



The Subversive Power of Stereotype in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*¹

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Introduction

Flight to Canada is a historical enactment; it re-establishes historical facts about the African American experience. As Glenda Carpio argues, it “operates within a fictional space that merges the past (antebellum and Civil War America) with the novel’s present (the years after the Civil Right movement), both of which intersect with our own present moment of reading.”² Beyond conventional power relations between master and slave, it exposes some new dimensions of the relations of power.

Flight to Canada is a dialectical restructuring of the basic power relation between master and slave, between whites and blacks. Indeed, one of the strategies in which the master’s power takes effect in his interaction with the slaves is the creation of stereotypes, which is the elaboration of blacks as caricatures. We intend to show in what follows that Ishmael Reed’s novel turns on a presupposition – the ethical axis of master and slave – to a new structure of power and domination in the relationships between whites and blacks. In other words, the purpose of this paper is to examine, within the white supremacist context, the implications of stereotypes concerning the statuses of the master and the slave.

In the thematic concern of the novel, Reed asserts the following: “Strange, history. Complicated, too. It will always be a mystery, history. New disclosures are as bizarre as the most bizarre fantasy” (*FC*, 8). A mystery is something strange or unknown which has not yet been explained or understood, and therefore, deserves some new explorations or investigations. From this conceptual standpoint, and also convinced that the story of African Americans’ lives under slavery has been distorted, Reed offers a new approach or a revision.

¹ Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1976. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in this work under the initials (*FC*), followed by the reference page.

² Glenda R. Carpio, “Conjuring the Mysteries of Slavery: Voodoo, Fetishism, and Stereotype in Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*,” in *American Literature*, Vol. 77 No. 3, 2005, P. 567.



In other words, for the author of *Flight to Canada*, African Americans' experience of slavery needs re-centering for, actually, their stories have been "taken from their bodies to suit purposes other than those to whom the story belongs."³ And, the result of this dispossession is their dehumanization:

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 is like robbing a man of his Etheric Double. People pine away. It baffles the doctors the way some people pine away for no reason. For no reason? Somebody has made off with their Etheric Double, has crept into the hideout of themselves and taken all they found there. Human hosts walk the streets of the cities, their eyes hollow, the spirit gone out of them. Somebody has taken their story (*F C*, 8).

What Ishmael Reed refers to as a person's "Etheric Double" or a person's "gris-gris", is the person's story, a metaphor of the African American dehumanization; for a man's story is "the thing that is himself." This metaphor which expresses the dispossession or the negation of the African American humanity echoes in another neo-slave narrative: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*,⁴ a drama by August Wilson's. In that playwright, it is through the chain gangs system that Joe Turner has snatched Herald Loomis' "song" from him, demising his life. Thus, the story or the song is the metaphor standing for the essence of blacks' lives and, the fact for the whites to take them amounts to dehumanizing blacks.

Blacks' humanity has been shattered through slavery. Looking back on this prominent event in the African American experience, Reed offers fresh insights on the slave discourse. In his effort to rearticulate the standpoint of African Americans as subjects, Reed explores the conflict of power between slaves and master, focusing on some new implications or realities as the slaves gain pre-eminence. Thus, the new perspective aims at presenting African Americans not at the margin in their own history, not as simple caricatures, but in the perspective of the dialectics of countering and challenging the fantastic process of their "reification."

How does Reed (re)construct the power relations between the master and the slave? How does the slave negate the master's power? In the perspective of the questioning above,

³ Glenda R. Carpio, *Ibid.*, P. 582.

⁴ August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, New York, New American Library, 1988.



my first concern, after some theoretical considerations, is the analysis of the relations of domination and subordination between slaves and master, the functioning of the racial power relation within the white supremacist discourse. Then, we will focus on the shifting power, the disruption of the master's power.

1) The White Power Structure

1.1) Theoretical Overview

The present work is framed within the logic of the dialectic. We assume that the relationship of blacks to white society is dialectical in nature. The dialectic permits us, as Bonnie Thornton Dill explains, “to focus on the dynamic and contradictory aspects of black American life and to account for the simultaneity of conflict and interdependence which characterize black-white relations in American society.”⁵

To some extent, the dialectic represents “everything as being in the state of becoming something else.”⁶ Through *Flight to Canada*, there is a conflict or dialogue set around power, which is in a state of being challenged through contradiction. The issue of power stems from the contradiction between the discourse of domination and the counter-discourse of emancipation. In other words, to the power of domination are opposed strategies of emancipation. While whites or masters are the dominating forces, resistance to that power is implicit in blacks or slaves' relations to whites. Blacks' struggle for empowerment is not articulated, yet its effects are subversive of the white man's power.

Power can be defined as the ability to control others or the capacity to exert authority over them. It is a multiplicity of force relations that involve the disjunctions and contradictions existing between some individuals, groups of people. In the light of this power struggle, we will not base our investigation exclusively on dialectical materialism, but also on the theoretical formulations of the concept of power as developed by Michel Foucault. According to Foucault, power does not operate through class. As Michèle Barrett points out:

⁵ Bonnie Thornton Dill, “The Dialectics of Black Womanhood”, in *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*, Edited by Sandra G. Harding, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1998, P. 101.

⁶ R. N. Carew Hunt, *The Theory and Practice of Communism*, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1977, P. 48.



Foucault's concept of power was, in significant measure, developed as a critique of Marxism's theory of power as an instrument of a class dominance that was understood to originate from economic interest. Foucault saw power, on the contrary, as something that is exercised rather than possessed; it is not attached to agents and interests but is incorporated in numerous practices.⁷

Foucault argues that power is pervasive in all interactions, and it operates through mechanisms and strategies. Thus, for Foucault, the key aspect for a critical investigation of power is centered on the question "how?" As Roger Deacon writes:

Foucault suggested that we need to develop an 'analytics', as opposed to a theory, of power relations or at least 'theory as toolkit'. In other words, instead of attempting to say what power is, we must attempt to show how it operates in concrete and historical frameworks, in the sense of 'By what means is it [power] exercised?' and 'what happens when individuals exert power over others?'⁸

One of the historically constructed patterns of white power or domination over blacks is stereotyping. Within the Foucaultian concept of power, our concern in the present paper is based on the analysis of the subversive power of stereotypes in the relations between master and slave in Reed's novel. In this light, Foucault's conceptual perspective of power can be appealing to our investigation as it promises to clarify the networks, the strategies and mechanisms through which power is exercised. How do these theoretical considerations apply to Reed's novel?

1.2) Subjugating Blacks: the White Supremacy Discourse

In line with Foucault's concept of power, Saugata Bhaduri and Simi Malhotra note that

A system of power does not operate through repression alone, because coercing everybody to submission is a rather uphill task. The only way in which a system of power can sustain itself is by eliciting consent for it and

⁷ Michèle Barrett, *The Politics of Truth*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991, P. 135.

⁸ Roger Deacon, "An analytics of Power Relations: Foucault on the History of Discipline," in *History of the Human Science*, London, Sage Publications, Vol. 15 No.1 2002, P. 91.



complicity towards it from the objects of exploitation themselves. A system of power succeeds when its objects willingly submit to its authority.⁹

As a matter of fact, power is pervasive in all the whites' interactions with blacks. The whites' domination operates through the social structure of the slavery plantation. This hierarchical social structure establishes the rules regulating the relations between the white master and the black slaves. Structured around the birth rights and superiority complex that the peculiar institution grants to whites, the master has power of life and death over the slave. Their relationship is based on domination and submission. This social configuration or socially constructed relationship appears in all the other spheres of life. In effect, slavery sets up an opposition of two unequal forces with the possibility of the balance shifting one way or another. The slaves are subjugated by the white master, Mr. Arthur Swille, a rich and powerful farmer of the South.

Mr. Swille is not only rich, but also a man who has gained national fame and influence owing to his economic success. This prominent position is due mainly to the work of his slaves. Abraham Lincoln, one of the historical characters of the novel underlines this fact in a conversation with him:

Mr. Swille, listen to your train. That great locomotive that will soon be stretching across America, bumping cows, pursued by Indians, linking our Eastern cities with the West Coast. Who built your trains, Mr. Swille? The people did, Mr. Swille. Who made you who you are today, Mr. Swille? A swell titanic titan of ten continents, Mr. Swille. Who worked and sweated and tilled and toiled and travailed so that you could have your oil, your industry, Mr. Swille? Why, we did, Mr. Swille. Who toted and tarried and travestied themselves so that you could have your many homes, your ships and your buildings reaching the azure skies? We did, Mr. Swille... (*FC*, 29).

This passage is significant because it presents a world of a deterministic power structure between the rich master and the poor slave. Through this passage, Abraham Lincoln admits the mutual relation between people of different social classes. It recalls the law of the unity of opposites and interdependence between the rich and the poor. The success or fame of the master derives from the exploitation of the hard labor of his slaves.

⁹ Saugata, Bhaduri and Simi Malhota, in their preface to *Literary Theory: an Introduction*, Wimbledon, Anthem Press, 2010, P. x.



Aside from this dialectical formulation, what is at issue here foreshadows the problem of power between the master and the slave as viewed by Ishmael Reed. The fact is, the rich and prominent persons are made by other people who are supposed to be lowdown persons. Considered as lower persons, or persons of low status, they are always the ones to perform the jobs in order for the rich to legitimate his comparative privilege, his position of dominance.

In his relationship with his slaves, Mr. Arthur Swille is the dominant, while Uncle Robin and the other slaves are the submissive. Mr. Swille is the owner of the slaves who work for him. He has ultimate authority, all the rights over them: their labor force, their body. In short, the slave is the white man's property as Raven Quickskill tries to define himself: "I am property. I am a thing. I am in the same species as any other kind of property. We form a class, a family of things. This long black deacon's bench decorated with painted white roses I'm sitting on is worth more than me – five hundred dollars. Superior to me" (*FC*, 64).

This status of property is legal and legitimate. It makes the slave a thing, an object to be used as the master pleases. "Even Mr. Lincoln said that what a man does with his property is his own affair" (*FC*, 63), one of Quickskill's pursuers said when the former who engineered to break free, got captured. Indeed, whenever one of his slaves run away, Mr. Swille has the right to recapture him, and make of him what he wants. The escape of a slave is a way of challenging the master's power, for it amounts for the slave to get away and be out of the master's compass, beyond his control. This escape generally occurs when the slave happens to learn to read and write, hence the slave's denial of education.

They are not entitled to be educated, for education certainly entails enlightenment, power and everything it involves. Mr. Swille's slaves are submitted to that social disposition that has been transgressed by Raven Quickskill: "Raven was the first one of Swille's slaves to read, the first to write and the first to run away. Master Hugh, the bane of Frederick Douglass, said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he'll take an ell. If you teach him how to read, he'll want to know how to write. And this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself" (*FC*, 14). Thus, this social restriction intended to control the slaves holds from the master's belief that education makes the slave run away.



In addition to the slaves' denial of education, other provisions are made by the white master to maintain his power and authority on the slaves. Thus, in all matters relating to the body of the slave including clothing, manners, social relations, etc., only Mr. Swille has a say. He sees to it that the slaves' attitudes do not defy the basic assumptions of white supremacy. For instance, Uncle Robin's attire is ordered by him: "Uncle Robin, his slave, is standing against the wall, arms folded. He is required to dress up as a Moorish slave to satisfy one of Swille's cravings" (*FC*, 18).

Indeed, Mr. Swille perceives the slave in stereotypical ways, and one of his cravings about the slaves is to make them look like faithful servants in order to confirm one of his psychic fantasies. This physical appearance fits the master's requirement: the slave's physical appearance that must enhance prediction and control. For the master, his slave and house-servant Uncle Robin should look like a clown, an entertainer who wears amusing clothes – an "Uncle Tom." Uncle Tom is an epithet of servility; it is a derogatory term for a person of a low status group who is overtly subservient with authority.

An Uncle Tom is for the master a "simple creature," and as long as Uncle Robin behaves so, he deserves his master's confidence, and, subsequently he is entitled to some privileges. About some of Uncle Robin's privileges, Mr. Swille declares: "It's upon my son's advice that I don't permit any of the employees to use the telephone. I permit Uncle Robin to use it because he's such a simple creature he wouldn't have the thought powers for using it deviously. He's been in the house for so long that he's lost his thirst for pagan ways and is as good a gentleman as you or me" (*FC*, 34).

Such an assertion holds from the supposed humanity of the institution of slavery. Actually, behind this rationalization, it is the exposition of a stereotype that was common during slavery. Slaves were indeed considered as childish people. Therefore, they need protection from their master, a sufficient ground for Mr. Swille to reject the idea of their emancipation that Abraham Lincoln was preparing to issue. "You see, Mr. President. They need someone to guide them through this world of woe or they'll hurt themselves" (*FC*, 37). Mr. Swille's assertion derives from the stereotype of black childishness on which the institution of plantation slavery relies. An infant is innocent, naïve, unintelligent, and the slave



is considered to have the mind of a child. Being a child, and predictable, Mr. Swille has the feeling to be safe to manipulate him. On the whole, stereotyping Uncle Robin leads Mr. Swille to have paternalistic attitudes towards him.

In sum, stereotyping slaves is a process whereby the master disciplines and controls them. In other words, the need for dominance encourages stereotyping, which in turn maintains the master's power on the slave. As Susan Fiske observes, "Stereotyping and power are mutually reinforcing, because stereotyping itself exerts control, maintaining and justifying the status quo."¹⁰

Stereotypes are some generalizations consisting of biased views or perceptions. Through the institution of slavery, the white masters have set up these mechanisms of power which help in preserving the racial and social hierarchy. To some extent, the constraints of these stereotypes can bring the slaves to the level of animals or objects, or make them anonymous, invisible. For Ralph Ellison, stereotypes are products of whites' fantasies. His anonymous character in *Invisible Man* states: "That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come into contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality."¹¹

Stereotypes provide expectations about personal characteristics and exert control through prejudice. However, stereotypes may have a contradictory duality. Thus, the order of power as discussed above deserves questioning, for total power is impossible, since the relationship between the master and his slave is subject to the physical and emotional limitations of the slave, and therefore cannot be total or absolute. Our concern now is how is the white power subverted?

2) Reversing the Power Relation: Blacks' Counter Power

Stereotypes can be used as tools by the master class to manipulate and oppress the dispossessed. But as David Mikics argues, for Reed, stereotypes may also stem from, or be appropriated by African American

¹⁰ Susan T. Fiske, "Controlling Other People. The Impact of Power stereotyping," in *American Psychologist*, Vol. 48 No. 6, 1993, P. 621.

¹¹ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York, Penguin Books, 1965, P. 7.



counterculture,” thereby becoming tools of empowerment. Uncle Robin, for example, manipulates the stereotype of the faithful, child-like servant epitomized by Stowe’s Uncle Tom in order to revolutionize the hierarchy of the Swille plantation.¹²

It is on this basis that we shall now be concerned with two prominent examples of stereotypes in Reed’s novel. The first is the “Uncle Tom” stereotype embodied in Uncle Robin, and the second to be considered is the Mammy stereotype: Mammy Barracuda, another trusted house-slave. The development of both house-slaves stereotypes obliterates the white power. While the first manipulates the caricatured views about him to challenge and overpower the master, the second unconsciously dissolves or disrupts the white mistress’s status.

2.1) Overpowering the Master

Unlike the other male characters such as Raven Quickskill, 40’s, or Leechfield who escape from their master in order to enjoy freedom in Canada, Uncle Tom who reminds us of Robin Hood who steals from the rich and gives to the poor, stays with Mr. Swille. Maybe he does not try to flee because he is an old man, as he later explains:

I wonder did he [Raven Quickskill] find what he was looking for in Canada? Probably all that freedom gets to you. Too much freedom makes you lazy. Nothing to fight. Well, I guess Canada, like freedom, is a state of mind. Them counts and earls look like they’re free, but they’re not free... I couldn’t do for Canada. Not me. I’m too old. I done had my Canadas. I’m like the fellow who, when they asked why he sent for a helicopter to get him out of prison, answered, “I was too old to get over the wall.” That’s the way I feel. Too old to go over the wall. Somebody had to stay. Might as well have been me and Judy. Yeah, they get down on me an Tom (*FC*, 178).

In order to achieve his personal freedom, Uncle Robin resorts to stereotypes that he tactfully manipulates to overcome his master’s power. Indeed, Uncle Robin opposes a moral or mental force to the physical subjugation of his master. His following statement appears as a synthesis of the power struggle between the master and him: “The difference between a savage and a civilized man is determined by who has the power. Right now I’m running

¹² Glenda R. Carpio, *Op. Cit.*, P. 576.



things. Maybe one day you and Raven will be running it. But for now I'm the one who determines whether one is civilized or savage" (*FC*, 149).

This observation reveals a reversal in the power relation that we have tried to examine so far. The key to Uncle Robin's success lies partly in the impact of stereotype as Susan T. Fiske notes that "People in power stereotype in part because they do not need to pay attention, they cannot easily pay attention, and they may not be personally motivated to pay attention."¹³ It is this lack of attention that is carefully used by the slave in order to overpower the master.

Thus, to his master's "sly" question: "Robin, what have you heard about this place up North, I think they call it Canada?" Uncle Robin delicately offers the following answer:

Canada. I do admit I have heard about the place from time to time, Mr. Swille, but I loves it here so much that....that I would never think of leaving here. These rolling hills. Mammy singing spirituals in the morning before them good old biscuits. Watching 'Sleepy Time Down South' on the Late Show. That's my idea of Canada. Most assuredly, Mr. Swille, this my Canada. You'd better believe it (*FC*, 19).

In his answer, Uncle Robin who knows that his survival depends upon forging ways and means to accommodate the plantation system, tries to do what is expected from him. He knows that he has to stay within the bounds of Mr. Swille's expectations. The expected answer is part of the house servant stereotype that is loyal and faithful to his master and, will do anything to deserve his master's esteem and confidence. So, it is like a game that Uncle Robin has to play, and the winner, like the answer is known beforehand. In the power relations between master and slave, the slave is supposed to be submissive and loyal. Uncle Robin enacts a role, that of "Uncle Tom."

On the other hand, Uncle Robin knows that his success in his struggle for survival and above all the negation of the master's power depends on this primary phase: to comply with the master's orders and desire. Mr. Swille is pleased with what he hears from his slave, and he even acknowledges the slave's central role in his life:

Uncle Robin, I'm glad to hear you say that. Why, I don't know what I'd do without you. I can always count on you not to reveal our little secret.

¹³ Susan T. Fiske, *Op. Cit.*, P. 621.



Traveling around the South for me, carrying messages down to the house slaves, polishing my boots and drawing my bath water. All of these luxuries. Robin, you make a man feel like ...well, like a God. (*FC*, 19-20)

In his interaction with the slave, the master believes that he is authority and holds authority over the slave, because he is the one who possesses, and who gives orders to be executed by the slave. Yet, the slave might play a central role in the master's existence, for everything concerning the master's world bears his stamp. It is what occurs between Uncle Robin and his master. Gradually, Uncle Robin starts to exert a certain control over the supposed master. Mr. Swille is conscious of this fact that he terms the "nigger fever":

Nigger fever. Niggers do something to you. I've seen white people act strange under their influence. First you dream about niggers, little niggers mostly; little niggers, sitting eating watermelons, grinning at you. Then you start dreaming about big niggers. Big, big niggers. Big, big niggers walking all on top of you; then you got niggers all over you, then they got you. Now they got white men fighting white men on land taken away from the Indians (*FC*, 131)

The nigger fever furtively takes hold of the master. Standing for power, it is an "influence" that grows gradually, that is to say from partial to total, an overwhelming influence making the white man powerless. In other words, the white man's power is celebrated and challenged by the influence of the slave. This is the proof of the existential impasse that develops out of the master's dependency on the slave. This dependency is further detailed by the master: "Don't mention it, Robin. I don't know what I'd do without you. He brings me two gallons of slave women's milk each morning. It keeps me going. He travels all over the South in an airplane, buying supplies for the estate. He's become quite a bargainer and knows about all of the sales..." (*FC*, 34-35)

The trust and reliance of the master on his slave leads to the development of some moral qualities that the latter will later use against the master. Moe, the white house servant senses it and makes the following remark: "I don't know why he trusts you, Uncle Robin. He thinks you're docile, but sometimes it seems to me that you're the cleverest of them all, though I can't prove it," Moe remarked (*FC*, 40).



What Moe cannot prove is a sort of magic spell Uncle Robin has put on his master by dint of his central role in the master's life. Eventually, bewitched by the slave, the master believes that his slave is endowed with a second mind, a hidden mind which is curiously captivating, according to Lincoln who confesses:

Curious tribe. There's something, something very human about them, something innocent and ... Yet I keep having the suspicion that they have another mind. A mind kept hidden from us. They had this old mammy up there. She began singing and dancing me around. The first time in these years I took my mind off the war. I felt like crawling into her lap and going to sleep. Just sucking my thumb and rolling my hair up into pickaninny knots. I never even gave spooks much thought, but now that they've become a subplot in this war, I can't get these shines off my mind. My dreams.....She must do Swille a lot of good (*FC*, 46-47).

Thus, the slaves exert some power effects on the master, as Lincoln further adds: "You know, I can't help thinking sometimes that the rich are retarded. That Swille couldn't go to the bathroom, I'll bet an escort or someone showing him the way" (*FC*, 47). This incapacity of the "master" to do things by himself suggests the idea of a child that cannot do things by itself. Its life totally depends on the mother or the parents. The white master's dependency on the slave is further reinforced by his subsistence on "Slave mothers' milk".

Here, we have the reversal of the prejudice of infantilism that was bestowed on the slaves. Feeding Mr. Swille on "Slave mothers' milk" is to infantilize him. Actually, the slave mothers' milk is some Coffee Mate, a poison Uncle Robin uses to feed Mr. Swille in order to kill him:

Every time I went on trips for Swille, I'd load up on it. They serve it on the airplanes. I'm an old hand at poisons, and so I'd venture a guess that if Swille's wife, or Vivian or whatever or whoever pushed him hadn't he'd of 'gone on' from the cumulative effects of the Coffee Mate. Cartwright ain't the only scientist. Those Double Etherics that Ms Swille's defense witnesses talked about sounded more scientific than that bull he been laying down (*FC*, 175).

This revelation shows that the rich white master has taken the lower position. Actually, the white man is not for the slave a superior being. Rather, he is like a child that is



taken care of by the slave. Ironically, this image counter poses with what Mr. Swille's perception of slaves as childish.

In order to come up against Mr. Swille's domination, Uncle Robin carefully calculates how to handle him in ways that usually go unnoticed. In this process, Mr. Swille becomes the slave while Uncle Robin achieves mastery. He overpowers the master and becomes the "master of a dead man's house" (*FC*, 178). Mr. Swille's reliance on Uncle Robin eventually makes the latter the heir of his property. It is "an incredible reversal of fortune" (*FC*, 170). This reversal dramatizes an inversion of power that suggests the collapsing dialectical model wherein Mr. Swille's prior position of dominance is superseded by Uncle Robin's prior position of subordination.

Thus, there is a modulation from some original, determinate structure of power to the ironic disclosure of the slave as the agent of power. It is the triumph of the "lower" world over the "upper" world. Uncle Robin's fight is discrete, invisible to the master. Rather than seeking open conflict, he has learned to tactfully overpower his master, who is victim of his objectifying the slave.

Uncle Robin's emancipation is the result of a process of the negation of the white man's power. It is a mental counter power against the white supremacist society. For Uncle Robin, power is not the capacity for the slave to overtly challenge the master's authority with violent acts. In most cases when the white man's power is directly opposed, through revolts and other kinds of violent confrontations, those efforts were put down with overwhelming force.

So, Uncle Robin's counter-power lies in hidden, unspectacular strategies. The inversion of the master/slave dynamic occurs through stereotypes. It is through the stereotypes of slavery, that is, the representations that embody fixed ideas and white psychic fantasies, that the counter-power is elaborated.

To carry out this strategy, Uncle Robin seems to have been naturally gifted. For, as W. E. B. Du Bois stated, the Negro is "born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world". This veil is referred to as "the color curtain" by Richard Wright. Owing to



that veil or curtain, Mr. Swille cannot grasp Uncle Robin's true consciousness. Using other terms, Ralph Ellison gives further details about the white man's perception of the African American when he writes:

I [the black] am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.¹⁴

This biased perception of the black by the white can be considered as the origin of various stereotypes that prevail in their interactions. What whites see when they look at blacks, as Ralph Ellison argues are “figments of their imagination.” These fantasies are potential sources of some privilege and empowerment for blacks. The Mammy caricature through Mammy Barracuda is a second case in point. Her deep respect for racial hierarchy and her fidelity to her master is likely to dissolve the white mistress status.

2.2) Dissolving the White Woman's Status

White women in general are considered as the symbols of the white power. It follows from this that, like the white man, the white mistress stands in the power relation as an oppressor of black slaves. To be exact, she is a member of the dominating race. Ironically, within that white supremacist context, the white mistress does not enjoy the position of a superior being. The relationship between Mammy Barracuda and Ms. Swille is illustrative.

To start with, the functioning of the power relation between whites and blacks makes her a victim of oppression. Gender constitutes the axis of the oppression that characterizes her within the system of plantation. Mariarosa Costa and Selma James rightly observe that women's status in general is obliterated in capitalist societies: “With the advent of the capitalist mode of production, then, women were relegated to a condition of isolation, enclosed within the family cell, dependent in every aspect on men”¹⁵

¹⁴ Ralph Ellison, Op. Cit., P.7.

¹⁵ Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, “Women and the subversion of the Community,” in *Materialist Feminism. A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives*, Edited by Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham, New York, Routledge, 1997, P. 45.



Actually, under plantation slavery, the white mistress's status as a superior being compared to her black house-servant is questionable. In matter of care, affection, and love, she suffers from her husband's oblivion and neglect. Mr. Swille is too busy with other interests to mind his wife, in spite of all the efforts of Ms. Swille to strike his attention: "I wanted you to notice me. You weren't paying attention to me", said Ms. Swille (*FC*, 135).

The power of the master allows sexual licentiousness and miscegenation. Black women play the role of sexual objects for the white man, and in this role, they tend to outplay the white mistress in term of importance. Very often, they become the master's preferences as sexual partners. According to one of the whites' fantasies, black females are sexually potent, and unquenchable. Thus, whites are rather obsessed by black women with whom they consume all their sexual cravings, and eventually forget about their own wives. The following is a complaint by Ms. Swille about her misery in the hands of her husband and his black girlfriends:

You're always changing the subject on me, treating me like the field hand around here. As though I came with the land, like arrangements in the feudal ages. Military Man, "she says, "he has a mammy who says abrasive things to me, and she manhandles me and confiscate my belongings. And he has concubines. The slave girls walk around with all my jewelry on. Oh, the decadence. Tell them about the decadence down here, Military Man. The great immoral decadence. Tell them in the land beyond the screams (*FC*, 133).

Disillusionment, pain, anger, and bitterness are among Ms. Swille's feelings. She expresses her grief, mentioning "the great immoral decadence" that refers to the state of corruption of the southern society. The consequence of this corruption is the physical degeneration of its central representative: the white mistress, who plays the role of the southern belle. Ms. Swille looks like a "living ghost." Once she threatened her husband with a pistol, accusing him of being responsible for her physical degradation: "*her* bones protruding, *her* legs and *her* ribs showing" (*FC*, 134). She adds that she has become "so delicate that *she* won't go out of doors for fear the sun will melt *her* or that *she* will stumble in a puddle and drown or if somebody said boo I'd keel over" (*FC*, 134).



Ironically, the white woman becomes a mistress without importance. She is considered as a second class citizen, as Mammy Barracuda reports: “She say she tired of being a second-class citizen and she say she don’t want to feed herself no mo” (*F C*, 20). If Ms. Swille is neglected, it is also because her husband confines her in a role, a social role that perhaps makes her sexually undesirable. The role of the white woman is to be the master’s wife, but, most importantly, she plays the role of the “southern belle.”

The white mistress stands as a symbol of purity for the white social system. In that role, she is jealously preserved, overprotected by men and the laws governing social life. In her institutionalized role, her status can be likened to the one of the slaves, as Glenda Carpio argues:

Although the experiences of slaves and white women (particularly those from the upper classes) differed drastically, suffragists stressed that women’s status aligned them with the enslaved population of the country because, like slaves, women could not control their own persons or property, vote, choose a profession or hold public office.¹⁶

As a consequence, she develops an incapacity that is filled up by the black house-servant. The relationship between Mammy Barracuda, the house-servant and her mistress, Ms Swille is therefore another axis of the white mistress’ subordination.

The Mammy is another stereotype figure among black women. It is a woman, generally employed as a house-servant who is contented, happy to be a slave and she offers loyal servitude to the master. She is a loyal cook and a housekeeper and has great love for her white family. She is in close relationship with the white mistress. The narrator introduces her as follows: “Mammy Barracuda has a silk scarf tied about her head. A black velvet dress. She wears a diamond crucifix on her bosom. It’s so heavy she walks with a stoop. Once she went into the fields and the sun reflected on her cross so, two slaves were blinded” (*FC*, 20).

This grotesque caricature embodies the stereotype of the loyal slave and devout Christian. She is determined to help her delicate mistress officiate her position as a “southern belle.” In that perspective, the Mammy stereotype, along with other social circumstances,

¹⁶Glenda R. Carpio, *Op. Cit.*, P. 576.



turns to be a weapon to destroy the white mistress' power. Barracuda, a trusted house slave, acquires a privileged position in the social structure of plantation slavery. In their interactions with the slaves, whites are inclined to rely on stereotypes in order to maintain the status quo. The counter-power originates from Mammy Barracuda's tendency to respect and maintain the status quo.

Barracuda, the loyal black servant, is always ready to go by the social code of the plantation. As Carpio argues, "Barracuda so dramatically embodies the stereotype of the loyal slave that she praises the power of the man that keeps her enslaved."¹⁷ In this light, she is a sort of guard for Ms. Swille. She sees to it that the social prescriptions are respected. And the white symbol of purity and authority must also be maintained.

In the hands of Barracuda, Ms. Swille suffers physical and emotional ill-treatment. The following testifies some physical assaults: "The mistress brings back her frail alabaster arm as if to strike Barracuda. Barracuda grabs it and presses it against the bed. "Barracuda! Barracuda! You're hurting me. Oooooo" (*FC*, 112). The southern belle even takes insults from her house-servant in the bathroom. While washing her, she insults her: "Now move, you old mothefukin she-dog. You scarecrow. You douche-bag! You flea-sack drawers! You no-tit mother of a bloodhound. You primary chancre!..... (*FC*, 113)

In addition, the black servant plays the boss in the "big house." Her authority extends to the master, as the mistress reports: "She has some strange hold on Master Swille" (*FC*, 126). In any matter concerning the household, she is the commander in chief. Except for the master, she holds total authority over the female house-servants as well as over the white mistress. The latter stands in the third position in the Swilles household, as the following passage suggests:

Mammy Barracuda stands in the center of the room, her arms folded. She gives orders with her head. Pointing in this direction, that direction. Tapping her foot when annoyed. Giving some eye-dagger when mad. Not smiling but showing a wee twinkle when pleased. Bangalang is second in command, following through, taking inventory of every detail (*F C*, 117).

¹⁷ Glenda Carpio, *Ibid.*, P. 573.



Emotionally, Ms. Swille is defeated. She suffers daily humiliation from the servants. Talking to her son, she expresses her anger before confessing her low status as compared to Mammy Barracuda:

I'm furious. Son, do you see me shaking? Do you what a terrible state I'm in? That smoke, Mammy Barracuda, just makes my life miserable. I have no authority any more, and when I do exercise my functions she says things like 'Dit out of my way,' or 'Dit out of my kitchen.' She has some strange hold on Master Swille (*FC*, 126).

Eventually, Ms. Swille becomes a miserable being whom people can laugh at. She has almost gone insane and she is said to have pushed her husband into fire to kill him. On that account, after having stayed in a hospital, she will be sent to an asylum.

On the whole, it can be argued that the white mistress' superior status collapses before the black servant. Ironically, in her attempt to urge Ms. Swille to abide by the prescriptions of the southern tradition, Barracuda feels compelled to brutalize her in order to make her suit the tradition. As a result, the white woman's status is derogated. This derogation derives from the Mammy caricature, namely Mammy Barracuda's deep respect of the southern code that makes the white mistress the symbol of white supremacy.

The role played by Barracuda within the white supremacy context makes her an important figure compared to the white mistress whom she is supposed to serve as a "right hand." Unlike the white mistress, she becomes self-reliant and autonomous in serving the white mistress. The oppression of the white mistress by her can be considered as the counter-power of the oppressed.

Her condition can be paralleled with the condition of Louise Bonbon in Ernest Gaines' *Of Love and Dust*.¹⁸ In that second novel of Gaines, Aunt Margaret, Bonbon's house-servant, is the one who not only takes care of Louise her mistress, but she also gives her order and even threatens to weep her. In addition to the suffering due to her husband's negligence, Louise Bonbon's life is directed and supervised by Aunt Margaret, the black house-servant, and eventually, she becomes insane at the close of the novel.

¹⁸ Ernest Gaines, *Of Love and Dust*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1967.



The relationships between slave and master we have tried to analyze so far defy the basic assumptions and laws of white supremacy. The white domination system or the power relation conceals its own contradictions. Ishmael Reed portrays these images according to the white man's fantasies in order to explore the potential dynamisms in the master/slave dialectic.

Conclusion

Flight to Canada is an imaginative recuperation of the past, a neo-slave narrative, by Ishmael Reed, aiming at correcting the historical record of slavery. Reed is here animated by a desire to reconstruct history in order to reconstitute African Americans as subjects during slavery. This impetus goes against those who snatch stories from blacks and make them mere objects. An instance is Harriet Beecher Stowe whose book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is based on the story of Josiah Henson, a former slave.

The relation between master and slave is portrayed by Ishmael Reed on a hypothetical basis. What we have been concerned with through this study is that the discourse of domination hides some disturbing contradictions. Reed redefines the power relations that render African Americans properties, objects. Here, the notion of power is re-conceptualized and reversed. Indeed, the stereotypes become the sites of power for African Americans. Seeing blacks through their "lenses": as caricatures, stereotypes, not as individuals, the white man's power is easily destabilized, obliterated by the slave.

Actually, the power relations under the institution of slavery render blacks properties or objects. This status is reinforced and maintained through the same mechanisms of stereotypes. And it is through stereotypes that Reed tries to construct a new power relation that presents the "subjectification" of those who were perceived as objects and the "objectification" of those who were subjects or agents.

The stereotypes are worked out, manipulated to counteract the white man's power. In other words, the exercise of power to maintain white supremacy over blacks is met with strategies of counter-power. The counter-power does not consist in crushing the myths of black inferiority, or dispelling the prevailing negative stereotypes about blacks. Instead of



trying to offset stereotypes about them, Reed reveals the counter-power potential of stereotypes created by whites to dominate blacks.

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