certain privileges that “are not inherent in the events themselves” (Hughes-Warrington, 2008, p.389) but are rather a matter of interpretation influenced by the historiographer’s vantage point. Accordingly, White rejects impartiality, objectivity, and disinterestedness of the historian as a positivistic illusion.

This viewpoint is especially reflected in Raven’s conversation with Yankee Jack, when the former recounts the sufferings he and his parents had to tolerate as slaves. Here is a dialogue between the two which illuminates Raven’s dissatisfaction with employing a scientific method for writing a history of slavery from the vantage point of the white historians:

[Raven] "The hardships I've had to overcome. My mother sold down the river. My father broken for spitting into the overseer's face. The whippings, the floggings."

[Yankee Jack] "That's not what the revisionists are saying. Don't forget, I read the *New Republic*."

[Raven] "Revisionists. Quantitative historians. What does a computer know? Can a computer feel? Make love? Can a computer feel passion?" Quickskill tears off his shirt. "Look at those scars. Look at them! All you see is their fruit, but their roots run deep. The roots are in my soul. What does a [...] computer know about that?" (FC 150-1)

As their conversation goes on, Yankee Jack, having a scientific mind on things, accuses Quickskill of telling "niggardly lie[s]" (p.151). Raven's comment about quantitative historians and their mechanistic, seemingly objective method of accumulation of historical data by the use of seemingly infallible computers illuminates his—as well as Reed's—discontent with the application of a purely scientific method of writing history. These quantitative historians are the representatives of the empiricist, positivist, and scientific historians who naively aim at being objective; an objectivity for the sake of which they forget all about the individual slaves' sufferings. What is especially involved here, as Rushdy argues, "is that cliometricians ignore the materials and evidence against slavery provided by slaves themselves in fugitive narratives" (Ibid.). In such a composition of the history of slavery, the very subjects whose history the historians are determined to write and the documents they provide are absent and pushed into negligence. As it is obvious, for Raven, as well as for Reed, much like Hayden White, the composition of history is considered to be an act of selection/exclusion and accordingly, it can never be objective; it is rather relative to the position and the vista of the historiographer and to the kind of trope imposed by her/him on the historical narrative s/he is supposed to write.

Therefore, as Rushdy quotes C.W. E. Bigsby, *Flight to Canada* aims at "subvert[ing] history from within" (p.114) in order to foreground and take into account the "physical and psychic suffering[s]" (p.115) of slaves and to recount the history of slavery in America "from the other side of the whip" (Ibid.). The history/ story that Raven is supposed to write is the revisionary counter-history of *Flight to Canada*. Somewhere in the novel, musing on the story he is determined to write, he says to himself, "I'll have to include all of this in my story" (FC 14) which very possibly means taking into account those events and phenomena determinately or inadvertently ignored by official historians.

4. THE TELEOLOGY OF EMPIRICIST HISTORY

Teleology means to have a determinate ending. For history to be teleological is to "purposefully go [...]"

forward toward some known end." (Bressler, 2007, p.219) One of the key principles that differentiates the deconstructive views of history of critics like White and Foucault among others, from those of the Enlightenment philosophers of history like Kant and Hegel as well as modernist historians like Marx, is that the former group rejects the teleological and progressive assumptions at the heart of the latter's view of history. For Foucault specifically, history far from being rational, progressive, and teleological, is discontinuous and contradictory. For him history is no longer linear or causal, nor can it be logically explained. For White, history being a sublime phenomenon does not follow a predictable trajectory. Except for critics like Fukuyama, for most of the poststructuralist history critics, particularly White and Foucault, neither the movement of history nor its final destination is clear or predictable even by applying scientific laws. That is, for their history is no longer regarded as a conscious and self-determined movement towards some predictable utopian future.

In *Flight to Canada* the teleology of history is rejected through abandoning the linearity of time. Reed parodies the traditional and old-historicist views on history, its linearity, and continuity by adapting a different philosophy of time, i.e., the African or Neo-Hoodoo concept of time (Martin, 1988, p.74) wherein time is no longer conceived linear but comprehended as a circular phenomenon (Martin, 1988, p.106). Such a conception of time inevitably rejects the teleology of history in that for history to be teleological, i.e. to have a purposeful ending, time cannot but be linear. In Hoodooism, "time is a circle" (Ibid.). It is not "linear" or "diachronic" (p.74), but rather, "synchronic" (Ibid.) in which along with acknowledging the passage of time, there is "a most pointed emphasis on the present" (Ibid.). In the "African sense of time," according to Reed, "past, present and future function at the same time" (Reed, in Rushdy, 1994, p.126). In Reed's narrative, this synchronicity is manifested through the blurring of the boundaries between past and present, and through "dystaxy" that is "the disruption of linear narrative" (Martin, 1988, p.74). According to Martin, Reed's *Flight to Canada* provides "the best example" for this manipulation of the traditional linear account of time (p.74). This manipulation is particularly conducted through creative and purposeful anachronisms.

Anachronism—the Greek term for "back-timing" (Cuddon, 1999, p.33)—is "the misplacing of any person, thing, custom, or event outside its proper historical time." (Baldick, 2001, p.1) In his *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale enumerates two main types of anachronism: in the first case, the material culture of one period is superimposed on that of another period where it is noticed as being incongruous. And in the second case, it is the ideology and the mental consciousness of one time attributed to a time to which it historically does not

belong. In each case anachronism produces “an impossible hybrid” (McHale, p.93), which in turn exacerbates the “ontological tension” between the real and the fictional. Anachronism in worldview and ideology which is more frequent, may happen even in traditional historical fiction, but while it tries to “disguise” it, historiographic metafiction deliberately “flaunts it” (p.93).

Flight to Canada employs both types of anachronism. In the first case, the material culture of the late twentieth century (the time of the composition of the novel, 1970s) is imposed on that of the American Civil War and antebellum period (1860s). Narrating the account of Swille's son's murder, the unknown omniscient narrator mentions, “the Snake Society went on satellite television to take credit for it [the murder]” (FC 17); elsewhere in the novel, Lincoln's assassination is televised (FC 103). There are also long phone calls between characters as for example between Swille and Lee (pp.30-31). In the very poem “Flight to Canada,” addressed to Master Swille, Quickskill claims to have fled to Canada “in a non-stop/ Jumbo jet” (p.3) sometime in the 1860s. Likewise, the possibility of space flight is superimposed on the nineteenth century: “Then they're going to put them in a space ship and send them to the moon” (p.96). In his conversation with Swille when he reports his findings about Raven's temporary place of residence, Cato calls himself “clever enough to have a Xerox made” (p.52) of Raven's poem “Flight to Canada.” As it is noticed, late twentieth century technologies like satellite television, color TV (p.37), helicopter (p.22, 178), microfilms (p.96), jumbo jet, Xerox, space flight, etc. are projected on mid-nineteenth century, a time in which they chronologically did not exist.

The second type of anachronism is in the same way used in the novel. This is particularly manifested in Raven Quickskill and Uncle Robin's characteristics. The consciousness and mentality of a late twentieth century subject are superimposed on both of them. Unlike most of the slaves around them, Raven and Robin are not obedient, self-less, docile slaves who may passively internalize their roles as slaves. Each resists Swille's whim for control and power in his way. Raven is “the first one of Swille's slaves to read, the first to write and the first to run away” (FC 14). After his long perilous escape to Canada searching for freedom, he finally understands that freedom is not simply physical freedom, but is basically a state of mind, and that it is the freedom of one's soul as much as it is of the body. This is what differentiates him from his fellow fugitive slave friends, 40s and Leechfield, for one of whom freedom is simply matter of physical power—hence his accumulation of and dependence upon guns—and for the other a matter of money and wealth. A good example for such a precocious mentality is reflected in the dialogue between Leechfield and Quickskill wherein they debate on slavery and freedom:

[Leechfield:] “Look man, if you want to buy yourself, here's the money. You can pay me back.”

[Quickskill:] “But it's not that simple, Leechfield. We're not property. Why should we pay for ourselves? We were kidnapped.” (FC 74)

This kind of mentality and consciousness on the part of Raven and Robin about the underlying logic of slavery held by the authoritative White majority reminds one of the conscious and self-disciplined late twentieth century subjects who see behind any cultural or political phenomena the hidden ideology at work.

The manipulation of the linear time and the blurring of the boundaries between past and present, particularly through employing creative anachronisms which is itself the result of embracing the Hoodoo sense of time in *Flight to Canada*, is a strategy Reed employs to distance his narrative from the traditional and empiricist concept of time and consequently to challenge the Enlightenment and modernist historians' sense of time. Rejecting the linearity of time naturally results in discarding the teleology of history according to which history moves purposefully through a linear timeline to reach its ultimate destination. To cast aside such linearity is a way through which Reed challenges the Enlightenment and modernist teleology of history in his historical novel about slavery and puts his idea in affinity with that of poststructuralist historians as White.

5. COUNTER-HISTORY: IDENTITY RE-NARRATED

By employing narrative strategies typical of postmodern novels, especially those of historiographic meta-fiction, *Flight to Canada* constructs a new or counter-History. By narrating this history in an unorthodox way, Reed deconstructs the empiricist attitudes towards history and reflects the postmodernist and deconstructive views, specifically those of White. A more meticulous study of the novel, however, shows that by such a deconstruction of the orthodox history, Reed has had a more profound objective in mind. By constructing a new history of the American Civil War that is narrated from the perspective of a fugitive slave representative of a marginalized, oppressed, and neglected group, namely the black, Reed foregrounds the silenced voices of the black slaves who have, up to now, been pushed back to history's dark corners.

According to McHale, one of the main objectives in deconstructing official histories is “to redress the balance of the historical record of writing histories of the excluded, those relegated permanently to history's dark areas” (p.90), those “left in historical anonymity” (p.91). Hutcheon, likewise, argues that one of the major outcomes of postmodernist—particularly American—fiction's “discursive pluralizing” or “interdiscursivity” (p.130) is that:

Margins and edges gain new value. The “ex-centric” —as both off-center and de-centered—gets attention. That which is “different” is valorized in opposition both to elitist, alienated “otherness” and also to the uniformizing impulse of mass culture. And in American postmodernism, the “different” comes to be defined in particularizing terms such as those of nationality, ethnicity, gender, race, and sexual orientation. (p.130)

Likewise, Elias (2000) argues that one of the reasons that “postmodern novels often attack homotopological Anglo-Western history” and recast a new historical narrative is “to reveal the oppressed Other, figured in the repressed trope at the heart of that history” (p.116). Similarly, what Reed does in the present novel is to narrate history from the perspective of the marginalized, silenced blacks, viewed as the “other” in Western history in general and in American history specifically, in a way to give them the opportunity—at least a textual one—to speak their neglected histories and identities.

Neglecting the black’s history (and culture) by the politically and socially dominant Euro-Americans and the endeavor on part of this dominant majority to prohibit the black’s account of things lead in the long run to the neglecting of the oppressed minority’s identity both in the personal, and particularly in, the collective dimensions. Accordingly, the issues of history and identity are not logically separated, not so at least in historiographic meta-fiction which proposes a “revisionist” view of the past as McHale believes (McHale 90). Therefore, it can be argued that the reworking of history in *Flight to Canada* leads to a reworking of identity, which means that the new account of history and the new way of narrating it leads to a new narration and at the same time a new definition of identity.

Black history—or the black version of things—has always been exploited by the dominant white history and culture and has been appropriated by it for its own use and in a way that guarantees the majority’s authority and dominance over the minority, their culture, and history. Such a thirst for authority does not simply lead to racial biases—e.g. Swille’s description of blacks as a “childish race” who “need someone to guide them through this world” (FC 37) or the judge’s claim that “according to science” the size of the brain of a black is “about the size of a mouse’s” (p.167)—culminating in slavery but also to cultural hegemony over the minorities. As the Immigrant confesses to Quickskill, “there are more types of slavery than merely material slavery. There’s a cultural slavery” (FC 67). Accordingly, what Reed does in this novel is to challenge and consequently to negate the white majority’s dominance over the black minority by constructing a new and counter version of history where the blacks’ existence is, at least, confirmed.

Flight to Canada is a revolt against univocalism, monoculturalism, rigidity, and the hegemony of the dominant majority over the minorities, a hegemony which silences them and forgets or intentionally neglects their

existence. It is, like *Mumbo Jumbo*, a revolt against “Atonism.” In this novel, the slave owner Arthur Swille and Yankee Jack are among the major agents of Atonism. They are the representatives of those who, by the use of political power and ideology, attempt to control and subjugate everyone under their authority. This is particularly manifested in the character of Yankee Jack, especially in his conversations with Raven Quickskill:

[Raven:] “You decide which books, films, even what kind of cheese, no less, will reach the market. At least we fuges know we’re slaves, constantly hunted, but you enslave everybody. (FC 146)

Elsewhere, he tells Yankee Jack, “they see, read, and listen to what you want them to read, see, and listen to” (p.150):

[Jack:] “The difference between a savage and a civilized man is determined by who has the power. Right now I’m running things. Maybe one day you [QuawQuaw] and Raven will be running it. But for now I’m the one who determines whether one is civilized or savage.” (p.149)

In this contest over authority, some slaves especially Cato passively accept the majority’s dominance over them: Cato is “so faithful that he volunteered for slavery, and so dedicated he is to slavery, the slaves voted him all-Slavery” (FC 34), while others as Raven and Robin actively resist slavery; they are not docile slaves who let their identities be written, defined, and circumscribed by the dominant hegemony. What is particularly noteworthy is that both Robin and Raven’s act of resistance involves in one way or another act of writing. Therefore “in *Flight to Canada* the ability to write is the ability to control one’s identity” (Lock, 1993, p.73). As H. A. Rushdy rightly puts, “both Uncle Robin and Raven, the two ‘writers’ in the novel, write primarily as a way of resisting slavery” (p.121). Consequently, literacy is regarded as “a pathway to freedom” (Mvuyekure, 2004, p.213). Probably it is the reason why literacy is defined in the novel as “the most powerful thing in the pre-technological pre-post-rational age” (FC 35).

In *Flight to Canada*, as it is observed, although both dimensions of identity, namely personal and collective, are given attention, it is through the personal dimension that the collective is given a new emphasis. Reed’s new account of identity brings Black identity to the foreground and gives it a new definition at the same time. Unlike the African-American artists and critics associated with the 1960s’ Black Arts movement who were celebrating the idea of *negritude*—an idea that believed in an essential and innate blackness—(Bertens, pp.105-9), Reed welcomes the postmodernist tenets according to which the idea of essentialism, black or otherwise, is arguably challenged. He revolts against the essentialism according to which identity is a set of predefined characteristics which are shared

by a particular class, race, or gender, everywhere at all times regardless of all individual differences. He distances himself from this black essentialism: What is described by Henry Louis Gates (1987, p.251) as “the Afro-American idealism of a transcendent black subject, integral and whole [...] the ‘always already’ black signified.” It is because for Reed, the idea of blackness “cannot be categorized or prescribed.” (Andrews et al., 2001, p.345)

Moreover, for poststructuralist critics identity is “a fluid process” and a construction which “is never autonomous completely.” (Wolfreys, 2004, pp.97-8) For Reed, accordingly, identity, black or otherwise, must remain fluid and not strictly defined or prescribed in that such a definition does not do justice to the infinite potentiality of human soul and limits one’s sense of the self. That is why in the novel *Raven* is described in the following words: “He didn’t want to have a cult. A Raven is always on the move. A cult would tie him down” (FC 144). This is the point where Reed’s ideas on identity converge with the postmodern celebration of identity as a plural, diverse, and dynamic category.

CONCLUSION

The present article investigated Ishmael Reed’s 1976 novel *Flight to Canada* in terms of key concepts of the American poststructuralist critic of history Hayden White. These concepts were employed in order to illustrate how the counter history in the novel embraces the Whitean poststructuralist history. It demonstrated how Reed’s parody of the orthodox version of history which led to its deconstruction in *Flight to Canada* is achieved through the novelistic and narrative techniques he employs, as well as through his Neo-HooDoo practice which has its origins in his African-American heritage. Reed challenges the American official history in that being constructed and recorded by the white majority, it has always neglected the black ethnic minority and suppressed their history—or story—which has, in the long run, resulted in neglecting their identities and existence. Accordingly, what Reed has endeavored to achieve in *Flight to Canada* is to nullify the Western as well as Christian prerogative in terms of history, culture, religion, and perspective—to name only a few—and to propose instead a plurality of perspectives, as well as a definition of identity more diverse and dynamic. Reed’s history of the antebellum period is introduced in terms of a fictional history wherein historically real characters interact with merely fictional ones, the classical categories of time and truth are deconstructed, and fiction and reality merge. Such a history encounters the readers with the kind of vibrancy, multiculturalism, and multivocalism favored by the writer.

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