

TRICKSTER ARCHETYPE IN ISHMAEL REED'S *FLIGHT TO CANADA*

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Abstract

The paper proposes to examine the transformation of the trickster figure of popular African American folk tales into tricksters of contemporary African American culture. The trickster figures of folk tales and slave narratives have made reappearance in contemporary texts by reconstructing the resistance strategies and ideologies derived from the early African American literature. I have chosen to examine this transformation in Ishmael Reed's novel Flight to Canada, a pivotal African American text that has consistently utilized the trickster motif couched in Africa's cultural, religious and ideological thoughts and symbols. The tricksters in neo slavery novels function as metaphors of resistance and counter-discourse against the homogeneous western culture. In my paper I will present a detailed account of the resurrection of the trickster in African American literary landscape not only as a disruptive and boundary crossing figure but also as a rhetorical principle which is based on power politics. Henry Louis Gates in Signifying Monkey has formed a distinctive literary theory by taking into account the cultural aspects of the African American ethnic group. Gates has illustrated how the rhetorical concept of signifyin(g) is derived from the ambiguous oracles of the Yoruba trickster god Esu. In my paper I will also focus on signifyin(g) as a trickster aesthetic that challenges the normative power structure and disrupts the dominant sexual and racial discourse.

Key Words: Trickster, signifyin(g), African American, folklore, neo slave narrative.

Trickster, the ambiguous and polytropic figure, is a liminal archetype associated with boundaries, edges and places of transition. The trickster figures in the folktales of many cultures and has been the focus of ethnographic, anthropological and religious studies. It is difficult to outline the characteristic features of the trickster as he is a protean figure who invalidates all the definitions. Though the term trickster has a clear pejorative load yet he often comes across as a positive force no matter how formidable his trickeries are.

A review of the important academic theories would clarify the concept of trickster archetype. The aim is not to provide a strict definition for a character whose role is significant for crossing the static boundaries of definition but to facilitate a reading that goes beyond the myopic version of presenting him as a deceiver and a selfish hedonist. The trickster is so firmly entrenched in the human psyche that Carl Jung in his essay *On the Psychology of*

Trickster Figure identifies him as an archetype of the unconscious mind that emerges from a common reservoir that is of “collective, universal and impersonal nature” (Jung 43). As for the nature of the trickster he says it is “characterized chiefly by unconscious and unreason” (Jung 197). Jung’s theory of the trickster archetype is based on Paul Radin’s collection of mythical stories about the Winnebago Indians but addresses tricksters in all mythological stories. Jung connects this archetypal figure not with a cultural hero but with his notion of ‘shadow’ which represents a component of the unconscious mind that is usually repressed from the rational and conscious part. Jung refers to the shadow as the “inferior personality” that is related to man’s lowest instincts which are “indistinguishable from the instinctuality of an animal” (Jung 233). The trickster in the Winnebago mythology represents the preliminary stage in the emergence and development of the consciousness. He is the representative of the archaic man and therefore incompetent and behaves like a “fool”. This trickster reminds the highly civilized people of their earlier stages of development and connects them to the animal instincts that they consciously try to suppress. Jung not only links the trickster to the bestial beginnings of humans but also establishes his connection with the divine. He superimposes all the contradictory aspects and puts him at the centre of all conflicts: “subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being, whose chief and most alarming characteristic is his unconsciousness” (Jung 169). Whenever the repressed instincts surface, the selfish buffoon emerges; while it is repressed the culture hero role is assumed. Thus the trickster is a true representative of the self that integrates both the rejected and suppressed and the cultural aspects into a mythological archetype.

Paul Radin in his definition has tried to encompass the numerous facets of the trickster figure in Winnebago mythology:

Trickster is not able to discern good from bad – yet he is the creator of both. He is cynical, cruel and unfeeling. He has no set of values neither social, nor moral and still he provides mankind with cultural norms. He is a genitalized figure with no mission beyond that of satisfying his primary wants, hunger and sex. The trickster is simultaneously the creator and the destroyer, the giver and denier, the one who fools and the one who gets fooled. But, the diffuseness of his behavior disappears and gradually he emerges with the physical outlines of a man. (Radin, Trickster 313)

Thus, Radin’s definition of the Winnebago trickster manifests that the trickster is a cultural hero responsible for establishing order in a chaotic universe while satisfying his cravings for sexuality and appetite. Wakdjunkaga, the trickster chief of the Winnebago tribe, begins his journey as a mass of ill formed body parts: his enormous intestine justifies his insatiable hunger and his huge detachable penis slung from his neck in a box stands for his unappeasable sex drive. But by the end of the cycle as a consequence of several misadventures, the trickster’s grotesque body parts gradually wither away and are reduced to normalcy.

Claude Levi-Strauss in his structuralist theory of mythology has discussed myths and the trickster figures within it. In his article *The Structural Study of Myth*, Levi-Strauss examines the tricksters Coyote and Raven as presented in native North American tales. He argues that these tricksters occupy a world of binaries and they thrive off the conflict and anarchy inherent in it. He further stresses on this point by highlighting the fact that both Coyote and Raven are carrion eaters which means that they occupy an intermediary position between herbivores and carnivores. Additionally, they do not actively hunt these animals but benefit by gorging on their carcass. As Levi-Strauss states “Thus, the mediating function of the trickster explains that since its position is halfway between two polar terms he must retain something of that duality, namely an ambiguous and equivocal character” (Levi-Strauss 441). Like most other social groups African American community also have its typical trickster figure. To understand the African American trickster it is necessary to go through the socio-cultural background of the African American community. The African-American community developed their own body of folklores that is a part of the three hundred year old oral tradition of Africa called “orature”. Originally the folklores were transmitted verbally but later they were explored, collected and recorded by writers such as Joel Chandler Harris, Charles Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. The oral nature of the folktales allows it to incorporate the circumstances under which the tales are related. As Roger Abraham states in *African Folktales*: “Oral performance tends to focus on the concrete qualities of the here and now, and on the practicalities and problems faced daily in the village or small-community context” (Abraham xix). Here lies the importance of Signifyin(g) in relation to the African American trickster. African slaves were prohibited from using their own language in the plantations so they created a new language that was vague and incoherent to the slave owners and overseers. Signifyin(g) makes use of puns, plurality of meanings, verbal ambiguity and double entendres to deconstruct the language of their masters. The stories are told by exploiting the signifyin(g) power of language. So the storyteller in a way can also be termed as a trickster for using the signifyin(g) language peppered with puns and verbal trickery that creates as well as disrupts order.

The tales acted as safety valves as they gave vent to the slave’s frustrations, anger and desire of revenge and instilled hope of a better future. The animal trickster tales often revolve round the acquisition of food. The theme is also detected in African trickster tales that frequently open with references to famine or shortage of food. In Africa it is a natural one induced by shortage of rainfall or failed crops. In America the scarcity is an artificial one created by the slave master who hogs all the food and material goods produced and the slave is left with only scraps, rags and crumbs. Under such adverse social conditions the difference between ‘stealing’: taking something by force from another slave, and ‘taking’: the moral act of providing oneself and the community by stealing from the master, becomes clear. The trickster tales serves to bolster the confidence of the slave community to survive the inhumanities meted out to them. The trickster tales demands that we suspend not only our

disbelief but also our moral conscience as the tricksters often engage in acts of violence and brutality. The enslaved Africans in America identified themselves with the cunning and witty tricksters who were often represented as weak creatures that used their tricks to outwit their bullies or oppressors and rebel against the established moral order. Trickery is the accepted way in a world where the power relation is arbitrary. Trickery provided the slaves with opportunities to reverse the power relationship in a symbolic way and thus impart an emotional release to the accumulated angst.

The trickster tradition of the African Americans is strong and resilient. Though the specific reasons for using trickster in folktales no longer exists yet the appeal of the character remains in the twenty first century and African American writers have adopted “tricksterism” in various guises- as theme, character, literary trope and narrative strategy. Tricksters have been the undisputed protagonists of the twentieth century slave narratives. Slave narratives are accounts of the traumatic personal history of the fugitive slaves when they were in bondage. While these narratives were vital to the anti-slavery campaigns, they also helped the ex slaves to construct and define their identities by relating their critical times in these narratives. The slave narratives were also an attempt to prove that the slaves were as human as their white masters. The use of English proved their intellectual potential and capability to experience emotions. The slave narratives were written in simple diction attempting to engage a wide variety of readers in order to persuade them to disapprove the institution of slavery. The slave narratives were extremely popular during the eighteenth century as they were firsthand account of adventures well blended with religious and political truths. They created cultural space for the blacks within the contemporary norms and remained the most important literary genre within the African American literature. The antebellum slave narratives written by the fugitive slaves who later became celebrated black abolitionists like Fredrick Douglass, Harriet Jacob, William and Ellen Craft records how deception was necessary to escape the shackles of slavery. The genre ‘Neo Slave Narrative’ emerged after World War II and is defined by the critic Rushdy as “modern or contemporary fictional works substantially concerned with depicting the experience or the effect of new world slavery” (Rushdy 533). The neo slave narratives approaches slavery from different perspectives and engage variety of writing styles. They constantly challenge Western logo centrism through ruptures, fissures and departures from American history; uses multiple voices in the narrative and combine past, present and future time to unite memory and history.

Ishmael Reed’s novel *Flight to Canada* (1976) is a neo slave narrative or re appropriation of the genre ‘slave narrative’ with a comic fury. The novel dialectically opposes Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Pym* and emerges as a comic satire. It parodies popular twentieth century American as well as African American culture, genres, motifs and specific works. His scathing satire is directed against the 1960’s American history, literature and political institutions. This

interaction of popular culture and history with fictional components adds a meta-fictional dimension to the novel.

Ishmael Reed as a trickster writer works within the African American tradition of signifyin(g), a term used by Henry Gates to describe the double-talk that was a popular tool of the animal tricksters in African American folktales. In contemporary literature it denoted the technique whereby a contemporary literary work draws on the traits of the past works but reconfigures and reinterprets the matter in a way to produce an utterly new creation. Reed effectively 'writes back' to the white culture and like a trickster adopts their resources of narrative techniques, style, genre etc to shape his own writing. Through his writing Reed turns the table on the whites by altering their writing strategies in a way that parodies or caricatures the original form and destroys them essentially. No doubt Reed proclaims in the title of one of his collection of essays "Writing is fighting". Reed along with the two writer protagonists, Raven and Robin, of his novel *The Flight to Canada* wields writing as a political and cultural weapon to assert physical and aesthetic freedom.

Henry Louis Gates in the 'Introduction' to a collection of slave narratives entitled *The Classic Slave Narratives* has claimed that "from 1760 to the present, almost half of the Afro-American literary tradition was created when its authors and the black readers were either slaves or former slaves" (Gates et al. *Classic* xv). In the hands of Reed, a radical revisionist writer, the slave narrative is reappropriated by using techniques such as metafiction, metahistory and anachronism, a strategy which helps him to move swiftly between past and present events. The rewriting of black texts by black authors has been termed by Henry Louis Gates as a curious form of signifyin(g) by which "writers Signify upon each other's texts by rewriting the received textual tradition." (Gates, *Signifying* 135) Gates has also acknowledged that he derived the concept of signifyin(g) after going through Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo* and he credits Reed by saying that Reed repeats "received tropes and narrative strategies with a difference" (Gates *Signifying* 217). But Reed is not confined only to "black-on-black" rewriting, rather he also aims for the relevant white American canons by rewriting "black-on-white". This incessant cross-cultural revisionism in Reed has complicated Gates's theory of Signifyin(g). *Flight to Canada* unlike slave narratives does not chart in a linear fashion the progress of a slave's life from bondage to freedom. Though the novel is set during the Civil War, Reed creates the ambience of a modern era by mentioning such devices as jumbo jets, telephones, televisions and magazines like *The Times* and *New York Review of Books*. The linear and logical development of history as established by the white culture is perturbed by his steady use of anachronism. He takes the readers back and forth in the history to highlight the flawed events in the past that continues to plague the social mechanism of the present American society.

Ishamel Reed with his biting satire tears apart the false representation of slavery in literature and political history. The first part of the novel is titled *Naughty Harriet* and Reed charges Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, of plagiarism. She is

representative of the cultural slavery of the whites to the blacks that they fail to acknowledge. Reed informs the readers that the story of Uncle Tom has been derived from a brief autobiography published by a former slave Josiah Henson. Reed has brought into light an important theme: the fear of the former slaves of being looted of their last possession that is their own story. The situation is poignantly conveyed by Thomas Hall, 81, a former slave when interviewed by Works Project Administration:

You are going around to get a story of slavery conditions and the persecution of Negroes before the Civil War and the economic conditions concerning them since that war. You should have known before this late date all about that. Are you going to help us? No! You are only helping yourself. You say that my story may be put into a book, that you are from the Federal Writer's Project. Well, the Negro will not get anything out of it, no matter where you are from. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I didn't like her book, and I hate her. No matter where you area from, I don't want you to write my story, because the white folks have been and are now and will always will be against the Negroes. (Hurmenace 259)

Reed's allegation is therefore a serious one as he believes Stowe appropriates the minority culture only to suppress it and misrepresent it. The autobiography of Joshua Henson had slid into obscurity whereas *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is an enormous success. The point made by Thomas Hall finds an absolute echo in what Reed says of the appropriation: "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" (Reed 8). It is criminal to take away a person's right to expression and self realization. It is also an attempt to force the slaves into an intellectual bondage by aiming to construct their life and history. The slave narrative was thus a genre that was dominated and controlled by the whites for profit. The incidents were often distorted by the white writers to please the white audiences and to facilitate their own gains. The confessions were also corrupted by the editors or collaborators who altered the details of the story. The slave narratives were thus under the shackles of the vicious influence of the White monoculturalism. Reed attempts to recover the lost gris-gris of African American literature so that they may regain their lost power over the words for self definition. Henry Louis Gates appropriately describes the entire process of recasting the genre as an evidence of "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" (Gates, *Signifying* 20). Reed like an efficient trickster turns the table on Harriet Beecher Stowe and the likes of her by writing an unconventional version of slave narrative through an extensive use of parodies, signifyin(g) and a disconcerting representation of history that takes the reader to an unfamiliar territory.

Another character from history that has been gradually developed, parodied and vilified alongside the fictional characters is that of the Republican President Abraham Lincoln. Reed deconstructs Lincoln's image of an altruistic emancipator of slave and presents him as a foolish and self-centered creature. Abraham Lincoln's thoughts on the slaves bear a strong resemblance with the underlying sentiment in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "Curious Tribe. There's something, something very human about them, something, something innocent and... Yet I keep having the suspicion that they have another mind. A mind kept hidden from us... 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" (Reed 46). He uses the black slaves as pawns in the Civil war, belatedly aware that their liberty is the main political issue in the War. Reed's portrayal of Lincoln as a conman who uses slavery as a trump card goes against his popular image as the "Great Emancipator" constructed by the white American culture and witnessed in numerous American films such as *Lincoln* directed by Steven Spielberg. Lincoln's lack of feeling for the slaves is far more heart wrenching than that of Swille, the slave owner. While Raven is a guest of Lincoln in White House, he dreams that Lincoln is in league with Swille and has planned a coupe to enslave him. Reed has thus debunked another false Messiah of the blacks pitilessly.

Reed's novel begins with a poem that shares its title with the novel and serves as an invocation. It is written by one of its trickster protagonist Raven Quicksill who manifests elements of both Native American and African tricksters. The Raven is generally considered as a Native American trickster and there are numerous tales about its exploits. Like the trickster he is multi-faceted and can change himself to suit the needs. He is a writer, poet and creator. Raven's character stems from Reed's Neo-Hoodooism which is a trickster aesthetic developed by Reed to confront Western culture's rationalism and monoculturalism. The Raven is as glossy and dark as an African and the last name Quicksill suggests his ability to maneuver through any tricky situation. The poem sets the novel's anarchic tone by its overt dependence on anachronism. Quicksill in his enthusiasm marks that "Little did I (he) know when I(he) wrote the poem "Flight to Canada" that there were so many secrets locked inside its world. It was a reading more than writing" (Reed 7).

The concept of time and space lose their solidity in the trickster narrative. The merging of past and present time in the introductory poem and the narrative section highlights the more tangible links between slavery and contemporary culture that draws parallel between the past oppression of the blacks under slavery and the present aesthetic subjugation of the black artist by a culture of appropriation and commodification of the dominant whites. The conflation of time is also a trickster technique for opening up a space for aesthetic outlet in the repressive times. Both Reed and Raven Quicksill through their writing want to liberate themselves from the oppressive material and cultural system that has ensnared them since the 19th century: "...freedom was his writing. His writing was his Hoodoo. Others had their way of Hoodoo, but his was his writing. It fascinated him, it possessed him; his typewriter

was his drum he danced to” (Reed 88-89). The poem *Flight to Canada* explores the dangers of commodity culture that barter the slave narratives as text for widespread consumption in exchange of freedom. Raven is fully aware of the celebrity value his narratives will garner. He satirizes the whole aspect of his participation in anti-slavery lecture circuit outright to escape the trap of commodity culture which would reduce his long coveted freedom to a mere commodity for consumption. He writes of the greeting he gets in the plane:

Passengers came up
And shook my hand
& within 10 min. I had
Signed up for 3 anti-slavery
Lectures. Remind me to get an
Agent. (Reed 3)

The slave narrative, therefore, is not just a work of art that kindles cultural and aesthetic curiosity but also an entertaining illustration for the dominant culture that is ready to spend for its production. The slave narratives were altered to suit the taste of the white audiences. The black narrative now replaces the black body as the present-day objects for slavery. Reed and Raven both aware of the stratagem, rip off the romantic halo of the slave narrative and by deploying the technique of signifyin(g) transforms it into a critique of commodity culture. Reed the trickster author thus creates the trickster character Raven in his image. He is a ‘cultural player’ that can manipulate the dominant culture’s marketing tactics to increase his own financial profit.

Raven as a cultural trickster manipulates the economic and political terms that define the narrative and the author. On his successful escape from Swille’s plantation to North America he achieves a star status that takes him to the White House where he interacts with Abe Lincoln and other prominent guests like Walt Whitman. He uses his poem to prove his humanity and to get access into a society obsessed with celebrity personalities and the work of arts. He has successfully negotiated with the forces of capitalism while preserving his own cultural identity. Reed resorts to signifyin(g) by rewriting on “black-on-black” when he introduces another slave narrator William Wells Brown. He is a successful real life trickster who has braved capitalism from within the system and has achieved fame for his fictional writings apart from the biographical slave narratives. He is presented as a model for Raven to turn himself into a culture savvy slave in order to turn the table on the white capitalist society and earn monetary and artistic success. Brown is presented as confident and dashing in his “tall silk hat” and “black silk gloves” and his business card reads “Anti Slavery Lecturer and Writer”. Raven acknowledges Brown’s discipleship and names him as the inspiration for his poem:

I read your novel Cato...I just want to say Mr. Brown, that you’re the greatest satirist of these times...my poem *Flight to Canada* is going to be published in Beulahland Review. It kind of imitates your style, though I’m sure the critics are going to give me

some kind of white master. They'll say he gave me the inspiration and that I modeled it after him. (Reed 121)

Raven realizes that his escape from the plantation has freed him only from the physical shackles of slavery but the shackles of cultural slavery looms large in the horizon. His poem has made him a celebrity while also spreading the trap to commodify him and his text. The poem has become by essence a trail that has set Master Swille and his greyhounds which may stand for the forces of material and cultural slavery after him even when the Civil War is over.

The creation of the character Uncle Robin, the butler of Master Swille, is a radical alternative to Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom. The analogy is made explicit when Cato provokes him by saying that Stowe "didn't even use your interview. Used Tom over at the Legree plantation" (Reed 55). Robin himself finds similarities with Uncle Tom "Sometimes it seems to me that we are all Uncle Toms" (Reed 41). He is Raven's counterpart and like Raven he is a trickster. But he represents the older generation of tricksters with different strategies for surviving. Both their names however are derived from the name of birds. Like birds the two trickster character stands for motion and freedom from the set hierarchies, and the ability to cross borders at will. The name of Uncle Robin also reminds us of another trickster Robin Goodfellow alias Puck in Shakespeare's *Midsummer's Night's Dream*. Stowe's Uncle Tom is an example of a carefully crafted stereotype and a myth of a literate, African pacifist: "He was a large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man, of a full glossy black, and a face whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindness and benevolence" (Stowe 21). Tom is a true Christian and Stowe calls upon the readers to identify his benevolence and humanity inspired by his strong religious faith that leaves an imprint in "the touching simplicity, the child-like earnestness of his prayer" (Stowe 36). The stereotypes and myths are often created by the dominant class to manipulate and suppress the oppressed class. Uncle Tom was the embodiment of humanity and that made slavery unjustifiable. But for many critics like James Baldwin it is a racist portrayal of the Africans. Uncle Tom came to signify an insult implying a person who is coward enough to remain subservient to the whites. Reed uses the character of Uncle Robin to break the stereotype and deconstruct the myth and turn it into a weapon to destroy the feudal order and the hierarchy. Uncle Robin's strategical servility to Master Swill is a quintessential trickster scheme to subvert his master instead. He pretends to be a compliant slave but there is always an undertone of irony in his actions and words. He extols about the slave's life in Swill's plantation: "We gets whipped with a velvet whip, and there's free dental care and always a fiddler case your feet gets restless" (Reed 37). He has no faith in Christianity unlike Uncle Tom. When his wife Judith quotes from the Bible "He that knoweth his master's will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes", his response shows an utter carelessness "I never read it, but I figured something like that was in it" (Reed 57). He gives Master Swill Coffee Mate containing "artificial flavor, tricalcium phosphate,

and artificial colours”, pretending it to be the highly nutritious slave mother’s milk. Robin outwits Master Swille with his sugar-coated words and subservient nature acting much like a person following the advice of the Invisible Man’s grandfather. He hastens Swille’s death by surreptitiously poisoning his coffee for years and takes the advantage of his Master’s dyslexia and pretending to be loyal and pea-brained, alters the will. He inherits the entire fortune. The hierarchy is turned upside- down as the slave becomes master and promises to “run it just like my Mussa run it” (Reed 167).

Uncle Robin is Reed’s most effective instrument in destroying the myth surrounding the slaves in the Southern plantation. Reed has provided space to the former slaves to reclaim their history by giving them the power of narration so long belonging to the whites only. It is through writing that Robin creates his own identity while Swille through his failure to write has handed over the power to Robin. Uncle Robin has not outright mutinied and escaped the plantation like Raven or Leechfield but his sly maneuvering proved to be far more effective in the long run. He understood that mental freedom is the necessary pre-requisite to physical freedom: “Well, I guess Canada, like freedom, is a state of mind” (Reed 178). It is he who ultimately frees the runaway slaves: Leechfield and Raven. On the other hand, Raven, who apparently gets more importance as a writer and a successfully escaped slave, realizes after he has physically arrived in his dream-country Canada that it has an uncanny similarity to Swille’s plantation from which he has escaped:

Man, they got a group up here called the Western Guard, make the Klan look like statesmen. Vigilantes harass fugitive slaves, and the slaves have to send their children to schools where their presence is subject to catcalls and harassment. Don't go any further, especially with [Quaw Quaw]. They beat up Chinamen and Pakistani in the streets. West Indians they shoot.. .. Of the top ten Canadian corporations, four are dominated by American interests Man, Americans own Canada. They just permit Canadians to operate it for them. (Reed 160)

Cheated by the false dreams of a free land Raven returns to the plantation to write down the autobiography of Uncle Robin on his request. Robin is eager to safeguard his story from Harriet Beecher Stowe who makes an attempt to coax Robin into giving the rights of his story to her. However, Robin unlike Josiah Henson does not fall into the trap. He gives the right of his life story to Raven. The two black tricksters wrestle away the literary dominance from the whites in an eagerness to provide a discursive reconstruction of South, slaves and slavery. They successfully manipulate the stereotypes to convert them into weapons, destroying the ones in the power who have created it.

The tricksters in Reed’s neo slave narratives are concerned far more with liberating their voices and seeking freedom from cultural slavery. Reed and his tricksters make their target of attack the appropriators of black literature and history. Reed’s story focuses on the two main tricksters, the fugitive Raven and the ‘trustworthy’ Robin. These tricksters tie together the themes of culture, identity, writing, literary representation. Reed resurrects and

gives a new lease of life to the genre that was stifled by the overtly moralistic and sentimental portrayal of the condition of the slaves by writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe. Reed's neo slave narrative exploits humor, satire, parody and fantasy to emancipate the genre from the clutches of the dominant culture.

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