

## ABSTRACT

MULLINS, MATTHEW RYAN. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Texts—19<sup>th</sup> Century Narratives: Literary Convention in Paul Muldoon's *Madoc: A Mystery* and Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*. (Under the direction of Thomas Lisk.)

This thesis explores how Paul Muldoon and Ishmael Reed use literary and historical conventions to comment on the value of literary conventions in the context of contemporary literature and culture. Muldoon uses poetic conventions in *Madoc: A Mystery*, while Reed uses slave narrative conventions in *Flight to Canada*. The value of reexamining these conventions in a contemporary context is to see their persisting importance and influence in literature and culture, and also to see where, perhaps, they may have fallen short as is the case with some of the slave narrative conventions appropriated by Reed.

No previous research has placed *Madoc* and *Flight to Canada* side by side. By placing these two texts side by side, we can get a better idea of the irreducible complexity of language. Both Muldoon and Reed use language that can only be reduced to a lowest common denominator that is, in itself, complex. Both authors also offer a revisionist history that questions capital "T" truth, and the concepts of time and history in general. And, in both texts, America is critiqued for falling short of its once-ripe New World aspirations. By appropriating literary conventions, Muldoon and Reed pull two hundred years into the span of a few hundred pages, and use convention to challenge convention while learning from convention in the process.

20<sup>th</sup> Century Texts—19<sup>th</sup> Century Narratives: Literary Convention in Paul Muldoon's  
*Madoc: A Mystery* and Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*.

by

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Matt Mullins is originally from Louisville, Kentucky. He currently resides in Youngsville, North Carolina. He studies literature, writes poetry, and is pursuing his doctoral degree in English. He lives with his wife, Jenny, and their dog, Broch.

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## INTRODUCTION

Paul Muldoon in *Madoc: A Mystery* and Ishmael Reed in *Flight to Canada* both work in the context of what literary and cultural critic Frederic Jameson calls, “The collapse of the high-modernist style” (202). Jameson has argued that “The producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture” (Jameson 202).

Both *Madoc: A Mystery* and *Flight to Canada* return to the “dead styles” of 19<sup>th</sup> century narrative forms. Muldoon and Reed both make literary allusions that once would have designated specific places and times, but are now brought together to create an entirely new global context and style. Both authors rely on connotation to enable their texts to span multiple centuries. Conjuring up images, politics, or taboos from the 19<sup>th</sup> century attaches to words not only their 19<sup>th</sup> century denotations, but also the connotations of their 20<sup>th</sup> century context.

Inspired by tales about the Welsh Indians, a group of Native Americans supposedly descended from Prince Madoc of Wales who discovered America long before Columbus, English poet Robert Southey wrote a book-length, narrative poem entitled *Madoc*. Paul Muldoon’s *Madoc: A Mystery* tells the story of what might have happened had Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge followed through on their plan to relocate to America and establish a utopian pantisocracy, a perfect world governed equally by all its inhabitants. While Southey and Coleridge are the primary characters in this long poem, Muldoon interweaves other narrative threads: Lewis and Clark’s western expedition, Aaron Burr’s

rebellious plot, and a vision of corrupt American capitalism embodied by the evil Alexander Cinnamond into the tale of Southey and Coleridge's utopian vision for America.

The entire narrative is unstable and unreliable as it purports to be derived from a retinograph attached to the eyeball of a prisoner named South: "All that follows / flickers and flows / from the back of his right eyeball" (20). Muldoon uses selections from Coleridge and Southey's journals, as well as quotations from Lewis and Clark, and the speeches and writings of other historical figures to advance his story. Unfortunately for the Coleridge and Southey of the poem, as in reality, they never found their pantisocracy. Southey and Coleridge are split up after drawing lots to decide who will try to reach Ulster, Pennsylvania before winter sets in. Southey becomes caught up in his own self-interest, and Coleridge lapses into a dependence on drugs.

*Flight to Canada* follows escaped slave Raven Quickskill on his adventurous flight to Canada from the Virginia plantation of his master Arthur Swille. Along the way, we meet his on-again-off-again girlfriend Quaw Quaw Tralaralara, President Lincoln, the pirate Yankee Jack, and a host of other characters. The novel opens with a poem by Raven that tells of his escape and return to the plantation. However, Raven's poem tips off his master, Arthur Swille, to the escapee's new location, and Swille sends a band of bounty hunters after Raven, who runs all over the northern United States and Canada to avoid being recaptured, all the while hopping jumbo jets, going to parties, and talking with freed slaves.

Reed simultaneously details the steady decline of Arthur Swille as master of his own house. Swille's favorite slave Uncle Robin (the Uncle Tom of the novel) secretly sets himself up as successor to his master's fortune, and when Swille is killed by what appears to

be his sister's ghost, Uncle Robin is ready to take possession of the plantation. Uncle Robin also wants to tell his story, and for that venture, asks Raven to return to Virginia to set it down in writing. The novel ends with Raven's return.

Steven Mailloux defines conventions as "shared practices" (399). Mailloux further clarifies his understanding of conventions by explaining how they function and how they are formed:

Traditional conventions function not only as options for the artist but also as expectations for his viewers or readers. Thus, when a new practice arises, audiences are surprised by the unexpected, the unconventional. The innovation also shocks the medium itself: if other artists adopt the practice and this adoption is not just a fad, then the unfamiliar becomes conventional.

(399)

When the "unfamiliar becomes conventional," as Mailloux states, it loses some of the edge that made it unfamiliar in the first place. Conventions are shared practices that are recognizable to the point of losing some of their ability to communicate information effectively. Fulfilling literary conventions is an attempt to tap into an existing, socially agreed-upon master narrative that is easily recognizable and uses language whose connotations are specific to its conventions.

Paul Muldoon and Ishmael Reed both respond to and use literary and historical conventions to comment on the value of conventions in the context of contemporary literature and culture, and on the idea of a master narrative. Muldoon plays with poetic conventions such as the long narrative, fragmentation, and collage. Reed, on the other hand,

makes serious fun of the conventions of the traditional slave narrative. Reexamining these conventions in a contemporary context shows their persistent importance in literature, and where, perhaps, they may have fallen short.

Muldoon and Reed both use language in a way that accentuates the irreducible complexity of words. The irreducible complexity of language is made up of the intricate web of connotations that every word carries. Similar to the physical complexity of the human eye, which cannot lose any of its parts and still function properly, language cannot be reduced past a certain point of diminishing return. Both Muldoon and Reed take advantage of the constant growth of meaning in language, often emphasizing connotation over denotation.

Chapter 1 discusses the ways in which Muldoon and Reed both appropriate 19<sup>th</sup> century narrative conventions to challenge the idea of such conventions, and also to create self-aware critiques of writing. Chapter 2 provides examples of how both authors manipulate concepts of time in order to demonstrate the irony of using convention to comment on convention. Chapter 3 examines architectural structures as political symbols, and demonstrate how Muldoon and Reed accomplish similar critiques of contemporary American culture while creating entertaining and humorous texts. These critiques are primarily embodied in the texts' self-awareness, revisionist history, and ironic commentary on the American New World myth. Muldoon's and Reed's work creates an intertextual discussion in which the old is made new again, and help us to appreciate literary convention while realizing and learning from its shortcomings.

CHAPTER 1  
APPROPRIATION OF 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY NARRATIVE

In *Madoc: A Mystery* and *Flight to Canada*, Paul Muldoon and Ishmael Reed both rely upon 19<sup>th</sup> century literary conventions in order to challenge and explore them. Although they offer similar critiques, Muldoon appropriates poetic conventions, while Reed primarily appropriates conventions from both fictional and non-fictional slave narratives. Both authors write with a sense self-awareness, bringing to the forefront a heightened awareness that a critique of writing is being carried out in writing.

• Muldoon by the Fireside •

In his book-length poem *Madoc: A Mystery*, Paul Muldoon plays with poetic conventions of language, form, and content derived from older conventions of narrative poetry and the Modernist reaction to those conventions. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was well known for his long narrative poems such as “Evangeline” and “The Song of Hiawatha.” Modernist poets, such as T. S. Eliot, popularized fragmentation, collage, and pastiche to reconceive the long poem as a form.

Muldoon’s critique of American Romanticism as embodied by Longfellow, and of Modernism as embodied by Eliot conforms to Frederic Jameson’s view of postmodernism, and with Ishmael Reed’s critique of literary and historical convention. Muldoon is imitating dead styles through his return to the long narrative form. He combines the narrative traditions found in American Romanticism with the return to the long form found in Modernism, and fashions a new form out of old forms.

Andrew J. Auge persuasively argues that “The context for the linguistic play in ‘Madoc—A Mystery’ is a nexus that Muldoon establishes between British colonialism in Ireland and America, the Western intellectual tradition, and, more particularly, the cultural movement of English Romanticism” (640). While Auge successfully defends his position, he seems blind to Muldoon’s play with American Romanticism. Yes, Muldoon is pointing out the effects of British imperialism in both Ireland and America, but he is also commenting on a singularly American version of colonialism, intertwined with the westward-moving Lewis and Clark/Coleridge and Southey narrative thread of the poem.

*Madoc*’s title poem, “Madoc: A Mystery,” spans two hundred and forty-six pages. Brian McHale argues that the significance of postmodern long poems, such as *Madoc*, lies in their return to narrative.

On the one hand, the modernists revived the long poem, restoring it to its former status as the measure of poetic ambition and achievement, especially for male poets, especially among North Americans; Pound, Eliot, Hart Crane, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens, among others, all essayed the genre. On the other hand, modernist aesthetics effectively deprived poetry of the most valuable of its traditional resources for organizing extended texts, namely narrative. (250)

*Madoc* is a long narrative poem, or sequence of poems, but if Muldoon is not returning to the conventions of literary Modernism in his play with the narrative form, then to what is he turning? Muldoon’s long narrative form is a return to an older style. The Fireside Poets wrote narrative poems such as Whittier’s “Snow Bound” and Lowell’s “Rhoecus.” For example, James Justus points out regarding one of the chief Fireside Poets, Henry

Wadsworth Longfellow, “Significantly, Longfellow’s characteristic genius is to be found in his dramatic narratives” (150). Muldoon’s appropriation of the narrative form enables him to incorporate the connotations of the older long narrative form into his own poem.

One of Longfellow’s most popular narrative poems, “Evangeline,” not only follows the narrative tradition of 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry, but oddly seems to foreshadow the westward Lewis and Clark adventures as they are portrayed in *Madoc*. “Evangeline” tells the story of a young French Acadian woman who, like Coleridge and Southey in *Madoc*, has come to America. In coming to America, she has been separated from her betrothed lover. The poem follows her across the blossoming nation, and includes, in a serious tone, themes and language similar to those Muldoon employs sardonically. Looking at Longfellow and Muldoon side by side reveals similar preoccupations with journeys, Native Americans, and secret races.

Longfellow:

Then at the door of Evangeline’s tent she sat and repeated  
Slowly, with soft, low voice, and the charm of her Indian accent,  
All the tale of her love, with its pleasures, and pains, and reverses. (Scudder  
445)

Still stands the forest primeval; but under the shade of its branches  
Dwells another race, with other customs and language. (Scudder 461)

Muldoon:

For a weekly ration of grog and a few gew-gaws  
Southey has enlisted fifteen disaffected Cayugas. (119)

February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1805. Sacajawea nibbles at the quirt  
of her newly-born's umbilical cord. (138)

Now I am inclined to believe that the ten ships of  
Madoc, or Madawc, made their way up the Mississippi  
and, at length, advanced up the Missouri to the place  
where they have been known for many years past by  
the name of the Mandans. (236)

Muldoon's references to Native American tribes and his poem's preoccupation with the existence of Welsh Indians in America evokes ambient echoes of Longfellow's Indian accents and hidden races.

Reminiscent of Longfellow, Muldoon's narrative fragmentation evokes both the spatial/narrative conventions of the Fireside Poets and the fragmented/pastiche conventions of the Modernists. Thomas Foster says, "He upends Enlightenment/Romantic ideology not by means of argument but through textual placement, by inserting pieces into his sequence at moments that will expose their vulnerability while at the same time advancing his own project" (Foster 45). One difference between Modernist fragmentation and Muldoon's fragmentation, I contend, is that the pieces, or fragments, of *Madoc: A Mystery* can stand alone.

Modernism is perhaps at its height in T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land." The fragments of "The Waste Land" cannot be separated from one another without damaging the poem as a whole, but the fragments of *Madoc* can, and even should be read both individually as fragments and together as parts of a whole. Take for example this fragment/poem/section

entitled “[Archimedes]:” “Coleridge leaps out of the tub. Imagine that” (41). Like every other individual poem in *Madoc*, this single line is a piece of the longer poem. Muldoon is not concerned with the length of any of his entries, whether they are twenty lines or one.

Now consider “[Archimedes]” in the context of the poem that precedes it, “[Epicurus]:”

They tip  
Coleridge into the icy tub  
  
to bring him round.  
His ornate  
  
*serge-de-Nimes*  
vest and pantaloons  
  
are laudanum-  
macked. His eyes a raccoon’s.  
  
He’s coming to  
his senses when a toe  
  
stirs, then the right fore-claw,  
and the tub begins to cla-  
  
mber like an alligator  
towards the birch-bower.  
  
The spaniel reeks of elder-  
flowers.  
  
A length of tarred twine  
dangles from a twig with (1)  
  
a silver ear-ring  
and (2) a salted herring. (40)

So Coleridge is leaping out of the tub because he has revived after having passed out and been tipped into it at the beginning of “[Epicurus].” We could never have had that information without the mutually illuminating bond between “[Epicurus]” and

“[Archimedes].” But does that bond provide the poem with any coherence? Within the context of the entire poem, yes; standing alone as a fragment, no. The context of the entire poem tells us that Coleridge has been on a drug-induced adventure, and though “[Archimedes]” alone would not provide this context, it is just as funny, just as moving, just as powerful a one-liner with or without the context of “[Epicurus].”

Because of its story-focused drive, *Madoc*'s plot provides insights into Muldoon's intentions that we do not see about Eliot's intentions from “The Waste Land,” at least not as explicitly. Muldoon is mocking Coleridge and Southey's utopian ideals, especially in his references to Southey's personal journals. For example, Muldoon isolates a passage from the journals in which Southey comments on the ideal city from Plotinus's *Enneads*, and envisions his own utopia:

—Yet I  
cannot help wishing the experiment had been tried; I  
could rhapsodise most delightfully upon this subject,  
plan out my city, the palaces and hovels of  
Southeyopolis. (158)

As Charles O'Neill concludes, “The frustrations of the idealist, Muldoon seems to suggest, lead to the fury of the ‘demagogue,’ his final epithet for Southey” (56). Coleridge and Southey's quest for a pantisocratic government by the people embodies British and American imperialism and one culture's dominance over another based simply on power. Muldoon constructs Coleridge and Southey's narrative with fragmented pieces, or snapshots.

“Snapshot” describes the way Muldoon presents us with information. Muldoon creates so many different threads, clues, and trails to follow that any single one might be a

full and complete mystery in and of itself, but all of them tied together do and do not seem to create one complete unity. Muldoon's process of constructing *Madoc* is like using a video camera to videotape an event, and occasionally interrupting the filming process to take a still snapshot of the live feed. O'Neill is again helpful:

Its fast pace and discontinuous actions might suggest a silent film comedy, a send-up of all tales of action, adventure and discovery. Or a reader might invoke the "mystery" of the poem's title and pursue the "key" that passes mysteriously through the narrative. Alternately, one might concentrate on the colonial excesses so vividly portrayed. Another perspective might see the poem as an enormous language-act, constructed to push the ramifications of historical coincidence and metonymic proliferation as far as they will go. (56)

As O'Neill implies when he alludes to the countless narratives in *Madoc*, there are many ways to read *Madoc*, and each one gives the reader a snapshot of the work, but not a unified vision of the poem's entirety. There is a narrative flow, but no unified vision of the structure of *Madoc* because each snapshot reveals a different direction in which the poem could go. Even if all of the narrative snapshots were brought together in one figurative movie reel, this cohesion would not result in one narrative conclusion.

Like Muldoon, Ishmael Reed also finds value in literary conventions, echoing non-fictional slave narratives such as *The Narrative of a Life of Frederick Douglass*, and from fictional slave narratives such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Unlike Muldoon, Reed is more overtly critical of literary conventions that he deems harmful or exhausted.

• Reed by the Light of the North Star •

According to James Olney, the traditional slave narrative typically entails a brief account of the protagonist's parental background and birth, a presentation of some disturbing but not excessive abuse from masters, a description of a flight, some reflection on slavery, and possibly even "sermons and anti-slavery speeches and essays tacked on at the end" (49). In *Flight to Canada*, instead of following these conventions, Reed manipulates them. This manipulation of conventions is an example of Frederic Jameson's assertion that "the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture" (202). In so far as the traditional slave narratives provide a view of slavery based entirely on literary conventions established by white writers, not on the revolutionary voices of ex-slaves, Reed appropriates the conventions to demonstrate that slavery is still alive and well.

The birth story in *Flight to Canada* is an especially interesting manipulation of the slave narrative parental background and birth story convention. Reed does not begin the novel with Raven's birth story. In fact, the novel does not start out with any birth or childhood experience. While that, in itself, may be a mockery of convention, what is more uncommon is the birth story he does give us. In the second chapter, Reed presents the slave master Arthur Swille's birth:

According to the family records we do have, we know that the first Swille, a zealous slave trader, breeder and planter, was "indescribably deformed." He did business from the tower of a Castle he built on his grounds . . . After Swille "crossed over," his dream was taken up by Swille II, Rockland Swille . . . His son Swille III, was named Arthur. (15-16)

With hyperbolic irony, Reed not only describes Swille's birth, but also traces Swille's line back three generations, and reveals the ridiculous history of the Swille family.

Reed's substitution of the master's birth story for the slave's suggests the slave's personal history does not truly matter in the traditional slave narrative. In the traditional slave narrative, the slave's history is important to the story only in so far as it is related to the master's history. However, because of Reed's manipulation of the literary conventions in *Flight to Canada*, Raven does not depend on Swille for his existence and personal history; as Robert Fox points out, the situation is reversed. "The southern slaveholders argued against abolition because they viewed their own liberty as being ensured by the enslavement of blacks . . . The dependence upon slavery is at the heart of the disease of mastership" (69). Swille, enslaved by his own family tree, cannot imagine a world without slaves. Reed alters the parental background and birth convention by focusing on the master instead of the slave to demonstrate the enslavement of whites to family history as opposed to the enslavement of blacks to their lineage, being slaves because their fathers and mothers were slaves.

Reed also twists the slave narrative flight convention. On the surface, Reed's manipulation is obvious. Raven escapes to Canada by way of a "Jumbo jet" (3). Reed is playing with a Western notion of time, and instead of using the Underground Railroad, or some ice-leaping river crossing, Raven hops a 737 to Canada, and then writes a poem about it. As Janet Beck argues, "Reed delights in appropriating stereotypic characterizations from the 19<sup>th</sup> century narratives and refashioning them with his sardonic humor" (136). The basic idea of the slave narrative is to escape, then to write about it. But for Raven, the escape is more complex than these two events. In comparison with characters from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, even though Raven has escaped to Canada, he does not feel liberated.

In Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the flight to Canada is an adventure whose end result is worth the hardship:

George and Eliza had now been five years free. George had found constant occupation in the shop of a worthy machinist, where he had been earning a competent support for his family, which, in the mean time, had been increased by the addition of another daughter. (427)

Stowe describes George and Eliza living in a "neat" and "cheerful" house:

a table covered with a green cloth, where was an open writing-desk, pens, paper, and over it a shelf of well-selected books.

This was George's study. The same zeal for self-improvement, which led him to steal the much coveted arts of reading and writing, amid all the toils and discouragements of his early life, still led him to devote all his leisure time to self-cultivation. (428)

Reed paints a less appealing picture of the end result of a flight to Canada as Raven's friend Carpenter describes one of Canada's safe havens:

"Let me show you downtown St. Catherine's," Carpenter said, removing a photo from his wallet. It looked like any American strip near any American airport; it could have been downtown San Mateo. Neon signs with clashing letters advertising hamburgers, used-car lots with the customary banners, coffee joints where you had to stand up and take your java from wax cups.

"It looks so aesthetically unsatisfying." (160)

Reed cuts this scene like the end of a scene in a sitcom where the star says he would never do "x," and the scene instantly cuts to the same actor doing "x." Raven goes

instantly from realizing his dream of being in Canada to being depressed about being there: “Then he slowly dropped his head to the table and let it rest there for a while, his arms stretched out” (161). Reed ends the scene with Raven’s head on the table, and starts the next chapter with Raven and Quaw Quaw driving back south toward the Canada/United States border.

In addition to the manipulation of literary conventions, Reed’s novel exhibits biting and, at times, utterly ridiculous self-awareness. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe appropriated the story of a slave named Josiah Henson. Reed addresses Stowe’s theft of Henson’s story explicitly in the opening chapter of *Flight to Canada*. Raven says of Stowe, “That story caught up with her. The story she ‘borrowed’ from Josiah Henson. Harriet only wanted enough money to buy a silk dress. The paper mills ground day and night” (Reed 8). Raven explains that in taking Henson’s story, Stowe had taken Henson’s gris-gris, or “The thing that is himself” (8). Stowe’s use of Henson’s story is not the kind of self-aware appropriation with which Reed is taking possession of the slave narrative and giving it new life. Instead, Stowe used Henson’s story for her own benefit, thus stealing his life away from him.

Stowe’s version of Henson’s story in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* sounds as if she thought she should say anything that might alleviate slavery’s evil, no matter what she had to “borrow.” Stowe’s appropriation was not self-aware because she legitimately thought she was doing good when in fact she was also stealing a man’s gris-gris:

The scenes of this story, as its title indicates, lie among a race hitherto ignored by the associations of polite and refined society; an exotic race, whose ancestors, born beneath a tropic sun, brought with them, and perpetuated to their descendants, a character so essentially unlike the hard and dominant

Anglo-Saxon race, as for many years to have won from it only  
misunderstanding and contempt. (Stowe 1)

And Stowe is here to set the record straight. Of course, according to Raven, she just needed a new dress. While Raven's categorization of Stowe's intentions is hyperbolic, Stowe's unselfconscious embrace of slave narrative conventions in her fiction demonstrates the difference between a 19<sup>th</sup> century earnestness and a postmodern uncertainty.

The irony of Reed's critique of Stowe is that he is using a similar tactic; however, when Reed uses slave narrative conventions in *Flight to Canada*, he does so with the utmost self-awareness. Reed is not a slave, but he employs the voice of an imaginary slave, Raven Quickskill in the same way that Stowe employed Henson's voice. However, unlike Stowe, Reed is self-aware of his position as a re-teller of a slave narrative, he does name his protagonist Raven Quickskill, talk about Harriet Beecher Stowe, and refer to Abraham Lincoln as "Lincoln the Player."

Self-conscious manipulation of convention and even of his own identity is Reed's method in *Flight to Canada*. After all, Reed's protagonist is a writer, like Reed himself, and Reed is bringing a 19<sup>th</sup> century issue into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Reed is not attempting to join the ranks of the impartial chroniclers of history. He is creating a link in the chain between literal slavery and cultural slavery, or the continued racial tension in America.

The primary issue with Harriet Beecher Stowe taking Josiah Henson's voice is that she was a white, upper-middle class citizen who had hardly a clue about the true sufferings of 19<sup>th</sup> century slaves. To treat the distinctions between the traditional slave narrative and the postmodern slave narrative with postmodern self-consciousness, we must acknowledge that we take issue with Stowe because "how dare she take a slave's story." Ishmael Reed is not a

slave. Though he is an African American, presumably descended from slaves, he himself was never bought or sold. So how can he justify appropriating the voice of a slave when Stowe cannot? Reed acknowledges that he is not suffering slave and does not tug at the reader's heartstrings in an effort to gain sympathy for his characters or himself. He demonstrates this awareness, primarily, through Raven. Raven is not a typical, suffering, beaten, traded-around slave. Reed revolutionizes the slave narrative.

At first, a turn to the past might not seem very revolutionary, but if Reed wants to say something about slavery it makes sense to use conventions that people are familiar with. The traditional slave narrative is familiar enough for most people to be aware of, even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The initial intended audience of slave narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *The History of Mary Prince* was initially the white, upper-middle class. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Janet Beck argues, "it was the white abolitionist editors and audiences whose expectations for the narratives dictated not only their form, but also, in part, their content" (132). So, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Reed turns back to a literary form once widely used and still widely read, and turns that form on its head.

Reed is attempting to reclaim the voice of the slave narrative from the grips of convention, and to empower it with a uniquely African American voice. One of the most blatant marks of white influence on the content of the slave narrative is the frequent presence of an editor figure. For example, in *The History of Mary Prince*, Mary Prince has been taken in by the members of an anti-slavery society, and she is dictating her story to Susanna Strickland (38). But even in slave narratives free of an obvious white/abolitionist controlling voice, frustratingly few true African American voices are audible amidst the chorus of conventions. For example, in *Narrative of a Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass is allowed

to hire himself out for work, but then forced to pay his master a certain sum each week (106), a physical illustration of the paradoxical voice of the ex-slave in slave narrative literature. As long as ex-slaves continued to write or dictate in the traditional slave narrative conventions they would eternally be ex-slaves. They would not be African Americans, Americans, people, individuals, but ex-slaves.

But in *Flight to Canada*, Reed is not perpetuating the ex-slave mentality. Instead, he looks at the slave narrative as a story that, at its heart, is truly African-American. Although the slave narratives might have originally been composed to suit a white, middle-class audience, Reed asserts that the stories are still slave narratives, not master narratives. These narratives have simply been hijacked by white conventions. As Robert Fox points out, Massa Swille's name is not just a corner-of-the-mouth smile to Uncle Robin's tampering with his master's last will and testament. Swille's name implies the "master's will" (68). Reed is breaking the white will for the slave narrative.

Helen Lock has argued that despite his twisted narration Reed falls perfectly in line with the history of African American writers. However, his work fits into the African American canon not because Reed fulfills all of the white conventions for the slave narrative, but because he reclaims them for black identity. Lock characterizes Reed's work as Neo-Hoodoo: a return to the original Voodoo, and a spurning of Hoodoo, the watered-down version of Voodoo that developed as Voodoo first made its way into the United States (69). Lock uses Reed's own outspoken claim of a Neo-Hoodoo approach to literature to argue that in the same way Voodoo took Christian conventions and adapted those conventions to its own deities in order to survive, Reed is reclaiming the conventions that have been used to control the African American voice by using them in his own way and in his own voice.

Both the poetry of Paul Muldoon and the prose of Ishmael Reed appropriate literary conventions, and specifically 19<sup>th</sup> century narrative conventions. Both of these critiques of literary forms from the 19<sup>th</sup> century point to conventions within the 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernist movement. The similarities and differences between Muldoon's and Reed's treatments of literary conventions reveal that each gives a prominent position to conceptions of time. The next chapter will specifically address concepts of time in *Madoc: A Mystery* and *Flight to Canada*, and will explain how those concepts act as a different commentary on literary conventions.

## CHAPTER 2

### CONCEPTS OF TIME

By manipulating linear narrative concepts of time, both Muldoon and Reed challenge the reliability of an historical record. In addition, they both challenge the notion that linear advancement equals cultural, social, or intellectual advancement. These challenges to traditional views of time create unstable narratives in which everything in the composition of these narratives is possible.

While Muldoon and Reed both contort a Western, linear sense of time, they do so with different purposes in mind. Muldoon seems to be suggesting a what-might-have-been scenario in order to challenge contemporary conceptions of power. Reed plays with conventional representation of time in order to offer a social commentary on the nature of slavery and the persistence of slave ideals into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Muldoon and Reed both challenge temporal narrative convention by manipulating the very convention they seek to challenge. The deliberate disequilibrium of narrative time helps call into question the cultural status quo. Muldoon creates this disequilibrium by purporting a history that never even happened, and by intending the uneraseable connotations of every word in the poem, while Reed creates a similar disequilibrium by replacing linear time with non-linear time.

#### • Muldoon & the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Unitel •

I ran into Foley six months ago in a dubbing suite in Los Angeles. He was half-way through post-production on a remake of *The Hoodlum Priest*, a film

for which I've a special affection since my cousin Marina McCall was an extra in the first version. (3)

*Madoc* begins with a prose poem, "The Key," set in the contemporary United States with the narrator's mind wandering back to Irish memories at the Olympic Cinema in Moy, Ireland. Muldoon takes us from a stereotypical flashback scene to a speculative history that never happened. Six poems after "The Key," we find ourselves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Clair Wills points out, "The 'story' of 'Madoc – A Mystery' is suspended between fact and fiction, past and future, Europe and America" (139). Wills sees the treatment of time in *Madoc* as a parallel to Muldoon's experience in moving from Ireland to America and to connections between the past and the future that haunt us all. However, unlike Wills or other interpretations say Muldoon plays with time in order to indict colonialism (Jacqueline McCurry), to trace American history (Carol Tell), to provide a Western context for present day poetics (Andrew Auge), I contend that Muldoon's treatment of time is a demonstration of how important the concept of "remaking" is to contemporary narrative representation of time and history.

"The Key" begins with the narrator's encounter with a friend who is overdubbing a "remake" of an older film because Muldoon is about to embark on a remake of American history. Wills does take notice of this passage, and even points specifically to the word "remake:" "Foley's problem is one of timing, but also one of connection, and the implication is that these are problems for Muldoon too" (Wills 140). Wills is correct in her observation of *Madoc's* grappling with a connection between past and present, but the fact that Muldoon is writing an alternative historical narrative, framed by the modern, big business-sounding Unitel, suggests Muldoon is revising history in order to suggest that all history is revisionist

history. Muldoon is playing with the question: “What is the significance of a history that never happened?”

Jacqueline McCurry claims that the “Mystery” portion of Muldoon’s title “suggests that his re-vision of American history might serve as a ‘medicine’ with which to treat mankind’s worst social disease: imperialism” (McCurry 107). While McCurry’s assertion of Muldoon’s emphasis on imperialism is noteworthy, imperialism is no mystery. Instead, the relationships among time, history, memory, and revisionist history (or the idea that history is whatever we say it is, or whatever we remember it as) seem to play the mysterious role in *Madoc*. Muldoon is struggling with the mystery of knowing that two hundred years ago someone else stood in the exact spot where anyone else could stand now. This mystery of the reality of history is what Muldoon is working toward when he opens the book with “The Key.”

Tim Kendall explains “The Key” nicely:

“The Key” may not provide the solution to the mystery of “Madoc”, but its temporal disruptions do match the organizing — or more exactly, disorganizing — strategies of the longer poem; the quotation, the xerox, the remake often precede and predict their originals, stealing their authority. (151)

But Kendall fails to take his observation to its logical conclusion, namely, that Muldoon has written this long narrative poem, in part, to create a history that did not happen. Muldoon performs a marriage ceremony between the American history that he outlines through Jefferson and Burr, Lewis and Clark, and Burr and Blennerhassett and the not-quite-real history of Coleridge and Southey’s involvement in all of these episodes of American history.

Muldoon's questioning of capital "T" truth in the context of time and history is not a philosophical treatise on time, but a narrative in fractured time. Muldoon takes advantage of the shifting connotations of words in the context of 1990 just as he takes advantage of their connotations from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For example, the "polygraph" mentioned in "[Pascal]" and created by Thomas Jefferson to allow himself to write multiple copies of a single letter simultaneously, also connotes the polygraph, or lie detector, that automatically comes to mind for a 20<sup>th</sup> century reader. "Madoc—A Mystery" is a willful exploitation of the irreducible connotations of everything, and especially language. The polygraph cannot be reduced to a single denotative meaning.

Jameson's treatment of historicism and nostalgia helps to clarify the "remaking:"

The insensible colonization of the present by the nostalgia mode can be

observed in Lawrence Kazdan's elegant film, *Body Heat*, a . . . *remake*

[emphasis mine] of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* . . .

.The word "remake" is, however, anachronistic to the degree to which our

awareness of the pre-existence of other versions, previous films of the novel

as well as the novel itself, is now a constitutive and essential part of the film's

structure: we are now, in other words, in "intertextuality" as a deliberate,

built-in feature of the aesthetic effect, and as the operator of a new

connotation of "pastness" and pseudo-historical depth, in which the history of

aesthetic styles displaces "real" history. (204)

Jameson's phrase "pseudo-historical depth" helps us tie together historical narrative, time, and revisionist history in Muldoon by pointing out that these concepts are anachronistic.

*Madoc* is anachronistic because it never actually took place at all. Muldoon is creating an

error in chronology. Jameson articulates the idea of looking at history's unerasable connotations through a set of new connotations, the idea of "real history," and the idea of multiple versions of history. Muldoon's poem embodies all three of these ideas.

Muldoon creates Unitel as a modern day capstone for his 19<sup>th</sup> century adventure. Unitel is the contemporary lens through which contemporary culture views history. Auge points out that the entire poem is narrated through the retinagraph attached to the back of the character South's eyeball (638). In "[Derrida]," four poems prior to the mention of Unitel in the final poem of the book, Muldoon says, "At any moment now, the retina / will be in smithereens'" (257). Unitel is the final vision, or last image, in *Madoc*. Muldoon is acknowledging that we incorporate the connotations of language into our own historical context which creates, in itself, an entirely new set of connotations.

In addition to the sleek-sounding Unitel, Muldoon also uses another framing device for his narrative. In "[Anaximenes]" just three poems into the 233 poems that make up "Madoc – A Mystery," Muldoon quotes from *Madoc*, Robert Southey's actual poetic epic, "The fluted cypresses rear'd up / their living obelisks'" (18). Then again, in the very last poem, "[Hawking]," Muldoon quotes the exact same lines (261). These poems act as the introduction and conclusion to a history book. But what is the beginning and end of a history that never happened?

Both "[Anaximenes]" and "[Hawking]" contain historical and contemporary allusions. Muldoon reminds us that we see history only through the context of our present circumstances. We understand history only from the point of view (i.e., South's retinagraph) from which we see or hear it. Both "[Anaximenes]" (at the very beginning) and "[Hawking]" (at the very end) contain the following: the passage from Southey's *Madoc*, a group of people

either shouldering or lowering weapons, the phrase “Trifoliate Chinese orange,” and a destroyed body organ (an eye and a leg) (18, 261). Muldoon orchestrates all of these common elements from the beginning and end of the poem to suggest that readers and historians look for connections among past, present, and future. Endless connections distract from one another, and prevent us from following them to any definite conclusion. This multifaceted path to nowhere is a commentary on human nature. We are always looking for answers, and as long as we keep looking we will keep finding answers, just maybe not *the* answer: “Through the hoopless hoop of an elk-horn bow” (213). Even the hoops in *Madoc* are hoopless.

While the entire narrative takes place in chronological order, Muldoon alludes to historical and contemporary language and events throughout the narrative by referring to philosophers and linguists in his titleless titles. Muldoon begins with Thales, the Greek mathematician who lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C., and ends with Stephen Hawking, the contemporary theoretical physicist. Since each of the titles is the name of a Western philosopher or theorist, one might assume that Muldoon is commenting on the development of Western thought. But because the beginning of the narrative has so much in common with the end (i.e., the connections between “[Anaximenes]” and “[Hawking]”), Muldoon might be suggesting that despite the “progress” of Western civilization, we are still in much the same place that we were in when the narrative started. Linear progression does not necessarily equal cultural or intellectual advancement, and newer does not necessarily equal better.

• Reed and the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Jumbo Jet •

As I argue in Chapter 1, Ishmael Reed manipulates the conventions of the stereotypical white-washed slave narrative for his own purposes. Reed's literary fracturing of chronology challenges social conventions and assumptions that time flows from past to future along a timeline, marked by points where specific incidents happen. Like Muldoon, Reed plays with Western conceptions of time to suggest a revisionist concept of history. As Ashraf Rushdy suggests, "Reed is revising our understanding of slave history as well as making his own important commentary on the Black Power politics of the sixties" (Rushdy 109).

Reed's uses African and African American conventions and techniques that include an entirely different view of time. The standard Western view of time is linear. Time follows certain rules, and stories flow in certain patterns. When Reed sends jumbo jets flying through the Civil War, and places televisions in the Douglass slave quarters on Swille's plantation, he is not only violating a convention, but also representing a non-Western, or more circular view of time.

African views of time are not constrained by the same guidelines as Western views of time. As Sheila Smith McKoy points out, Western time implies linear movement and demonstrates this linearity by juxtaposing it with non-linear events that act as "Deviations from this 'norm' such as when Shakespeare portrays Hamlet's situation by declaring, 'time is out of joint'" (209). Western time relies on the standard cause-and-effect view of events. In Western time, we can look back and reminisce about people, places, and events that we believe have happened and will never happen again. But Smith McKoy argues that an

African and African Diaspora concept of time is not linear. She refers to it as limbo time, and argues that it is rooted in the “West African belief in the cycle of time” (209).

So when Reed uses a radio to compare the sounds of Union and Confederate Civil War bands (87), or when Raven and Quaw Quaw watch Lincoln’s assassination on television and it is also Kennedy’s assassination they are watching, Reed is subverting linear, conventional concepts of time to break out from under white, Western narrative conventions. Reed’s structuring the novel on the basis of an African cycle of time directly places slavery’s effects within the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By presenting all of time as right now, Reed forces us to confront what is always happening. As Ashraf Rushdy points out, “*Flight to Canada* takes on the formal properties and assumes both the first-person and third-person voices of the fugitive slave narrative and the classical historical novel” (124).

Reed is purposefully using an historical approach for his narrative, but from the very first page, we know that something crazy is going on: “Lincoln. Harriet Beecher Stowe. Douglass. Jeff Davis and Lee” (7). The list of names sounds like it could have come out of any history textbook until Reed gives us “Jeff Davis.” The next thing we know, we are hearing vicious rumors about Honest Abe, Honest Abe’s mother, and we also hear a question: “Who is to say what is fact and what is fiction?” (Reed 7). For Reed, this question is an ironic jab at the white appropriation of African slave narratives (Stowe from chapter 1), but it also challenges, once again, Western history, and capital “T” truth.

Joseph C. Schöpp makes a cogent observation about the novel’s representation of time:

Reed’s handling of time, a conflation of past and present, where the word “flight” assumes a double meaning signifying both the hazardous 19-century

escape on the underground-railroad and the much more luxurious modern counterpart of an air-flight to Canada, becomes a major aesthetic device of which he will make ample use in the novel and which will allow him to blend the 1860s with the 1960s . . . and thereby keep the reader continuously aware of the fact that the past lives on in the present . . . that freedom, though realized in a corporeal sense, remains largely unachieved in a cultural sense.

(270)

The jet flying Reed's slave narrative into the 20<sup>th</sup> century delivers the problem to a 20<sup>th</sup> century audience.

In 1976, the United States was celebrating two hundred years of "liberty and justice for all." But Reed questions the idea of freedom in a nation that kept people physically enslaved until the 1860's and culturally oppressed through at least the date of the book's publication. Reed is purposefully playing on the connotations of language from the days of slavery to the year of the 1976 bicentennial, the year *Flight to Canada* was published. The word "flight" in pre-civil war America could have implied a dangerous escape for an African slave, a flight of stairs, or the flight of a bird. But in the year of America's bicentennial, the word "flight" could refer to a Delta Airlines trip, a flight of stairs, a dangerous escape for an African slave before the Civil War, or even the movie *Flight of the Navigator*.

Reed's narrative embodies what Jameson terms "real history" (205). Apparently, Reed and Jameson agree that "there no longer does seem to be any organic relationship between the American history we learn from the schoolbooks and the lived experience of the current multinational, high-rise, stagflated city of the newspapers and of our own daily life" (Jameson 206). Reed seems to be using the slave narrative not only to reclaim the tradition

and its conventions, as Helen Lock suggests, but also to challenge the existing tradition's authority. We cannot trust the "realism" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narrative, so Reed gives us a narrative that is impossible to trust because of its deliberate and obvious anachronisms, and its inclusion of allusions from medieval architecture to gravity-defying jumbo jets.

If we cannot trust history, we must try to look at everything at once. Reed alludes to Harriet Beecher Stowe, Gary Cooper, Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, Africans, Native Americans, and pirates—to name just a few historical figures. Jameson, referring to filmmaker Nam June Paik's experiment with stacking and scattering television screens, says, "The . . . viewer, however, is called upon to do the impossible, namely to see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference" (214). As Muldoon wants us to take in all of *Madoc's* fragments and narrative threads at once, Reed also wants us to read/view *Flight to Canada* by looking simultaneously at all the screens he sets up. His attempts to force us to look at everything at once, like Nam June Paik's, are purposeful. Reed wants us to see the 1860's, the 1960's, and an entire history of racial tension in the context of right now to make a very specific social statement. He wants us to recognize social inequality, identify cultural injustice, and acknowledge that the only way we can right the wrongs of "history" is to face them and attempt to make a change.

CHAPTER 3  
THE NEW WORLD

Both Muldoon and Reed take issue with the concept of America as the New World because the so-called New World seems to be one big extension of, or carry-over from, the Old World. Both *Madoc: A Mystery* and *Flight to Canada* criticize America's inability to break with the past. The irony of this critique is that Muldoon and Reed both choose to appropriate traditional literary conventions to argue that tradition is overrated.

Nowhere is the irony of the New World setting more pronounced than in the architectural structures that house some of the villains from each text. Muldoon gives us the Romantic, 19<sup>th</sup> century island fortress of Harman Blennerhassett; Reed gives us the medieval castle of Arthur Swille. These structures depict America as a heralded New World that has ironically chosen instead to be a land that pays homage to all things conventional and Old World.

• Muldoon on an Island •

An island on the Ohio  
where Harman  
Blennerhassett  
is building a Roman  
villa  
complete with mosaics  
and frescoes  
and a modest cupola. (87)

The historical Harman Blennerhassett was an expatriate Irishman involved in scandals ranging from a marriage to his niece to conspiring against the United States government with

Aaron Burr (Rice 52–53). He appears in *Madoc* seven times. Muldoon introduces him in “[Campanella]:”

The bog-oak  
lintel  
was unearthed  
on his god-forsaken  
family estate  
in Kerry.  
He had it shipped  
from Philadelphia  
by barge  
and bullock-cart. (87)

The “bog-oak / lintel” is an explicit reference to Blennerhassett’s homeland in Ireland. He was forced out of Ireland because of his controversial marriage to his niece, Margaret Agnew (Rice 52). So Blennerhassett left the Old World because of laws that prevented him from living the way he wanted to live, but when he arrives in the New World in *Madoc*, he decides to have this piece of his family estate (the bog-oak lintel) shipped to the New World when he builds his own home, carrying the Old World into the New World.

The historical Blennerhassett built his romantic home on an island in the middle of the Ohio River. Muldoon is commenting on Blennerhassett’s ties with the Old World, but he also seems to be saying something about the United States as a nation. The Europeans who came to settle America treated this land as an uninhabited island when they settled here. Instead of taking notice of the customs of the current inhabitants, or establishing a new society where their particular ideologies could be accommodated, they perpetuated the Old World notions of class and civility.

Muldoon returns to the “bog-oak / lintel” in order to connect the historical Blennerhassett to *Madoc*’s cynical idea of the New World. After all, the narrator tells us that in installing the lintel in the house, one of the workers was,

cut in half,  
*eheu*  
when the cable  
of the windlass  
snapped. (87)

Wealth and power are more valuable than human life. Blennerhassett is willing to sacrifice any life but his own to build his and Aaron Burr’s New World.

At the same time, the Wood County militia, seeking to arrest Blennerhassett for conspiring with Aaron Burr against the United States government, will sacrifice any life in order to suppress Blennerhassett and Burr and to maintain the American vision for the New World:

December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1806. When the Wood County militia  
led by Colonel Phelps  
come at full gallop  
across the Island, one breaks his neck, *eheu*. (207)

Again, a member of a group is sacrificed to try to establish opposing visions of the New World. In response to the deaths of the builder and the militiaman, Muldoon uses the lament “*eheu*,” a Latin equivalent of “*alas*.” “*Eheu*” sounds sincere in the context of Blennerhassett’s willingness to sacrifice anything for his vision, but Muldoon employs it as sarcasm to emphasize the equal willingness of people of diametrically opposing opinions to sacrifice lives in pursuit of their causes. The ironic use of “*eheu*” returns to the challenge of capital “*T*” truth by suggesting that there is no absolute right or absolute wrong.

Blennerhassett’s physical seizure of the Ohio River island mirrors Muldoon’s own seizure of narrative convention. Muldoon has seized new poetic ground, reaching back into

poetic conventions not only to carry over the occasional “lintel” or Renaissance sonnet, the occasional “marble bust” or Modernist fragmentation, but also use convention to mock and create convention. Muldoon does not stop at simply carrying a convention over into his own work. Instead, he uses the conventions as well as their literary connotations to multiply the possibilities for meaning in his own text.

Carol Tell writes, “Muldoon’s description of Blennerhassett’s estate in Ohio typifies the foolish transference of European civilization to the New World” (56). Muldoon expresses his cynicism through Blennerhassett’s architectural vision specifically because of the correlation between architecture and poetry. Tell says Muldoon “comments on the erection of buildings such as Monticello, buildings that duplicate European grandeur in a very non-European setting” (56). In addition to his commentary on America’s Old World/New World connections, Muldoon makes these connections to open another conversation, not only to challenge history, but to challenge poetry itself.

Muldoon’s poem is rife with Old World poetic connections. As Chapter 1 argues, the form of the poem is a conglomeration of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century conventions. But *Madoc* is also connected to Old World sentiment through Muldoon’s contextualization of Jefferson’s and Blennerhassett’s homes. To critique America’s inability to break with the past, he is also playing with poetic conventions to suggest a new persona for the poet, a new, learned, self-aware poet who is able to weave various threads of history into his poetry in a humorous way that helps us both to understand and to learn from his revisionist history.

An Artesian  
well. A lily-pond.  
The sound of Handel’s  
Water Music  
on a spinet  
or harpsichord.

A peacock  
and a dappled fawn. (88)

Listening to Handel by a lily-pond, accompanied by a peacock and a fawn, and having the house heralded “The New Atlantis / The City of the Sun” is more than a little romantic (88). In the line “A peacock / and a dappled fawn” (88), “dappled fawn” immediately conjures Gerard Manley Hopkins, who used the word “dappled” in such poems as “The Windhover,” “Pied Beauty,” “Inversnaid,” and “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” (Hopkins 16–21). The phrase from “The Windhover” that Muldoon specifically alludes to (whether intentionally or not), is “dappled-dawn-drawn Falcon” (Hopkins 16).

Muldoon’s reference to Hopkins is an expression of *Madoc*’s humorous, learned, and self-aware tone. “The Windhover” is a serious poem dedicated, in fact, “To Christ our Lord.” Hopkins is in spiritual ecstasy as he watches a soaring falcon. Hopkins gives us rhythmic stress marks, spiritual euphoria, and the Romantic inklings of an artist alone with God in nature. Muldoon also places his reference to the “dappled fawn” in the setting of “An Artesian well. / A lily-pond. / The sound of Handel’s / Water Music” (88). But in the context of *Madoc*, Muldoon does not describe the tortured spiritual artist pondering God, but Blennerhassett building his “New Atlantis” (88).

Whereas Blennerhassett perpetuates the architectural styles of his Romantic upbringing because that is all he knows, Muldoon appropriates the Romantic poetic tradition in an effort to graft all of Romanticism’s connotations (the poet as wise, lonely sage and the beauty of nature), into the contemporary context of his audience. Today, one might find a harpsichord in a dubbing suite like the one mentioned in “The Key,” where it might be used to give a song a very specific sound. Similarly, Muldoon chooses words and phrases that suggest different meanings for different times in order to make everything possible—not in

order to make anything possible, but in order to make everything possible, every possible connotation of every word in every context in which it could be placed.

Blennerhassett built his house on an island. The surrounding river served as the quintessential medieval moat. But in Muldoon, as the Wood County militia takes over Blennerhassett's island in an effort to quell the Burr/Blennerhassett rebellion conspiracy, the moat becomes ineffective. In the same way, by removing language from the figurative island of denotation, there is no longer a moat around any word. Muldoon demonstrates that no word, idea, or rhyme stands alone in a specific place and time for a singular denotative meaning. As he himself says in the Author's Note to his collection *Poems 1968–1998*, "I have made scarcely any changes in the texts of the poems, since I'm fairly certain that, after a shortish time, the person through whom a poem was written is no more entitled to make revisions than any other reader" (xiii).

• Reed in King Arthur's Court •

While Muldoon employs Blennerhassett's island mansion subtly, Reed's architectural metaphor is hyperbolic and blatant. Through his depiction of Arthur Swille, Reed criticizes America's inability to break with the past. Kathryn Hume writes, "*Flight to Canada* teases out historical contradictions at the roots of American thought. Far from being fundamentally democratic, Reed argues, Americans moon over a medieval dream of being lords and ladies, members of a happy aristocracy supported by the necessary servants and slaves" (508). The best demonstration of Reed's criticism of America's inability to break with the cultural

traditions of Europe is Arthur Swille's Arthurian obsession, and in turn, his Arthurian dwelling.

Reed explains that Swille "did his business from the tower of a Castle he built on his grounds, said to be the very replica of King Arthur's in the Holy city of Camelot" (15). "Did his business," implies that Swille was doing some "breeding" of his own, or maybe this line is a reference, similar to Muldoon's reference to "tak[ing] a dump." Either way, the line is both humorous and suggestive (17). Reed does not hold back in his treatment of Swille's historical heroes: "Listening to Arthur and his knights, so refined and noble that they launched a war against the Arabs for the recovery of an *objet d'art*, yet treated their serfs like human plows, de-budding their women at will . . . Dracula, if you recall, was a count" (15).

From the very beginning of the novel, Swille is an utterly loathsome man, obsessed with history, the dark side of history, which gives those in power the opportunity to oppress those who are not in power. Reed conflates the 19<sup>th</sup> century master/slave relationship and the Arthurian lord/serf relationship. Swille's Arthurian lineage equips him for the oppressive role he plays so well, by indoctrinating him with holy superiority: "Camelot became Swille's bible, and one could hear him in the tower, giggling elflike as he came to each new insight; and they heard him dancing as Camelot, a fairy tale to most, became for him an Anglican Grand Design" (16).

Tying Swille to the knightly tradition of King Arthur is Reed's way of connecting American aristocracy with a system in which power and political sway were obtained through inheritance, not through individual initiative. Whereas the White House is a temporary residence for whoever is currently serving as the ruler of the United States, a

castle is a family heirloom passed down from king-father to prince-son. Reed directly ties these two traditions together through the character of Mingy Moe:

There's a knock at the door. It's Moe the white house slave —Mingy Moe, as the mammies in the kitchen call him. He looks like an albino: tiny pink pupils, white Afro.

“Sorry to disturb you, Master Swille, but Abe Lincoln, the President of the so-called Union, is outside in the parlor waiting to see you. He's fiddling around and telling corny jokes, shucking the shud and husking the hud. I told him that you were scheduled to helicopter up to Richmond to shake your butt at the Magnolia Baths tonight, but he persists. Says, ‘The very survival of the Union is at stake.’” (22)

With the pun on “white house slave,” Reed is saying that in 1976, considering the state of the Union and his impression that the aristocracy is basically running the nation, the White House might as well house slaves. Moe also feels a necessity to remind his master of who Abe Lincoln is. By having Abraham Lincoln, the leader of the United States, come begging for a loan from Arthur Swille, ruler of Swine'rd, Virginia, Reed is suggesting that America's political power rests more in Old World-style family political power than it does in the hands of the people of the Democratic Republic.

Ashraf Rushdy calls Swille “An economic, social, and political force representative of the history of the colonizing impetus of the United States” (113). Swille is all of that and more, the embodiment of anti-abolition. Even William Wells Brown, author of *Clotel*, who

appears in *Flight to Canada*, cannot believe Swille's persistence in chasing after Raven, when he asks Raven,

“Where you heading?”

“Canada.”

“Vacation?”

“No, I'm escaping. I've booked passage on this steamer under a pseudonym. My master is after me.”

“You have to be kidding me, stranger. The war is over.” (120)

Reed depicts Swille as a prophet (maybe even the cause of Lincoln's assassination) when Swille says to the President, “Why don't you shave off that beard and stop putting your fingers in your lapels like that. You ought to at least try to polish yourself, man. Go to the theatre. Get some culture. If you don't, I'll have to contact my general; you know, there's always one of our people keeping an eye on things in your . . . your cabinets. Why, under the Crown . . .” (28).

For Reed, Swille's Arthurian obsession is evidence that slavery persists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the form of cultural slavery. The government cannot legislate reality. Day-to-day life is inconsistent with the idealistic words spoken by congressmen in Washington, D.C. Reed even seems to be saying that the lives of congressmen are a far cry from the words of congressmen, or of the president. Medieval and Romantic settings and references, from Swille's Castle to his love of *Idylls of the King*, point out the New World's fascination with the Old World, and the persistence of self-serving, hypocritical idealism. Reed is highlighting a disparity between the Emancipation Proclamation and the daily realities of

living in the United States in the year of our country's bicentennial celebration of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Moving beyond his metaphorical use of medieval and Romantic architecture, through the character of Yankee Jack, Reed also criticizes the persistent white domination of American culture. Raven Quickskill accuses Jack of being the gatekeeper of literature: "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" (146). The implication of the statement "At least we fuges know we're slaves" is that Yankee Jack is a slave but does not know it.

Reed sees white voices as having complete control over modern literature and culture. Yankee Jack says, "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 and Raven will be running it. But for now, I'm the one who determines whether one is civilized or savage" (149). Reed's "one day," if it has not come, is at least on the rise. Now that we talk about freedom of voice and the equality of all kinds of literature, through simple self-awareness whiteness has become less of a dominant voice.

Yankee Jack's domination of culture in *Flight to Canada* is an example of America's inability to break with the traditional white, male domination of culture, and of literature in particular. Reed's Yankee Jack character also suggests an intertextual relationship with Muldoon's Captain Jack near the end of *Madoc*. Captain Jack is mentioned specifically only once, in "[Nozick]," where he is leading a band of Modocs (a Native American group) to their destruction. The narrator says, "The Modocs, led by Captain Jack, are / systematically hunted down on the laver-breads of / Oregon" (259).

The Modocs appear on only two other occasions in *Madoc*: in “[Edison]” and again in “[Levi-Strauss].” The thought of making connections among the philosopher titles in which the Modocs are mentioned and then attempting to draw some conclusion suggests the endless complexity of *Madoc*. Muldoon leaves all of these rabbit trails open for discovery and adventure, but never provides anything that might sound like the answer, or even an answer. Though research, connections, and conjecture seem hollow, Muldoon wants us to pursue some higher meaning in the text.

Like Reed’s, Muldoon’s narrative makes everything possible. The utopian pantisocracy dreamed up by Coleridge and Southey is free to start up in the poem as it never did in history, and then nosedive. Reed flies a jumbo jet through a slave narrative while referring to Gary Cooper. Muldoon recounts a history that never happened. Both authors criticize America for all of the history that could have been the foundation of a new nation; history that is instead a desperate attempt just to struggle free of the encumbrances we created for ourselves. The island fortress of Harman Blennerhassett, the medieval castle of Arthur Swille, the poetic break with traditional forms, the break with literal as well as cultural slavery: all of these illustrate the failed opportunity to form a New World, American culture.

Muldoon’s poetry reveals a desire to build on the positive traditions of history and to break with the blunders. Reed suggests the need to break with the old and adopt the new in the context of slavery’s cultural effects. But Muldoon and Reed both use literary techniques that by definition imply the forms of the Old World. So how can they be said to be breaking with the past? Instead of simply adopting the literary conventions, Muldoon and Reed adapt them to their contemporary setting, and, even in using them, move beyond them. Both

authors keep the Old World in mind in the hope of making the New World, the New Poet, or the New Culture better than the Old.

Reed's hope is encapsulated in the closing line of his novel, when Raven is finally able to return to the plantation without fear, and the now-master, Uncle Robin, a former slave, is informed by his secretary that "Raven is back!" (179). This ending demonstrates the ironic distinctions that Reed sees between Old World and New by bringing Raven back to his Old World location in the context of a New World and new possibilities. Raven's return is reminiscent of Muldoon's and Reed's return to old literary conventions.

Muldoon and Reed create conflicts in order to lead to possible solutions that will highlight the irony of their narratives for a particular time and a particular place, not in order to uncover ultimate answers. For Muldoon, the solution to breaking with the Old Poet is to become the New Poet. For Reed, the solution to breaking with the Old Culture is to become the New Culture.

Muldoon and Reed's treatments of Old/New World distinctions help us better understand their texts by demonstrating how both authors create Romantic settings in order to emphasize just how stuck in the past America is. We have so many stumbling blocks from the past, and Muldoon and Reed are highly sensitive to the fact that if we can overcome these stumbling blocks (disenfranchisement, imperialism, slavery) like Raven, then America can blaze into the future without a cloud of guilt hovering overhead. Or, as the narrative in *Madoc* demonstrates through the similarities between the first and last poems, we can recognize the unchanging character of humans throughout history, accept our flawed nature, and move on. In literature, the media may change, the contexts may change, but their contents persist. These contents are the human condition, what it means to be a human, the

relationship between life and the world in which it is lived. Humanity does not change much from generation to generation, but the ways we talk, think, and write about humanity do change.

## CONCLUSION

Paul Muldoon's endless labyrinth of clues and connotations along with Ishmael Reed's disassociative conglomeration of history-defying images challenge traditional literary methods of communicating meaning. Each author's appropriation of literary conventions challenges the idea of a traditional master narrative, or the existence of a totalizing metanarrative that would contain essential answers to any and all questions. However, Muldoon and Reed are not saying a master narrative does not exist. Instead, they are saying there could be a master narrative, but that we have simply latched onto conventions that limit our concept of the relationships between narrative, time, space, and history.

Muldoon's and Reed's challenging of literary conventions does not suggest that these conventions are meaningless. Instead, they are full of meaning, and in the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reveal that we as contemporary readers still have something to learn from these conventions. We are in the fortunate position of being able to look through a contemporary lens that has put enough distance between us and the conventions to allow us to see them and to see through them more clearly. But maybe later generations will look back on this manipulation of convention as a convention in itself, and have an entirely new set of contemporary lenses through which to look at our time as well as their own. Perhaps this endless cycle of creating convention is the master narrative to which Muldoon and Reed are alluding in their texts.

*Madoc: A Mystery* and *Flight to Canada* suggest the existence of master narratives, but question whether or not these master narratives are knowable. Muldoon demonstrates the difficulty of tapping into a master narrative through the sheer limitless possibilities of *Madoc*.

*Madoc* would be impossible to annotate comprehensively. Reed demonstrates the disparity between master narratives and our ability to know them by mixing genres such as the slave narrative and the Arthurian legend together in one all-encompassing narrative.

Both authors also showcase the irreducible complexity of language. A single word can be boiled down only to a lowest common denominator, and this lowest common denominator is itself complex. In 2007, the word “flight” can be reduced only so far, to a lowest common denominator that connotes everything from Southwest Airlines to an escaped prisoner. This reading accepts the constant and continual growth of the master narrative, whether it be literary, moral, or human. Through their appropriation of literary conventions, their contortion of time, and their push to force a distinction between old and new, Muldoon and Reed valorize literary convention and learn from its shortcomings.

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