



Fabulative Histories and Syncopated Voices in Doctorow's Ragtime
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Histories Revisited: A New Historicist Reading of Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Pynchon's *Mason and Dixon* and Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*

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Abstract

Doctorow's *Ragtime* is a novel which Linda Hutcheon has labeled as a Historiographic Metafictional narrative, i.e., a work which self-consciously draws attention to its artificiality. By departing from the novelistic traditions this novel blurs the boundary between history and literature in order to draw attention to the limitations of historiography as a reliable source for projecting truth. Through such a representational method, this narrative provides an arena in which various oppositions and tensions are syncopated. In such an arena, many characters alter their ontological status, i.e., the fictional characters move from the peripheral realm of imagination into the sphere of historical reality while the historical characters lose their superior status, and deteriorate to the position of mere fictions. In this way the fabulative histories of the marginalized are brought to the fore and are prioritized over the factual historical events. This characteristic makes *Ragtime* a proper medium for resonating the voice of the underrepresented and the marginalized through the pages of history. This paper examines the strategies which are employed by Doctorow to prioritize the subjective truth, i.e., fictional truth over the objective reality, hence inscribing the untold stories which have been kept out of the pages of history.

Keywords: Historiographic Metafiction, Postmodernism, Historicism, Parody, Syncopation.

Doctorow's Fabulation as History; Blurring the Boundary Between Fact and Fiction

The relationship between history and fiction has been the subject of debates since the time of the classics. Aristotle, the prominent Greek philosopher for instance, in his *Poetics* views history and poetry as opposing concepts because "the historians" as he argues, recount events which have actually happened, while the poets who are free from constraints write about things as they might possibly happen (*Poetics*, IX). The distinction which is mapped out by the Greek philosopher, is reexamined by postmodern critics and historians in a broader sense. The new-historical approach which foregrounds the similarities between these genres, is characterized by a tendency towards the revisionist historical novels which blend historical documents with fantasy, in order to achieve the most impressive results. This fabulative impulse which prioritizes romanticism to realism has enabled writers such as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon and Edgar Lawrence Doctorow to outrageously free their text from the boundaries and constraints of a specific historical period and to invent implausible documents which fill the voids in historical records. Such fabulative histories, as Scholes points out, discard the empirical notions of history which have dominated the literary canon and the Western thought and "deliberately challenge the notion that history may be retrieved by objective investigation of fact" (1979, 206). In other words, these revisionist



narratives, do not return to history naively, but instead they revisit the past to question history as a reliable field which depicts the events that actually happened.

The fusion of fantasy into history is an overarching strategy in Doctorow's *Ragtime* in which the conventional notion of history as a collection of facts, becomes a "myth that has lost its power to command belief" and this provides an arena for what Scholes terms as "the intrusion of fantasy upon imagination" (1979, 207). This novel which projects a mosaic of American history during the early twentieth century, from the very outset, outlines the lives of some prominent historical figures through multiple fragmented vignettes. These seemingly unrelated stories build up around famous historical personages such as Stanford White, the famous architect, Evelyn Nesbitt, the eminent actress and beauty model, Harry Houdini, the celebrated escape artist, Emma Goldman the famous feminist anarchist and J.P. Morgan and Henry Ford the prominent businessmen as the embodiment of the capitalist system. Parallel to the events which primarily sound to be the center of a narrative projecting historical facts, the novel also chronicles the stories about three 'fictional' families; the Rochelles which is a White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) family, as well as a Jewish immigrant family, and a Black family. The connections and interaction between these historical and the fictional characters which apparently occurs across "mutually exclusive spaces", as Stephen Harris points, gradually undergoes transformation as the characters who belong to different real worlds of history and 'unreal' worlds of fiction, "are brought into each other's spheres" (2001, 51). This is obvious in the way that historical personages such as Houdini and Goldman enter the spheres of the Rochelles and the Jewish family, while other characters such as Coalhouse Walker or The Younger Brother enter the worlds of historical personages such as Booker T. Washington or Emma Goldman and Evelyn Nesbit. In other words, although, at the beginning these families are deemed to be of secondary importance, yet as the narrative evolves, their lives converge in various combinations with those of the historical personages. This results in the formation of a heterogenous family at the end of the story, which is a symbolic intrusion of fiction into a text that at the onset was deemed to be a historical narrative.

Ragtime is at first narrated as a quasi-factual narrative, in the form of the school textbook histories, but gradually, the novel concerns itself with fantastical stories rather than focusing on seemingly 'factual' historical events. As the stories build up, fictional characters such as Tateh, a Jewish immigrant as well as Coalhouse Walker Jr., a black pianist, take up central roles in the narrative. As the story develops, these three families (the WASP, Jewish and Black) gradually prove to be dysfunctional families drastically affected by the sociopolitical changes of the era. Although the formation of an interatrial family at the end might be an implication for the transformation of American community into a heterogeneous community, but at a higher level the disintegration of the families leaves the reader with multiple unanswered questions such as racial prejudice and economic hegemony. In other words, the disintegration of the families not only symbolizes the collapse of the lofty American ideals but also underlines the dark and destructive reality of the painful rift in a destabilized community, thus dramatizing American community's metamorphosis to a decentered world.

Ragtime provides an amalgam of fictive and factual worlds, in which the line between a historical account of characters such as Emma Goldman's and Evelyn Nesbit and Doctorow's fictive account of their encounter disappears. In such a realm, the historical personages perform acts which are not verified by historical data and are sheer products of writer's imagination. Emma Goldman, for instance, as a harbinger of womanhood breaks through the frames of history and meets Evelyn Nesbit and metaphorically liberates her from the constraints of the patriarchal community. Emma Goldman's massage of Evelyn Nesbit, as Foley argues, is an encounter which clearly violates the "canon of historical decorum", hence enabling the author to utilize the reader's encyclopedic knowledge "in order to pose an open challenge to the reader's pre-conceived notions about what historical 'truth' actually is" (1978, 95). In this very evocative and ironic encounter, where the reader is witness to the "intrusion of fantasy upon the historical record," as Scholes puts it, Doctorow invents "totally implausible 'documents' to fill the lacunae



in the historical record” (1979, 206-7). Here the audience is provoked to consider any imaginary encounter between historical characters as a fictional truth which has come into existence on the pages of the novel. There are numerous examples of such imaginary yet quite palpable events and in each case as Paul Levine contends, “Doctorow is more concerned with imaginative truth than with historical accuracy, [i.e.], he is concerned with what truly happened rather than with what really happened” (1985, 17). Hence, in *Ragtime* through re-contextualization, historical figures are mythicized and given fictional qualities in order to demonstrate the potential of imagination for configuring history. Doctorow’s famous historical figures who appear in the mythicized fictive world, have their historical counterpart and through this parallelism he postulates that both the fictional and the historical characters are equally products of a writer’s imagination, as well as of a language that is used to invent both history and fiction.

In the light of the abovementioned, *Ragtime*, as a metafictional narrative, uncovers the notion of the indeterminacy of the past and views history as something which could be deconstructed. This narrative projects an arena in which historiography loses its primacy over the fictive, hence, history’s credibility as the purveyor of truth and the projector of the objective reality is contested. This free interplay of author’s imaginative potentials, as Hutcheon maintains, clearly highlights the fact that, for Doctorow, there was not a “neat dividing line between the texts of history and literature”, so he felt free to utilize both (1988, 136). This stand point is clearly acknowledged in Doctorow’s *False Documents* where he states, “there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative” (1983, 26). In this light, Doctorow’s novel, *Ragtime* in a sense is a narrative which draws upon both history and imagination in order to represent a unique version of the American history during the ragtime era. It is also a work which exemplifies this writer’s postmodernist philosophy of narrative. Doctorow’s views with regards to the theory of narrative and the power of language as a persuasive property of facts which are stated in his *False Documents* are outlined further below.

False Documents: Doctorow’s Philosophy of Narrative

In an interview with Mel Gussow, E. L. Doctorow very explicitly describes his approach in *Ragtime* which he claims to be a resurrection of Defoe’s narratology. By mentioning this example, Doctorow draws attention to the fact that from the very beginning of the history of novel, novelists have always mixed up the factual and the fictional. Categorizing his work in class of novels such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*, which Kenneth Rexroth has called false documents, Doctorow affirms that, “halfway between fiction and history” is the region where his novel *Ragtime* is located (Cited by Foley, 1978, 99).

In his essay entitled, “False Documents”, after drawing upon Rexroth’s concept Doctorow states that, “every fiction is a false document in that compositions of words are not life” and proceeds to commentate on *Ragtime*, stating that his novel should be labeled as a “false document” (1983, 20). In order to elaborate on this contentious argument, he, goes on to locate two types of power which are inherent in language, i.e., “the power of the regime” and “the power of freedom”. He expounds on the power of the regime as articulations which have “manifest reference to the verifiable world,” and claim to represent objective facts. This sort of power, he goes further to associate with ‘realism,’ or “regime of facts” which governs human beings (1983, 16-17).

After introducing these opposite concepts, Doctorow, also draws attention to the notion of “the primacy of fact-reality” in industrial societies. In such a scientific and empiricist world, he contends, language is seen as a persuasive property of facts, an asset which is employed to govern us. Such modes of power which attempt to govern us, Doctorow argues, must be necessarily “self-interested and organized” in order to perpetuate their dominance (1983, 17). The deeply rooted power of the regime which derives its power from what individuals are



supposed to be, is manifest for instance, in the empiricist beliefs (such as a biological facts) that prioritize a certain gender or class and consider them as superior to others. Furthermore, Doctorow, proceeds to discard such impositions, proclaiming that such assumptions which are basically associated with the regime of facts are mere human constructs that are infinitely violable. He finally concludes that,

what we proclaim as the discovered factual world can be challenged as the questionable world, we ourselves have painted-the cultural museum of our values, dogmas, assumptions, that prescribes for us not only what we may like and dislike, believe and disbelieve, but also what we may be permitted to see and not to see (1983, 17).

In contrast to the power of the regime which demands the reader to accept the articulated matter as matter-of-fact data, Doctorow, brings to attention the power of freedom. This sort of power, which he finds abundant in Vladimir Nabokov's descriptions, inhere "in a private or ideal world that cannot be easily corroborated or verified" and are associated with being rather than becoming, i.e., free will rather than imposition (1983, 16-17).

Before the emergence of the industrial society, (an era in which the primacy of fact-reality is deemed to be quite reliable), as Doctorow indicates, "there was a time in which the designative and evocative functions of language were one and the same" and within this world "the act of telling a story was in itself a presumption of truth" (1983, 18). Doctorow, elaborates on this through examples such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Writers of such works, he maintains, tried to make the reader believe that their role was merely editing a collection of factual data, thus making their presentation believable to the reader. At this stage of history, Doctorow, argues, there was "intravention", that's to say, "a mixing-up of the historic and the esthetic, the real and the possibly real", as writers freely blended fiction and historiography (for instance Crusoe and his historical counterpart Selkirk's biography), and in this way they made the reader believe that what was presented on the page was 'true' (1983, 21).

Moreover, Doctorow, commentates on the condition of the novel in our age, where literature is infused in all aspects of life and is employed by the artists to tackle the socio-political concerns. Although nonfictional discourse enjoys some sort of authority over the fictional discourse, Doctorow argues, but "it is dulled by the obligation to be factual" (1983, 23). Fiction, however, is free from such constraints, due to the fact that the novelist's work exists in free domain of imagination. He explicates this very notion by Nietzsche's dictum that, there exist no facts in themselves, there are "only interpretations" and in order to bring a fact to existence we must first introduce meaning (Nietzsche, 1954, 458). Thus, the role of the novelist, he proclaims to be an arbiter of the truth, in the sense that through giving order to the chaos of history, he introduces meaning to events and through this very composition, in fact he generates truth. Moreover, in line with Nietzsche's pronouncement, Doctorow, proclaims that, "history is a kind of fiction in which we live and hope to survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history, perhaps a superhistory, by which the available data for the composition is seen to be greater and more various in its sources than the historian supposes" (1983, 25). In this way Doctorow prioritizes the novelistic art over the seemingly factual representational methods which are found in historiography.

Through such argumentations, Doctorow emphasizes the role of the fictional narratives, as false documents, which derive their force from the power of freedom, a domain in which the artist can 'emplot' and create a false document to create a truth that is more believable than the real or the factual which resides in the domain of power of the regime. In this arena, Doctorow argues, in order to "offer facts to the witness of the imagination and pretend they are real" the novelist has to "commit a kind of regressive heresy", hence, deconstructing the language of the power of the regime, i.e., that of the politicians, historians, or certified data which always presume to project a world of facts (1983, 21). Finally, Doctorow concludes that, those novelists who are aware of the fact that "reality is amenable to any construction



that is placed upon it” can oppose the power of the regime and compose false documents which would be “more valid, more real, more truthful than the ‘true’ documents of the politicians or the journalists or the psychologists” (26).

The aforementioned contrast between the regime of facts and the power of freedom i.e., realm of fact and imagination is an eminent feature in Doctorow’s *Ragtime*. The following sections employ Hutcheon’s notion of Historiographical Metafiction as well as Doctorow’s philosophy of narrative to expound on the opposing regimes which reverberate through this novel.

***Ragtime*; Syncopation of the Blacks into History**

Ragtime as a parodic representation of the ragtime era in American history (1902 through 1917), not only portrays a miniature of the crucial events in this phase of American history, but also provides a detailed study of the nature of Historiographical and fictional narrative. *Ragtime*’s thematic and technical aspects, underscore Doctorow’s theoretical standpoints about the power of the regime as a constraint upon man’s attempt to understand the truth. In this work, Doctorow employs fiction to say something about history, hence, he goes beyond the traditional novelistic traditions in terms of plot, characterization, etc.

The very arguments of *Ragtime* are rendered through a variety of opposites which could stand for the regimes which were referred to above. John Parks elaborates on Doctorow’s opposing regimes and extends it to *Ragtime*’s intricate structure, a feature which is attained through the syncopation of a number of tensions and oppositions such as, “degeneration and regeneration, static forms and volatile images, repetition and change, history and fantasy, self and other, rich and poor, white and black, WASP and immigrant, narcissism and self-divestment, journeys outward and journeys inward, departures and arrivals” (1991, 459). This characteristic transforms the novel arena where the peripheral fictional characters (blacks and immigrants) who represent notions such as, renewal, unpredictability, transformation, and fantasy come to override the centrality of the Whites who are associated with the degenerative and static forms, i.e., the industrialized view of history. Through such fragmented, and intricate combination of opposites, and random encounters, which Harris calls “illuminating collisions”, the novel blurs the borderline between the abovementioned binaries which are associated with the power of the regime and the power of freedom (2001, 51). In other words, by parodying the traditional forms of historiography, this narrative primarily starts in the form of factual and objective representation of history, hence prioritizing concepts such as, degeneration, static forms, self, rich, white, etc. This pattern, however, is gradually undermined, as this static and seemingly objective presentation gets replaced by a set of more dynamic and fantastic events which come to reverberate through and dominate the narrative as imagined truths.

The contrast between the static forms of history and the volatile and dynamic images of fantastical worlds, as an overarching strategy runs throughout the whole narrative, but Doctorow does not hesitate to introduce it through the very title of his novel. Offering a narrative about history, and at the same time associating it with the world of art and music, in a sense underscores this novel’s intricate synthesis of art and imagination on one hand and history and factuality on the other hand. This is evident from the very outset of the novel, where Doctorow draws attention to the affinity between his narrativization of the past and the ragtime music by citing an epigram from the African American composer Scott Joplin (1868 – April 1, 1917): “Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play ragtime fast” (cited by Doctorow, 1975, xiii). Beginning his novel with such an evocative quote, Doctorow in fact invites the reader to get engaged in a thoughtful and introspective reading in order to decipher the messages that are inherent in the musical cords of history.

In order to understand the motivation behind choosing the title of *Ragtime*, one needs to go through history of this music which spanned through 1896 to 1917. Ragtime Music which is always characterized by a syncopated melodic line, as an extended metaphor runs through the



whole narrative. This very especial quality of syncopation which denotes “striking together” and is found in ragtime music, in verse and musical terms refers to a time when “the metrical pattern goes contrary to the natural stress of normal speech” (Cuddon, 2013, 703). In such musical or rhythmic patterns, the beats are replaced by each other, so that the strong beats become weak or vice versa. In this process, in a sense, the weak beats come to prominence and dominate the earlier strong beats. Henceforth, this syncopation which goes against an established rhythm, stresses or accentuates a weak beat in music. This quality of the ragtime music, i.e., accentuating the weak beat and the suppressed symbolically could stand for resonating the voice of the underrepresented and blacks and their liberation from the constraints, hence, providing them with a space to articulate their untold stories and to resonate their voice through the artistic and literary canon.

This particular kind of music which is now considered to be a timeless kind of music, owes it credits to the African Americans’ long history of subjugation. Although its origin dates back to the late 1890s, its popularity is always associated with the turn of the century, and the time period which is represented in Doctorow’s novel. The timeframe that this novel projects, actually extends from the murder of Stanford White, in 1906 to the pivotal events in 1916 which resulted in America’s involvement in the First World War. This narrative which is filtered through the perspective of a little boy, in retrospect reaches back to the 1902 when the New Rochelle family built their house, and the subsequent events which led to the formation of an intra-racial family. In this way, *Ragtime* exactly corresponds to the time period (twentieth century through the Harlem Renaissance and jazz age) in which ragtime music was a predominant and popular style in music throughout the United States.

Although, ragtime as popular type of music gradually lost its status, and after 1917 came to be replaced by the jazz music of Tin Pan Alley, but its role in syncopating the Negroes in the American history is an undeniable fact. In, this phase of American history, as James T. Maher the editor of *American popular song; the great innovators, 1900-1950* notes, “the straight line from plantation music” resonated through ragtime music and later on the jazz music in 1917, and in this way, black sounds found their way through the American white-centered tradition (12, 1972). In this light, the very fluctuating quality of the *Ragtime*, which is resonated through its evocative title, symbolizes the unheard voice of the repressed. In other words, in the same manner of syncopation of the cords of the black plantation music in the white centered artistic traditions, Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, is in fact a vigorous attempt to resonate the history of the underrepresented through the historical traditions.

Berndt Ostendorf in his “The Musical World of Doctorow’s *Ragtime*” contends that, undoubtedly it was the belated recognition of this music in the ragtime renaissance during the seventies which “inspired the naming of the novel and helped to launch it to best-seller status” (1991, 584). Hence, entitling his novel as *Ragtime* and choosing a black pianist as the protagonist of his novel, is not incidental, in the sense that in the 1970s the memory of Martin Luther King’s assassination was still fresh in the memory of nations around the world. Doctorow’s awareness of such historical events is quite evident in recalling this revolutionary figure’s memory in the encounter between the Booker T. Washington (the famous black leader) and Coalhouse Walker Jr. (Doctorow, 1975, 282). In addition to conjuring up this reformist black reader’s call for justice, Coalhouse Walker Jr. whom Doctorow confessed to be “the central image of the book” becomes the very emblem of the oppressed blacks and his ragtime piano also becomes a central metaphor in the novel (cited by McCaffery, 1983, 44). It is in fact after his emergence that the fragmented framework of the narrative centers around this character, and in a sense all characters’ lives come into confluence with his destiny and take one direction towards the end of the story. Coalhouse Walker’s intrusion’ in a “Model T Ford” takes place at the very heart of the narrative in chapter twenty-one and stands for a symbolic turning point in the course of the events in the story. His central position is amplified and is brought to the fore by his very emergence in this crucial stage of the



narrative. It reminds the reader of the name of Scott Joplin whose epigram initiates the novel, hence his incursion is symbolically an indication for the intrusion of world of music into domain of history. At this phase of the story, Doctorow intricately fabricates a setting in which Coalhouse plays the historic Scott Joplin's composition "The Maple Leaf ...[as the] most famous rag of all" and makes it ring through the air (1975, 155, 160). His very first performance in this scene is described by the Little Boy as a vigorous piece of music "producing the clusters of syncopating chords and the thumping octaves" that filled the whole place with light and "roused the senses and never stood still a moment" (Doctorow, 1975, 160). This dynamicity and vivacity which is accentuated in this section of the story, brings to the fore the novel's metafictional quality, which prioritizes dynamic flux of fantasy and the illusory over the rigid and static realm of facts and historical data.

Coalhouse Walker's emergence in the novel, and his dominant status throughout the rest of the narrative not only changes the course of the story but also transforms the form of the narrative. The first half of the narrative provides a highly intriguing, and willfully chaotic survey of some notorious historical figures of the ragtime era, but as Foley argues, "it is only in the second half, with the mounting crisis of Coalhouse Walker's story, does the novel attain momentum" (1978, 94). This major shift which brings a character from periphery and endows him with characteristics of a protagonist or hero, is an innovative technique which adds to the vivacity of the flux narrative. It is also an attempt by the writer to blur the boundary between fact and fiction. By putting a "black pianist as protagonist of his novel" Ostendorf argues, Doctorow, connects the musical worlds of Scott Joplin and Coalhouse Walker Jr. with "the industrial world of Henry Ford and J. P. Morgan via the Model T Ford, the principal incarnate of relentless serial production" (1991, 584). In this light, the first category of the abovementioned characters who are associated with dynamicity and vitality of art and music invade the realm of history which also could be categorized under the domain of power of the regime. The intrusion of the marginalized is symbolically represented through Coalhouse's artistic performances which vibrates the cords and rings through the air penetrating through the darkness (Doctorow, 1975, 160).

These marginalized characters who emerge from the periphery are evocatively associated with art and imagination while the second category of characters are associated with an industrial and rigid realm which denies the presence of peripheral entities in its sphere. Henry Ford for instance, as the embodiment of the capitalist system had developed an industry which enabled a machine to duplicate itself endlessly. In this way he had been able to control the workers' amount of production. Standing out as the epitome of the capitalist systems' exploitation of the masses, he is described as someone who believed that workers must dedicate every second of their time for their job, a principles from which Ford developed his theory of industrial manufacture, i.e., "not only that the parts of the finished product be interchangeable, but that the men who build the products be themselves interchangeable parts" (Doctorow, 1975, 136). Pierpont Morgan on the other hand, is another character who represents the American ideals. In the novel he is described as an American hero, a man who "by dint of hard work and ruthlessness" had multiplied his fortune and controlled multiple corporations, and had an undeniable influence over the United States Government. Moreover, he is described as a seminal figure in American History who had "crossed all borders", hence becoming "a monarch of the invisible, transnational kingdom of capital whose sovereignty was everywhere granted" (Doctorow, 1975, 138). These characters who are grouped under the domain of the regime of facts, represent the industrialized realm of facts and the objective and authoritative view of history which has always been favored by those who reside in the center. In this light the center and the periphery get engaged in an ongoing struggle, that is, the driving forces of the center attempt to dominate the peripheral and to maintain the status quo while, the subversive force of imagination and the periphery attempt to undermine and



subvert it. This, in a sense, is a clash between the imaginative realm of fiction and the factual realm of history which echoes through the rest of the narrative.

Commenting on the musical image of the novel, Paul Levine maintains that, “‘syncopating chords’ playing against ‘thumping octaves’ suggests the dialectical relationship in *Ragtime* between fiction and fact, individual will and historical necessity, the organic vision of community expressed by Emma Goldman and the mechanical view of corporate society created by Henry Ford” (1985, 58). Aligned with this argument, Derek Wright also points out that, the piano player is Doctorow’s metaphor for history, since, regardless of any style it plays its own tune. In this light, Wright moreover argues, “history, as the music of what happened, the events that actually took place, is not the same as history as it is received in the present from what historians have written down” (1993, 14). In other words, similar to the syncopation of the voices of the marginalized and the peripheral which is symbolized through the ragtime music, the novel is also the writer’s attempt to go against any constraints imposed by history or any system of thought which recognizes “the primacy of fact-reality” over imagination (Doctorow, 1983, 17). In this sense the image of the piano-artist and the ragtime music, (musical representation or a historiographical metafiction) as an appropriate mode of challenging the constraining norms and resonating the voice of the suppressed, becomes a metaphor for the creative act of the novelist. As Coalhouse Walker, plays Scott Joplin’s ‘Wall Street Rag’, it’s very potential for transporting the audience is described as, “Ill-tuned or not the Aeolian had never made such clear chords” which hung through the air like banquets of flowers and “there seemed to be no other possibilities for life than those delineated by the music” (Doctorow, 1975, 159). This very quality which runs through the pages of the novel, is in fact a hallmark of the narrative as a work of historiographical metafiction, in the sense that the fictive and imaginative cords hang through the narrative attempting to delineate the story of the lives of the characters from a subjective vantage point.

In *Ragtime* these two opposing poles, i.e., History and Imagination, are juxtaposed and in various occasions the seam line between them is highlighted. In every instance, Doctorow does not restrain himself from favoring fantasy and projecting the potential of imagination in constructing a truth on the page. This inclination, recalls Doctorow’s paradigms in his False Documents, when he writes, “dreams are the first false documents, of course: they are never real, they are never factual; nevertheless they control us, purge us, mediate our baser natures, and prophesy our fate” (Doctorow, 1983, 27). Hence, *Ragtime*, with its metafictional quality, in various stages self-consciously confesses to be a false document but at the same time, insists on the fact that truth which is constructed through the power of imagination is more real than that of the empirical realm of history.

Parody in *Ragtime*

In order to unveil the constructed nature of the past, *Ragtime* overtly and consciously imitates the acknowledged version of the past and subverts the popular image of the ragtime era as an age of innocence. Although Doctorow begins his story with a mythicized and idealistic version of American history, nevertheless as the narrative proceeds, he embarks on demythicizing and undercutting the “vision of an innocent, turn-of-century America, an America without economic, social, and racial problems” (Clayton, 1983, 115). The mythicized version of history is outlined from the very outset, where the novel portrays an idealized version of the ragtime era which is reflected from the patriotic standpoint of the white upper-middle-class during this era of transition. Taking the stance of an objective reporter, the narrative voice, provides a false and sentimental view of past events through a mosaic-like miniature of that period as the following:

Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900’s. Teddy Roosevelt was President...There seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people...That was the style, that was the way people lived. Women were stouter then. They visited the fleet carrying white parasols. Everyone wore white in summer. Tennis racquets were hefty and the racquet faces



elliptical. There was a lot of sexual fainting. There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants (Doctorow, 1975, 3).

In this manner from the very outset, the story takes the form of a historical manuscript and bombards the reader with the flux of various historically verified vignettes. Through a series of report-like and telegraphic sentences, the narrative provides some information which are assumed to be only found and read “between the lines of the journals and gazettes” (Doctorow, 1975, 4). This part of the narrative which moves at an inexorable speed primarily depends on the historical data to introduce well known figures such as Stanford White, Harry K. Thaw, Harry K. Thaw, and Emma Goldman who come to take a central position in the historicized narrative of the early pages (Doctorow, 1975, 4). However, in this part of the story the reader can sense a break and turning point, where the narrator moves from a documented narrative to a more subjective one. This turning point is quite distinguishable when the narrator moves from the historical version of the murder of Stanford White, by Harry K Thaw (Evelyn Nesbit’s lover) to Evelyn Nesbit’s fainting on the scene of the crime. This metaphorically shifts the objectified and factual narrative to a dreamlike and hallucinatory one, hence enabling the speaker to infuse his objective historical data, with stories about Emma Goldman’s amorous relationship and Mother’s Younger Brother’s and love affair with Evelyn Nesbit. This very early intrusion of the Anarchist- Feminist activist Emma Goldman to the story and recalling a vague and unverified memory of the time she lashed Evelyn with her tongue, very clearly sets out the pattern for a narrative which embarks on violating the traditional notion of objectivity of history.

From the moment of the incursion of the imaginative and the fictional into the story, however, the reader can notice that the nostalgic narrative voice of the opening of the novel which was already tinted with irony goes on to reverberate through rest of the story. This ironic tone calls upon the reader’s contemplative and thoughtful attention over the objective narration of history. This ironic stance, Hutcheon regards as an element “that allows critical distancing” and later on refutes this nostalgic and objective portrayal of history (1988, 89). By employing such an ironic tone, the narrator questions and radically revises the naïve and nostalgic view which is deliberately outlined at the beginning of the novel. In a subsequent contradictory statement, which follows the objective representations of the early pages, the narrator states, “Apparently there were Negroes. There were immigrants” (1975, 5). This statement which negates and contradicts the earlier idealistic image of a utopian community, in a sense, could be regarded as an onset for the stories and histories of the blacks and immigrants to surface up in the pages of the novel.

In this mixture of factual and the fantastic, in fact Doctorow directly criticizes the empirical and objective representational method of history. Through the intrusion of the fantasy into history, he demystifies traditional historical representations and mocks the historiographical records which have been deemed to be an accurate and objective image of the bygone events. This very ironic tone of the early stages, questions the possibility of any accurate historical or linguistic generalization, and mocks and challenges reader’s simplistic and nostalgic perception of the past. In this regard David S. Gross argues that the early pages of the narrative which is a miniature of the narrative’s framework, tells the reader that;

our sentimental view of the past tells lies in seeking to conceal the realities of class and racial oppression and its support of the money complex; when we see “all people” dressed in white and amusing themselves we are actually seeing the past as if only the ruling class existed, specifically ignoring the very existence of the Negroes and immigrants who provide for its privileged position (1983, 130).

Accordingly, Hutcheon considers this opening as a pattern which sets out the general outline of the narrative, i.e., calling into question “many American social ‘ideals’- such as justice” and writing about “those ex-centric parts of society” who have traditionally been excluded from both fiction and history (1988, 89-90). In this way the narrative paves the way for some marginalized characters to find their way through the pages of a narrative which is primarily dominated by prominent historical figures. By creating such incongruities with the “canonized history,” as



Wesseling contends, Doctorow attempt to remind the reader of the fact that, “there were indeed negroes, there were immigrants, and there were women, and if they did not play a dominant role in the past, they may yet ascend to prominence in times to come” (1991, 174-5).

This representational method, very obviously highlights the fact that Doctorow meant to produce a fiction which was socially and politically committed. *Ragtime* is a novel which clearly underscores the writer’s inclination and commitment to reflect upon the socio-political issues. In developing his poetics of history, which were outlined earlier in the discussion of False Documents, Doctorow, seeks a sort of fiction that not only challenges the hegemony of a specific ideology, but also deconstructs the earlier literary conventions which attempted to separate historical writings from fictional narratives. *Ragtime* implements this through blurring the line between fact and fiction, and in doing so it exposes and challenges the supremacy of institutionalized discursive practices in both literary and cultural studies. In this light, Doctorow’s narrative becomes a venue of battle for freedom, i.e., an arena in which the canonized historical and literary traditions are challenged. In this way, *Ragtime* becomes a novel which resonates Doctorow’s assumptions about the tasks of a narrative, which “is to disrupt or dismantle the prevailing regimes of truth, [in order] to prevent the power of the regime from monopolizing the compositions of truth, from establishing a monological control over culture” (Parks, 1984, 454-5). It is the essence of this monologic culture with its authoritarian and absolutistic denial of the existence and validity of the ‘Other’ which *Ragtime* attempts to dismantle. Hence the story takes the form of a metaphorical clash between fiction and history, a process through which new realities, i.e., truths about the underrepresented nations who have been monopolized and hegemonized, come to get introduced. In this way the fictional realities come to challenge and even replace the objective realities which have been perpetuated throughout history. Hence Doctorow’s narrative becomes an idiom for the author to resonate the voice of the devoiced through his medium of representation. Although the author’s version might be deemed of a low value, biased and illusory, due to the fact that it is filtered through his perspective, but at least it becomes a provocative medium that makes us ponder about the untold realities throughout the world. Moreover, through an unreliable narrator Doctorow employs a “fictional discourse which needs no external verification” and invites the reader to regard some certain statements as true, that is to say, fictional truths that “have a solidity that cannot be reached in nonfiction” (Ryan, 1997, 167).

With this assumption that “the development of civilizations is essentially a progression of metaphors”, Doctorow contends that the novelists have to take advantage of every method of narrative to oppose and dismantle the power of the regime which attempts to perpetuate the dominion of the monologic cultures (1983, 26). In order to deconstruct this regime of objective truth, Doctorow parodies historical discourse and ironically mixes the historical and fictional characters, and imposes his own order on the historical narrative, only to allude to the fact that history is just another constructed narrative. *Ragtime* commences this through presenting the historical and fictional characters in situations which are quite unverifiable and surprising. Employing this strategy, it interweaves the story of the nameless Rochelle family (representing the center) with the peripheral and ex-centric characters such as Coalhouse Walker, Sarah and Tateh. In this way the narrative very skillfully frees the historical figures such as Harry Houdini, Henry Ford, J. P. Morgan, and Emma Goldman from the frames of the magazines and newspaper headlines, photographs and other historical records and brings them back to life in the pages of the novel. In the same manner the fictional characters are brought into the very center of the narrative, to the extent of even overriding and dominating the historical personages of the story. In this way the seam line between the historical account of these characters’ lives and Doctorow’s creative account of these characters disappears. This metaphorically stands for Doctorow’s experimentations to create a proper medium of representation, which can break through the shackles of conformity in literary and historical canon.



Parody which reveals the ironic difference that exists at the heart of similarity, Hutcheon argues to be a “perfect postmodern form”, in the senses that, “it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (1988, 11). In other words, parody is able to offer simultaneous perspectives on the present and the past, which enables the writer “to speak to a discourse from within it, but without being totally recuperated by it” (1988, 35). Hutcheon moreover argues, similar to Brecht's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt*, “parody works to distance and, at the same time, to involve both artist and audience in a participatory hermeneutic activity” and due to this characteristic it has become a very popular and effective strategy which is employed by the marginalized communities and feminist artists who attempt to undermine the hegemony of the “white, Anglo, male culture” (1988, 35). Due to this very reason, Doctorow takes advantage of this technique, in order to disenchant the readers and to instigate them into an active and thoughtful interpretation of the seemingly historical data.

Commenting on his parodic representation in *Ragtime*, Doctorow honestly points out that his primary aim in composing this novel was to establish a “narrative distance”, i.e., “to create something not as intimate as fiction nor as remote as history, but a voice that was mock-historical-pedantic” (1980, 44). This strategy, which Hutcheon's terms as “metafictional paradox”, that's to say, “self-conscious narratives” which demanded the reader's “detachment” as well as “involvement” (1988, x) is clearly noticed in the ironic tone and the sentimental representation of the early pages of the novel. The quasi-factual narrative of the novel, is a proper technique which, not only breaks down the reader's complacency but also calls to attention his involvement in re-reading and reconsidering historical narratives' claim of impartiality. This critical distancing, in a sense, makes the reader brood over, and contrast the objective and native representation of the historical events in the form of schoolbooks with subjective accounts which are filtered through perspective of the characters.

Hutcheon's notion of metafictional paradox is quite palpable in the shift from the cool, detached and ironic narrative voice which distances the reader from the events of the turn of the history in America, to the more subjective perspectives of the characters. The end of the second chapter, is a good example, in the sense that it subverts the idealistic and “Disneyland view” of the American history as an era of innocence and reveals the socio-economic conflicts that were kept suppressed underneath its surface (Levine, 1985, 51). This stage which could be labeled as one of the earliest moments of epiphany, gets the reader introduced to the upcoming immigrants. In a description in which Father is the only witness, the narrative attempts to capture a historical event in its fullest originality. Here, this idealistic and naive view of the former pages is shattered; when Father who is now a member of Peary's polar expedition, which is another symbolic representation of Teddy Roosevelt' expansionism, goes through a disillusioning moment. While he is onboard and the “awesome unalterable rhythm of the ocean” is transmitted to his bones, Roosevelt passes an “incoming transatlantic vessel packed to the railings with immigrants” (Doctorow, 1975, 13). In this pivotal point of the narrative, Father the daydreamer and the manufactures of “fireworks and flags and patriotic paraphernalia”, is brought out of his illusory world of idealism and is forced to experience a more real and true version of history, one which has been kept out of the pages of the journals and magazines, i.e., documented pages of history (Fowler, 1992, 60).

The scene of Father's confrontation with the transatlantic vessel filled with immigrants stands out among the rest of the pages, due to the fact that similar to this character's disillusioning experience, the reader is given the chance to experience a genuine and emotionally laden moment which is passed through Father's perceptive eyes. Father who is disillusioned and “persuaded by the actuality of the trip” watches the vessel which was packed with immigrants;

Thousands of male heads in derbies. Thousands of female heads covered with shawls. It was a rag ship with a million dark eyes staring at him. Father, a normally resolute person, suddenly foundered in his soul. A weird despair seized him. The wind came up, the sky had turned overcast, and the great ocean began to tumble and break upon itself as if made of slabs of granite and sliding terraces of slate. He watched the ship till he could see it no longer. Yet aboard her were only more



customers, for the immigrant population set great store by the American flag (Doctorow, 1975, 13).

This vibrant and symbolic depiction is imbued with irony, in the sense that the Roosevelt vessel which was heading far to the Arctic, recalls the history of Teddy Roosevelt, the “Rough Rider” as the ruler of Anglo-Saxon Protestant America who had just “finished giving the monarchies of the Old World a lesson they will not soon forget at San Juan Hill in Cuba. This emblem of American Expansionism had just put down the Philippine rebellion and annexed Hawaii, “so the little brown brothers and sisters of the Third World have been instructed in just what is good for them” (Fowler, 1992, 59). In light of such analogy, Admiral Peary’s expedition comes to take a different meaning, i.e., projecting the provocative notion of exploitation and colonization of the ‘Other’ rather than a naïve patriotic image of exploration.

The bitter reality which is in fact disclosed in this moment, recalls Kipling’s *The White Man’s Burden* in which Eurocentric and white-centered spirit of expansionism is euphemized as educating, uplifting, civilizing and Christianizing the ‘Other’. Theodore Roosevelt, the ambitious expansionist whom Hugh Brogan considers to be incarnating Kipling’s “imperialist creed” in fact received a copy of this poem, which he hailed as “rather poor poetry, but good sense from the expansion standpoint” (1973, 40). Commenting on this analogy, Fowler also draws attention to Father as a “big-game hunter and an amateur explorer of real accomplishment”, a decent American man living in the tumultuous decade of twentieth century who aspired to be as much like Theodore Roosevelt as he could manage (1992, 61). But ironically, Doctorow’s parodic representation in various occasions shatters such long-held Eurocentric and White-centered ideals. In fact, it is through Father’s successive failures throughout the story that Doctorow brings to light the vanity of such monolithic principles. Hence, in line with other literary predecessors, Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, is an endeavor to retell the long stories of subjugation and manipulation of the Blacks and Immigrants, tales which have been kept silenced and unnoticed in the glorious pages of a White-centered and Monolithic history.

Conclusion

Doctorow’s *Ragtime* as a historiographical metafiction infuses the aesthetic and liberating tone of fiction into the solid rhythm of history, in order to generate a proper medium of representation for encompassing the volatile flux of history. This narrative exemplifies Doctorow’s attempts to unveil and recall this long history of domination and exploitation, which is an undeniable part of the world’s history. On various occasions, *Ragtime* attempts to blur the boundary between fact and fiction in order to bridge the gaps between the lives of different American families, hence dropping the veil that keeps the ex-centric nations invisible. To undermine and negate the objective and white centered versions of truth and instead providing a space for the ex-centric and the peripheral at the very center, the narrative prioritizes fantasy over facts, i.e., Power of Freedom over the Power of the Regime. Doctorow believed that histories are composed and imbued by historian’s creative imagination, and draws attention to the fact that, being part of an establishment, the American historians have always written out of existence the histories of the ‘Others’. Hence *Ragtime*, typifies this writer’s ongoing struggle to reverberate the untold stories of the underrepresented and to resonate the voice of the devoiced through the cords of history. The novel also obviously exemplifies Doctorow’s attempt to reframe the paradigms for historiographical narratives and his belief in the fact that the writers can employ their power of imagination and take up the cudgels against the literary and historical conventions. This writer who ardently approved the potential of fantasy in composing alternate worlds, believed that imagination can impose itself on the world and compose alternate fictional worlds infused with fictional truths and alternate realities. Hence, Doctorow’s imaginative power which is reverberated through this narrative, in a sense, has the potential to affect communities’ consciousness, their system of belief and the way people act. With such presupposition, this compulsively readable novel turns into the writer’s manifesto of socio-political commitment, a



work which discards the objective version of history which has been traditionally inscribed from the standpoint of a dominant culture. Hence, Doctorow's, metafictional strategies and his parodic representations make *Ragtime* a typical treatise of social commitment which indispensably rewrites American history from the bottom up to create a world of difference, incongruity and plurality.



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تواریخ مزیفه و أصوات متزامنه فی روایه 'راکتایم' لدوکتورو جزء من أطروحة الدكتوراه بعنوان ؛

إعادة النظر في التاريخ: قراءة تاريخية جديدة ل 'راكتاييم' لدكتورو ، 'ماسون و ديكسون لينيشون و سحابة أطلس' لميتشل

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خلاصة

رواية راكتاييم لكتبتها دوكتوروس هي رواية صنفها ليندا هوتشون على أنها قصة تاريخية ميتافكتالية. هذه الرواية التي أعادت صياغة النماذج في السرد التاريخي المعاصر ، تمزج بين الحقائق والخيال وعلى أثره تصبح العلاقة بين التاريخ والأدب غير واضحة وذلك من أجل لفت الانتباه إلى محدودية السرد التاريخي كمصدر موثوق لإبراز "الحقيقة" أو "الواقع". من خلال أسلوب التمثيل الساخر ، يوفر هذا السرد مزيجاً من عوالم واقعية وعوالم خيالية ، وهي ساحة تختلط فيها التناقضات والتوترات المختلفة. في مثل هذه الساحة ، ينتقل العديد من الشخصيات بين العالمين الخيالي والواقعي ويغيرون وضعهم الوجودي. وهذا يعني أن الشخصيات الخيالية تنتقل من عالم الخيال المحيطي إلى مجال الواقع التاريخي بينما تفقد الشخصيات التاريخية مكانتها العالية وتتدهور إلى الخيال "المجرد". هذه الخاصية تجعل من الرواية وسيلة مناسبة لتمثيل الفئات المهمشة عبر صفحات التاريخ. تبحث هذه الورقة في بعض الاستراتيجيات ما وراء القص التي تستخدمها الكاتب لإعطاء الأولوية "للحقيقة الذاتية" ، أي "الحقيقة الخيالية" على "الواقع الموضوعي" ، ومن ثم تدوين القصص غير المروية التي تم إبعادها عن صفحات التاريخ.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما وراء التاريخ ، ما بعد الحداثة ، التأريخية الجديدة ، المحاكاة الساخرة ، أختصار الحروف.

ديروكتين خيال و دهنگين نزم كرى د رومانا 'رهگتايما' دكتوروى دا

ئهف به شه ل نامهيا دكتوراي ب ناف و نيشانى خواري يا هاتيه وه رگرتن:

پيدا چونه فا ديروكان: خويندنه فه كا ديروكا نوى د 'رهگتايما' دكتوروى، 'ميسون و ديكسون' پينچونى و 'كلاود ئه تله سا' مايكل دا

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كورتى

رومانا "راكتاييم" يا رومان نفيس "دوكتورو" رومانه كه كو "ليندا هويتشون" وهكى چيروكهك ديروكى بناف كرىه.

ئهف رومانه كو پارادىگمى پين دى فه گوته ديروكيا هه مدهم ده ژى نوو فه خيزكرىه.

راستين و خه يالى دكه ته ناف هه فدوو و سنورين دناقهرا ديروكى و وازهين ده ژ هول رادكه دا كو بالى بكيشنه سه سونورين ديروكناسين وهكى "چافكانيهك پين باوهر ژ بو پروژه كرنا راستين يان واقعيه تن.

ئهف فه گوتن ب ريبازا نه مسيلا پاروديك تيكه له كه ژ جيه ائين راسته قينه و خه يالى، قاده كه كو دژبه رى و تهنگه زارين جياواز تيده ده پينه هه فگرتن. د قاده كا وهكى فن ده گه لهك كاراكترا دناقهرا جيهانا خه يالى و راسته قينه ده كوچ دكن و ره و صا خوه يا ته تتولوزيكى دگوهورن.

كاراكتره رين خه يالى ژ قادا خه يالى يا دهردور ده رباسى قادا راستييا ديروكى دبن و كاراكتره رين ديروكى ره و صا خوه يا بلند وندا دكن و دكه فن پوزيسيونا چيروكتين ناساي.



ئەف تايه تەمەندى "راگتايىم" دكە ئامرازەك گۇنجاو ژ بۇ دەنگفەدانا دەنگى كەسپن كىم نەمرەدار و مارژىنال دناف روپەلپن دىرؤكچ دا. ئەف گۇتار ھندەك ستراتسجىيىن دىرؤكى ئپن كو ژ ھىلا "دوكتورو" فە دەپنە بكارئانپن دا كو پپشى ل راسپيا سەبژەكتىف ئانكو راستىيا خەيالى ل سەر راستىيا ئۆبژەكتىفى بگرە. ژبەر فۇچ چەندئ چىرؤكپن نەگۇتى يپن كو ل دەررەفى روپەلپن دىرؤكچ ھاتپن ھشتن فەدەھوپن.

پەپئپن سەرەكى: مپتافىكسىؤنا دىرؤكى، پشت مۇدرنپزم، دىرؤكناسى نوو ، پارؤدى، سىنكؤپاسپؤن.