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A Review of *Flight to Canada* by Ishmael Reed

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Attacking Cultural Myths

BOOK REVIEW: *Flight to Canada* by Ishmael Reed, Random House, New York, 1976. 179 pages. \$6.95.

Ishmael Reed's genius lies in his perception and expression of the cultural conflict basic to the oppression of Black Americans historically and contemporarily. Often criticized for numerous "obscure references," Reed achieved an exceptional level of insight, satire, and intrigue in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Now in *Flight to Canada*, he gives us insight, satire, intrigue, and hilarity in an equally astute yet less complex analysis of American Black/White relations, illuminating the cultural struggle between Western Civilization and the Afro-American, and clearly focussing the Afro-American membership in the so-called Third World by virtue of domestic colonization. With the exception of Toni Morrison, Reed is the only contemporary novelist who has delved into the workings of Afro-American culture *vis-à-vis* the American expression of Western Civilization to reveal the intricate composition of the tantalizing, multi-dimensional freedom evading the Negro slave and even the twentieth century Afro-American.

The plot revolves around the escape of three slaves from the Swille plantation and the relentless search for one of them, Raven, by the master Arthur Swille. Little is sacred to Reed except the recognition of racial and cultural freedom (i.e., Canada) as a myth. Oppression simply takes another form once slavery is abolished. It can be so veiled that many, as Cato, are fooled into believing it is virtually nonexistent; the Leechfields of the race convince themselves they can rip off the oppressors; others like 40's cynically and despondently retreat; and the Raven Quickskills struggle and discover the harsh reality of the veil. Princess Quaw Quaw, a Native American who thought she had bridged the gap of racial hostility, serves to assert that domestic colonization comes in many forms but is, however, a reality in the American experience to those racially and culturally different.

Reed artfully attacks the myth of Camelot, Arthur Swille's world which suggests the myth of the garden underpinning the Anglo-centric domination of America; and his central character, Raven, no longer invisible or blind to the falsity of Canada, can no longer be kept running. He destroys the myth of Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, as he draws on fact and imagination to portray

Lincoln as a pawn of Camelot, manipulated to further its dominance through the issues of the Civil War.

Anachronisms emphasizing the relevance of oppression today, names signifying on characters (Does Swille suggest swill, meaning "to drink greedily" or "garbage fed to pigs?" And what about *Leechfield*? Etc., etc.), the trickster motif, all keep us laughing and thinking from the reading of Raven's poem at the beginning until the very end. Firmly rooted in the Afro-American literary tradition, *Flight to Canada* raises the consciousness to the cultural contours of the political struggle, and illuminates the foils of the past in the struggle for liberation, extricating the myths, Black and White, that have so entangled us.

Johnnella E. Butler