

CHARLES JOHNSON'S *MIDDLE PASSAGE* AS HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

Barbara Z. Thaden

Critics have found in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* a variety of themes and allusions. For Madelyn Jablon, Johnson's text is about writing an African *and* American self; for S. X. Goudie, it is a deconstruction of the racist and colonialist world view which marks us as either the enslaver or the enslaved; for Ashraf Rushdy ("Properties of Desire") it is a philosophical exploration, indebted to the early Karl Marx, of the slave's struggle to create an identity and subvert, through theft, love, and writing, the capitalism which commodified him. For Celestin Walby, it is a rewriting of ancient African and Egyptian myths and rituals expressing "a condition of fragmentation and a desire for unity" that can only be achieved through self-sacrifice, a solution as old as the original myths and rituals, "transcending race and time" (668). For Molly Abel Travis, this very transcendence of race and time marks the novel as one whose time has not yet come, an argument I strongly contest. To my mind, what makes the novel most significant, and eminently teachable, is the fact that it is an accessible and important example of what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction." Despite its peppering of philosophical and religious allusions, words that don't exist in any dictionary, and complex metaphysical arguments, students find *Middle Passage* "easy" and enjoyable; teaching this novel with some of its intertexts, such as Melville's *Moby-Dick* and "Benito Cereno" and Douglass's *Narrative*, can be a richly rewarding experience.

Historiographic metafiction is a term Hutcheon uses to define the postmodern novel, especially those novels set in the past which are "at once popular best-sellers and objects of intense academic study" (*Poetics* 20). Novels such as *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Ragtime* are best-sellers because they use the plot structures and characterization techniques of popular fiction, yet interesting to analyze and teach because they use parody and irony to challenge those very techniques from

Barbara Z. Thaden is an assistant professor of English at St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, North Carolina. She is the author of *The Maternal Voice in Victorian Fiction: Rewriting the Patriarchal Family* (Garland, 1997), as well as articles on Gaskell, Austen, Derrida, Bakhtin, and Dostoevsky.

within the text. This type of postmodern fiction is marked by a concern with “whose truth gets told” in historical and fictional narratives (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 4, 123) since, in the words of Hayden White, “every representation of the past has specifiable ideological implications” (*Tropics of Discourse*, qtd. Hutcheon, *Poetics* 120). Johnson asks readers to re-vision the narrative histories of American slavery and of the Middle Passage, not only to question their point of view but also to question what these narratives mean for us today, and what they should mean. Hutcheon stresses how important black American literature has been to “this postmodern refocusing on historicity,” citing authors such as Toni Morrison and Ishmael Reed; we need to add Charles Johnson to this group of postmodern novelists who are effectively challenging and changing the canon of American literature by asking us to reread and re-vision our American classics.

Postmodernist works usually challenge “received versions of history” (Alexander 16) and remind us that history itself is an unreliable narrative construction. But many of us prefer not to teach young undergraduates postmodern texts which offer only “alienation, personal despair and disintegration [as] recurring themes” (Alexander 10), although we want to offer a politically engaged questioning of received truths. Charles Johnson’s fiction offers a mixture of positive themes in historiographic metafiction. Johnson shows how the stripping away of the illusion of an autonomous self—that “self” itself a textual construct, a recurring theme in postmodernist writing—need not result in alienation, personal despair, and disintegration. A practicing Buddhist, he sees the rejection of the autonomous self as a positive step, providing a refreshing change from those postmodern texts in which characters must simply endure the unendurable. Johnson takes historiographic metafiction a step beyond merely questioning the veracity of the narrativized past. He reinscribes that past so that it speaks to our current social and moral problems with a voice that not only asks pertinent questions, but also offers some answers to our most pressing late-twentieth-century social and personal ills. He offers us what many would consider a rarity—a postmodern work which is also a celebration of life. Many postmodern novels tend to undermine “the twin goals of the classical realist novel—an object of love and work as a sphere of achievement” (Alexander 34), but these are exactly the values Johnson celebrates—his main character finds an object of love and a sphere of life-affirming work to fill the emptiness left after he has disgorged himself of his ego. These Buddhist, moral, life-affirming themes make Johnson’s fiction inspirational as well as pleasurable.

In *Middle Passage* Johnson incorporates the plot structure and themes of genres such as the epic, the romance, the sea story, and the slave narrative, in conscious imitation of the style of his mentor, John Gardner. Johnson believes that Gardner’s most effective fictions are those that appropriate age-old forms such as the epic and the pastoral because “by virtue of their having been in circulation for centuries, new fictions in these forms have the authority lacking in so much ‘interior’ modern lit-

erature. Meaning *accumulates* in the form, infuses these fictions with dignity, affirmation, and a timeless sense of value” (Johnson, “Phenomenology” 149). However, Johnson uses these forms with the conscious distancing of irony, parody, and even farce. In fact, the accessibility of Johnson’s third published novel is due to its having many of the characteristics of farce, which, according to Albert Bermal, “is by its nature popular: it makes a gut appeal to the entire spectrum of the public, from illiterates to intellectuals” (14). The trickster, the servant or slave who outwits his master, is a stock character in farce who “appeals to us because he lives by no rules and takes wicked delight in breaking the rules of others” (Bermal 47).

As in many farces, Rutherford Calhoun, the picaresque hero of *Middle Passage*, soon finds himself “on unfamiliar terrain where he appears odd and outnumbered,” where “he is different from everybody else” (Bermal 24)—in this case, as the only black American on a merchant ship setting out to pick up an illegal cargo of African slaves, a ship commandeered by a ruthless and comically bigoted captain. All the characters in the novel, including Rutherford, are essentially caricatures—grotesque but humorous, and much less realistic than the characters who appeared in Johnson’s stage farce *Olly Olly Oxen Free*. As a philosopher, Johnson doesn’t believe that fictional characters can represent real people. In *Being and Race*, he agrees with the philosopher William Gass, who holds that “there are no descriptions in fiction, there are only constructions” (17, qtd. Johnson 34). Like Gass, Johnson insists that a character is “not a person. He is not even an object of perception, and nothing whatever that is appropriate to persons can be correctly said of [a character]” (Gass 44, qtd. Johnson, *Being and Race* 34). Thus Johnson seems to agree with the “contemporary critical truism that realism is really a set of conventions, that the representation of the real is not the same as the real itself” (Hutcheon, “Historiographic” 6).

Most historiographic metafiction constantly reminds readers that they are not in a realistic novel by temporal leaps, abrupt shifts in narrative voice, jarring juxtapositions of genre, unmistakable parodic self-reflexivity, and other techniques, which Johnson himself employed in his 1982 novel *Oxberding Tale*. However, *Middle Passage*, while employing many of these techniques in subdued ways, also invites the uninitiated to participate in an uninterrupted narrative line, guiding readers over the abyss of postmodernism on the bridge of an adventure/romance plot which on one level is as riveting, unlikely, and unironic as George Lucas’s *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Most students are taken in by the narrative line and don’t perceive the characters as stereotypes because they are so used to this type of characterization that they take it at face value. Recognizing parody involves “not only the recognition of textualized traces of the literary and historical past but also the awareness of what has been done—through irony—to those traces” (Hutcheon, “Historiographic” 8). Many of our students have grown up on metafictional, self-reflexive, and inherently parodic TV cartoons and sitcoms. What they often seem unaware

of are the “conventions of realism” that postmodernism parodies! Students admire Isadora Bailey, the ex-schoolmistress with a nose like a doorknob, as an ideal woman, and feel outrage at Captain Falcon’s sexual exploitation of Tommy the cabin boy. They write that they often “don’t know how to take” scenes which are both grotesque and humorous—that is, they can’t believe that these scenes are supposed to be funny. In their minds they imagine real people, not quickly sketched grotesque caricatures. We should not wonder at this when movies such as *Who Shot Roger Rabbit*, *Dick Tracy*, and *Space Jam*, which juxtapose human actors with cartoon characters or place human actors in cartoon settings, prove through the juxtaposition that the cartoons are no more two-dimensional than the human actors.

Students will read and enjoy *Middle Passage* on the plot level, yet contextualizing the novel provides a key to open the tiny door of postmodernism, a door which, like the one Alice opens, reveals a vast and unusual space. Therefore, teaching Johnson’s novel along with several of its intertexts allows for discussion of how Johnson has both used and challenged past texts, by casting, for example, a former slave, petty thief, and womanizer as Odysseus to a Penelope ex-schoolteacher who knits sweaters for her menagerie of stray animals.

Parodic intertextuality is the very basis of historiographic metafiction. Postmodernist works which incorporate characters, images, structures, or themes from earlier works change our understanding of those works. Therefore, appreciating historiographic metafiction requires awareness of the important intertexts, those “‘primary’ utterances which are being distorted and redefined by being relocated within another linguistic and cultural context” (Worton and Still 11). Parody of intertexts is not simple ridiculing of past fictional plots and techniques, but “repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 26). Received histories and time-honored narrative structures are placed in a new context, made to speak in our time and to a new audience, with startlingly different connotations. For Johnson this parody is never a devaluing of past beliefs, but more a change in point of view so that previously withheld perspectives are textualized. And, behind all subjectivities, Johnson believes that we share “not different worlds, but innumerable perspectives on one world; and we know that when it comes to the crunch we share, all of us, the same cultural Lifeworld” (“Phenomenology” 151). However, merely presenting a variety of points of view is not Johnson’s goal, because this type of panorama would not be the highest type of moral fiction unless it privileged the “life affirming” perspectives over the others—or at least presented the triumphs of the human spirit, as well as the derailments, as not only valuable but possible (“Phenomenology” 151–52).

Beginning with overt references to Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, but with a parodically anachronistic first-person narrator, and with a snappy, contemporary prose style which no one can mistake for the prose of the 1830s, Johnson, who began his career as a political cartoonist, hangs his philosophical tale on a familiar plot, drawn with

the stark outlines of the caricaturist. It can be read quickly as the story of a black man (Rutherford Calhoun) we all recognize from today's television and movies as a good-natured ne'er-do-well, a thief, a liar, and a womanizer. However, this stock comic character is made to play the leading role in a *slave narrative*, a narrative about the Middle Passage as well as about a former slave. (Ashraf Rushdy, for instance, classifies this book as a text "which imitates the forms and conventions of the slave narrative" ["Phenomenology of the Allmuseri" 375].) This iconoclastic use of the most important subject and narrative structure of black American literature has outraged some critics as much as William Styron's appropriation of the voice of Nat Turner in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. It has been seen as in poor taste, like writing a love story with a happy ending and lots of bathroom jokes set in a Nazi concentration camp. In his introduction to *The Classic Slave Narratives*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes that "the narratives of ex-slaves are, for the literary critic, the very foundation upon which most subsequent Afro-American fictional and nonfictional narrative forms are based" (xii); making irreverent use of this material "simply for effect" (John Haynes, qtd. Goudie 110) is seen as indefensible.

However, Johnson's use of the slave narrative tradition is neither straightforward nor strictly parodic: it seems not only to parody but actually to invert the structure of the classic slave narrative. While *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* adopts a highly serious, melodramatic, emotional rhetoric, *Middle Passage* undercuts and puts into question not only the style and tone of the slave narrative but its very foundation—that progression from the dark night of slavery to the glorious day of freedom. Rutherford Calhoun is an ex-slave who discovers that his freedom is only a different type of slavery. In the first few pages of the novel, Rutherford refers to "the hour of my manumission" as "a day of such gloom and depression" that he cannot bear to speak of it (3). Gaining his freedom has only trapped him further in the futile struggle to preserve and promote his individuality. Running from the disappointment his brother Jackson caused him and running from marriage with Isadora, Rutherford stows away on a ship full of white men who, like him, are running from their failures and humiliations on shore to a worse fate at sea. Peter Cringle, the first mate, informs him immediately that "Being on a ship *is* being in jail, with the chance of being drowned to boot" (25). Everything Rutherford has ever believed about slavery and freedom will be turned on its head during his Middle Passage, which progresses from America to Africa before returning a different Rutherford, with a totally different idea of freedom, into the bondage of marriage and responsibility with Isadora.

Some readers may find in poor taste Johnson's using the plot structure of a slave narrative to support the theme that slavery is a *state of mind*. Yet Johnson is only taking Douglass's themes to their ultimate logical conclusion for today's American reading audience, who are not and never have been slaves. While Douglass's main motive was the abolition of the legal enslavement of the body, Johnson

expands on Douglass to show how his narrative can speak to our late-twentieth-century social problems. Douglass's narrative does in fact touch on the concept of slavery as a state of mind as well as a legal state of the body. For example, his "entrance to the hell of slavery" is achieved not at his birth but when he witnesses Captain Anthony whipping his half-naked Aunt Hester while she is tied to the rafters (258); later, under the despotism of Mr. Covey the slave breaker, "the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!" (293). Yet Douglass would have objected strenuously to the contention that he was a slave in body only because he allowed himself to be a slave in spirit. Douglass also shows how whites as well as blacks are enslaved by an evil social system when he reports Sophia Auld's degeneration from angel to demoness as the result of suddenly becoming responsible for only one slave (277). Yet he would never have granted that he and Sophia Auld were equally enslaved, or equally capable of casting off their chains. Even though Douglass describes his mental freedom as preceding his physical freedom, when he resolves to be a slave no longer in spirit, when he "did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me" (299), he knew that his mental freedom would not automatically lead to his physical and spiritual freedom. His mental freedom gave him the courage to fight and to die if necessary rather than to be a slave, but only the actual and legal freedom of his body could insure the continuation of his mental freedom, and this liberation of the body, not of the mind, becomes his constant, never-forgotten goal.

Frederick Douglass's narrative progresses from the dusk of birth as a slave through the deep night of complete mental and spiritual bondage to the brilliant light of physical freedom. Rutherford Calhoun's spiritual journey takes us in the opposite direction. Rutherford, like Frederick Douglass, was born into slavery, but was granted his manumission by his dying owner, Peleg Chandler, before the opening of the narrative. We learn that Rutherford's manumission has not allowed him to be happy and self-directed, but has instead led him to a life of petty crime, drink, womanizing, and running from commitment of any kind. "Since my manumission I'd brought a world of grief on myself" (92), he writes. We learn that Rutherford has rejected his brother Jackson Calhoun as a hopeless Uncle Tom, a sort of spiritual idiot who so rejects the idea of ownership that when Chandler asks him to decide how he wants the inheritance divided, he replies "I *could* ask for land, but how can any man, even you, sir, *own* something like those trees outside?" (117). The implication is that Jackson never felt that Chandler owned him, because ownership is just a misguided figment of the imagination, and therefore he was *voluntarily* serving Chandler, as were Rutherford and all the rest of Chandler's dependents.

A slave's voluntary servitude to a good master is a favored theme of anti-abolitionist writers, not of ex-slaves in slave narratives. Yet Johnson valorizes Jackson Calhoun, the slave who freely chooses to serve his master after manumission.

Jackson's initials remind us that he is a Christ figure, and he is described in magical-realist terms as a sort of Francis of Assisi who is so selfless and light that he can lie down on a flock of birds and be carried into the sky. When Jackson insists that their master split the inheritance equally among all of his slaves and ex-slaves, their offspring and relatives (leaving Rutherford to inherit only \$40.00, a bedpan, and a Bible), we are reminded of Christ's exhortation to the man who asked him to "speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me": "Take heed, and beware covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (Luke 12:13–15). Driven to exasperation by Jackson's repudiation of their inheritance and "spineless behavior in the face of freedom" (*Middle Passage* 3), Rutherford becomes a thief, stealing on the principle that he himself has had his own identity stolen from him and therefore has the right to steal others' property, security, and sense of self. In the end, the *Middle Passage* and Isadora Bailey will teach him that he does not need material possessions or a stolen sense of self to be a free and happy man. As is often true in historiographic metafiction, this insight seems much more relevant to American readers in the 1990s than to any actual or fictional black person, slave or free, living in the United States of America in 1830.

Rutherford learns on his voyage that the more men try to escape the bonds of others, the more trapped they become in bondage to their own egos; moreover, according to Johnson, no man is truly free of bonds to the entire social universe of others. Even Captain Falcon, the arch-individualist, has had to kowtow to the rich investors who have financed this voyage: "I'm captain 'cause I knew how to bow and scrape and kiss rich arses to raise money for this run," he informs Rutherford (147). Rutherford is forced to acknowledge that Ebenezer Falcon is slave to the investors, who, in turn, are slaves to fortune and other fortune-hunters. Papa Zeringue, the black New Orleans slumlord and racketeer who has financed a part of this slaver's voyage, looks "profoundly sad, beat down around the ankles *like a man loaded with chains*" (192; emphasis added) after seeing his investment sink to the bottom of the ocean. By the end of the novel, Rutherford has come to acknowledge that his brother Jackson Calhoun was, while still a slave, the freest man he had ever known, and Rutherford himself is rid of the need to "possess or dominate" his own life or the world (187).

In seeking to escape from his past, Rutherford discovers that he has not only misunderstood but also misused that past. When the Allmuseri God shows Rutherford that his father was killed just miles from the plantation on the day that he escaped, and did not in fact abandon Rutherford for worldly pleasures, Rutherford realizes that one of his own excuses for his antisocial, irresponsible lifestyle is a figment of his imagination, an imaginary enemy he has kept alive so that he can keep on hating it, just as Diamelo, one of the Allmuseri slave revolt leaders, must keep Captain Falcon alive in order to have an enemy he can both hate and control. Rutherford thought he had been abandoned by an uncaring father who sought only

his own liberty, but he now learns that his uneducated father was incapable of escaping and not guilty of abandoning his family.

Writing a slave narrative in 1990, Johnson asks readers, black and white, to reexamine their relationship to American slavery. He shows that Frederick Douglass's narrative tells only half the story. The escape from slavery was the event which began Douglass's "life," but Rutherford was *given* his freedom, as we readers have had it given to us. The institution of slavery can no longer function as an excuse for any type of antisocial behavior. Rutherford's father, a slave taken in Africa, parodies stereotypical late twentieth-century black lower-class excuses based on the past (distant or not); a womanizer, braggart, and ne'er-do-well, Riley Calhoun believes he can't help the way he is:

"Looka how we livin'," he'd say. . . . "Looka what they done to us. . . . We was kings once," he would say, scrawling with one finger on the dusty porch a crude map of an African village he remembered vaguely (and neglecting to add that in his tribe his own family was not royalty but instead the equivalent of Russian serfs or Chinese coolies). "We lost a war—naw, a battle. So now we's prisoners. And the way I see it we supposed to keep on fightin'." (169–70)

Riley Calhoun takes out his anger on other blacks, including his family, and feels that any constraints on his freedom, including marriage and religion, are imposed by whites. Rutherford had thought of him as the epitome of the irresponsible absentee father, someone who ran away from slavery but forgot to come back for his children. The anachronistic style and the allusion to current problems, such as fatherless family units, allow the reader to understand that the issues addressed in the novel are problems which exist now. Historiographic metafiction always "reshapes [the past] in the light of present issues" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 137). Johnson accepts the postmodern idea that we know the past only through its texts, and only through our own modern mind, but he takes postmodernism one step further. Rather than simply problematizing our understanding of the past, he insists that, if our interpretation of the past is causing us present anguish and social problems, we need to reinterpret that past in such a way that it will benefit us in the present. In other words, Johnson doesn't really care how a slave in 1830 would react to being abandoned by his father. His concern is how readers in the 1990s (black and white) react to such an event, and with what consequences to themselves and society.

Not only must Rutherford accept that his father did not purposely abandon him, he must also acknowledge that his father's excuses, like his own, were lame, and that his brother Jackson is closer to being an Allmuseri than either he, Rutherford, or his father. Ngonyama, the captive who best retains the Allmuseri worldview, roundly chastises him for his hangdog attitude: "None of us were brought up to *accept* failure, or laugh it off, as you do. . . . We were forced onto this ship. Why have *you* wandered so far from your home?" (*Middle Passage* 163). Illustrating the Buddhist idea of karma or what Johnson in this book calls the Allmuseri concept of

“outpicturing,” Ngonyama believes that the ship is doomed because the rebel slaves have allowed themselves to kill so many of the whites—allowed themselves to become contaminated with the murderous dualism of the Western mind.

Johnson has inscribed into the Alluseri mindset many classical Buddhist beliefs, such as the belief that even though we are inherently inclined to divide our entire experience into two parts, what we do and what happens to us, this belief is the greatest illusion. Buddhists hold that what happens to us is our “karma,” and “karma” is a Sanskrit word which means “doing.” Therefore, according to the doctrine of the Buddha, *what happens to us*, as well as what we do, is fundamentally our doing (*Buddhism, Man and Nature*).

Rutherford learns that he has himself created all of the mythical past which has circumscribed his life—the myth of an uncaring father, the myth of a servile and spineless brother, the myth of having no self and no history and no stake in America. “I was responsible for *all* of it, the beauty and the ugliness,” he comes to recognize (181). He learns that “the ‘I’ that I was, was a mosaic of many countries, a patchwork of others and objects stretching backward to perhaps the beginning of time. What I felt, seeing this, was indebtedness” (163). He also feels an intense desire to return to the America he has repudiated, because he has learned that he is no better and no worse than any other American of any color or rank or class—“If this weird, upside-down caricature of a country called America, if this land of refugees and former indentured servants, religious heretics and half-breeds, whoresons and fugitives—this cauldron of mongrels from all points on the compass—was all I could rightly call home, then ay: I was of it” (179).

Frederick Douglass believed that the purpose of slavery was to force slaves to forget that they were individuals, or to prevent them from ever achieving an individual identity, a theme repeated in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Douglass writes, “To make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. . . . He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right, and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man” (315). Douglass’s realization that Master Hugh Auld has no right to take his salary as a caulker is an important step toward his own freedom (314). We the readers must, like Douglass, see Hugh Auld as a pirate instead of a master, as a slave driver rather than a father figure or benefactor. All effective propaganda asks us to see the world in black and white, “us” vs. “them.” Johnson’s thematic purpose is entirely the opposite—Rutherford learns that he has everything in common with those he felt had oppressed and betrayed him, and that the enemy he was fighting and running from was, in fact, a part of himself.

While Douglass comes to fiercely resent pouring “the reward of my toil into the purse of my master” (316), Rutherford, who has been industriously stealing the reward of other’s toil from their purses, learns that it may be time for him to contribute to society instead of filching from it. Douglass’s “prison-house of slavery”

(305) has become, in Johnson, a prison house of language—our construction of the past has limited our opportunities in the present. Thus has Johnson inverted the form and the theme of the slave narrative to make it serve a late twentieth-century purpose. Rutherford rejects mindless sensation-seeking; he learns self-respect, self-sacrifice, and the value of accepting responsibility and stability.

Johnson persuades readers to accept this overturning of the structure and theme of the slave narrative by his anachronistic and farcical—not satirical—tone. But the slave narrative is only one of the many intertexts that inform and enrich *Middle Passage*. Rutherford is owned by a master named Peleg Chandler, an allusion to one of the owners of the *Pequod* in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and many parallels can be drawn between Ishmael and Rutherford, Captain Ahab and Captain Falcon. We first meet Ishmael, wanderer and philosopher, at the wharf where he is observing “thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries,” men “tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks” that hear but cannot follow the call of the sea (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 12–13). Rutherford, like Ishmael, is drawn to the waterfront, where he observes “businessmen with half a hundred duties barnacled to their lives” staring longingly at the ocean (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 4–5). Both Rutherford and Ishmael “abominate all honorable respectable toils, trials, and tribulations of every kind whatsoever” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 14), and it is Ishmael's stoical “Who aint a slave?” philosophy, his understanding that “everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way—either in a physical or metaphysical point of view” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 15), that Rutherford comes to agree with by the end of his *Middle Passage*. These early allusions to Melville's classic sea story lead us to suspect that Johnson has consciously set out to rewrite not only a classic American slave narrative, but also a “great American novel,” from a slightly different point of view. According to Houston Baker, “the most forceful, expressive cultural spokespersons of Afro-America have traditionally been those who have first mastered a master discourse—at its most rarefied metalevels as well as at its quotidian performative levels—and then, autobiographically, written themselves and their own metalevels palimpsestically on the scroll of such mastery” (42), and this seems to be exactly the project Johnson has undertaken in *Middle Passage*. Like the *Pequod*, the *Republic* will go down, with only a few surviving to tell the tale. Rutherford goes down—but then floats to the top and, as in any good farce, survives the unsurvivable. Unlike Ishmael, who is only another orphan for the *Rachel* to pick up, Rutherford floats to the surface with his “family” (Baleka and Squibb) attached, and is rescued by a pleasure yacht carrying the one thing they need—Isadora, ready-made wife and mother, complete with wedding regalia.

Johnson's more subtle play on Melville's “Benito Cereno” is even more philosophically significant. This text is explicitly invoked through the names of virtually all the slaves: Babo, Atufal, Diamelo, Nacta, Ghofan, and Akim appear in both narratives. Melville's tale can be seen as a Rorschach blot for critics, since its narrator

makes no attempt to judge his characters by some grand moral scheme. The slave leader Babo can be seen as the incarnation of evil itself, or as a freedom fighter who takes the opportunity to overthrow his oppressor. Melville's text offers us little background; he expunges the nastiness displayed by the real Captain Bonito Sereno in his source, Captain Amasa Delano's 1817 *Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, transforming the despicable and vengeful captain of the slave ship portrayed by Delano into simply a representative man, the best and the worst his culture has produced, neither above it nor, more importantly, below it. Does Benito Cereno receive what he had coming to him, or is he an unfortunate victim? The story has a controversial and various critical history (see, for example, Gross; Richardson; Grejda; Jehlen), but I agree with those critics who see it as a covert argument against slavery. Several critics have noted the symbolic significance of the *San Dominick's* sternpiece, "a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked" (39). The significance of this symbol is that the half-man, half-goat figure who is "on top" is masked, as is the prostrate human figure. Their identities are unknown—and interchangeable. When Delano first boards the ship, the true situation on board is that those "on top," those who are symbolized by the satyr, are the black slaves. But only a few hours later it is Captain Delano who has his foot on the neck of the prostrate Babo, after he has jumped into the longboat in order to kill Benito Cereno. Now it is Amasa Delano who is "on top"—who is the satyr, half man, half beast. If we doubt that the whites are depicted as being as cruel as the blacks, we have only to turn to the last pages of the story, where Babo is "dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule," his body "burned to ashes" and his head "fixed on a pole in the plaza" for many days (104).

As Aldon Nielsen has pointed out, none of the blacks speak about their true motives in Melville's "Benito Cereno," or even in their true voices; they remain silent, inscrutable "others" whose minds, like Babo's "hive of subtlety" (104), are basically unknowable. In *Middle Passage*, the rebellious slaves openly articulate their motives. Johnson has also made explicit the brutal conditions which led slaves to revolt, making impossible the interpretation of "Benito Cereno" that takes the Spanish captain as the innocent victim of an evil and unprovoked uprising. But most importantly Johnson has challenged Melville's theme that malign evil is inherent in mankind, and therefore one group will always oppress another throughout history, even though the oppressors and the oppressed will change places periodically. Melville saw no group as intrinsically superior to another—after all, Amasa Delano's believing that the blacks were incapable of carrying out such a devious scheme is his major error. Nevertheless, for him, oppression is inevitable: revenge and retribution will progress in an endless revolving cycle in a godless world until the sun goes out in a puff of smoke.

The character who comes closest to Melville's worldview in Johnson's novel is Ebenezer Falcon, the ultimate American. Falcon believes that "as long as each sees

a situation differently there will be slaughter and slavery and the subordination of one to another 'cause two notions of things never exist side by side as equals" and "'tis the winning belief what's true and the conqueror whose vision is veritable" (97). What's more, Falcon believes that there is no hope for peace in the world because

Dualism is a bloody structure of the mind. Subject and object, perceiver and perceived, self and other—these ancient twins are built into mind like the stem-piece of a merchantman. We cannot *think* without them, sir. And what, pray, kin such a thing mean? Only this, Mr. Calhoun: They are signs of a transcendental Fault, a deep crack in consciousness itself. Mind was *made* for murder. Slavery, if you think this through, forcing yourself not to flinch, is the social correlate of a deeper, ontic wound. (98)

Rutherford can think of no defense against Falcon's "dark counsel and arguments." Falcon convinces him that fighting between groups is inevitable, and therefore Rutherford swings wildly among the three different groups on the ship—the Allmuseri, the mutineers, and Falcon's supporters—hoping to end up on the winning side. But by the end of the book he has realized that there is yet another way to make peace. He realizes that the self that he perceives as in mortal combat with everyone else is itself a figment of his imagination. Falcon, who is "immune to heaven," cannot lose his self, his ego, and ends up shooting himself in the head as the only way to escape being a slave once the Allmuseri take over the ship. He cannot step out of the Hegelian master/slave relationship without killing his body as well as his ego. Rutherford, however, painfully purges his body of his self-identity, through a series of grotesque and symbolic actions which include not only a near-death experience but also vomiting an "afterbirth or a living thing aborted from the body—something foul and shaped like the African god, as if its homunculus had been growing inside me" (178). The African god's name, he has already realized, is Rutherford.

Thus Johnson inverts yet another American classic, showing that there is a way out of the revolving cycle of oppressor and oppressed. Johnson confronts the basic existential problem of our age—how to be neither the victim nor the executioner—and answers it with a call to reinvent our perceptions of ourselves and others, because the history we choose to tell ourselves will shape our future. While Melville's "Benito Cereno" proved that all men harbor a capacity for murder and mayhem, Johnson's *Middle Passage* insists that we continue striving to be neither victim nor executioner. On all three sides of the fracas, characters like Falcon and Diamelo who believe that might is right and murder is justifiable end up killing themselves and destroying that fragile ship, the *Republic*, upon which all must depend for survival. Johnson, like Melville, shows that no one is inherently victim or inherently executioner, but that all too often the victim *becomes* the executioner. Even though Rutherford is no saint after his voyage—he blackmails Papa Zeringue into providing for the support of the three Allmuseri children who have survived the sinking of the *Republic*—he himself does not desire revenge, power, status, or even

sex with the now willing Isadora, because “desire was too much of a wound, a rip of insufficiency and incompleteness that kept us, despite our proximity, constantly apart, like metals with an identical charge” (208). Rutherford has become similar to Reb the coffin-maker in Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*—able to act in the world without in turn being acted upon, because, as the Soulcatcher puts it in that novel, the man who desires nothing for himself “can’t be caught—he’s *already* free” (173).

Every reader will find new and different paths leading out from Johnson’s novel to historical, philosophical, and fictional intertexts, and different ways to relate the novel to the current American historical moment. That a novel this rich, this “writerly,” is also so readable and enjoyable is certainly a commendable achievement for the author, and a reason to make it one of our “canonized” American texts, one whose lens we look through to understand the literary and social history of America. Johnson writes that even if, at the final end of history, life proves to be only a sick and meaningless joke, this does not permit us to proclaim now, in the midst of our uncertainty, the certainty that all is meaningless:

God only knows that when we reach Hegel’s end of history and all meanings are known, this nightmarish sense that we are locked inexorably into victimization may be, when we look back, *the* truth; but the social payoff of this grim perception, particularly when it smothers all others in a fiction (or life) is, as Gardner wrote, immoral. We are responsible for the way the world appears before us, for its depth and richness (if we are open to others) or its poverty (if we are not), and for the impact our vision has on others. (“Phenomenology” 154)

As teachers of literature, these words should resonate for us as a cultural imperative.

WORKS CITED

- Alexander, Marguerite. *Flights from Realism: Themes and Strategies in Postmodernist British and American Fiction*. London: Edward Arnold, 1990.
- Baker, Houston A. *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991.
- Bernal, Albert. *Farce: A History from Aristophanes to Woody Allen*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.
- Buddhism, Man and Nature*. With Alan Watts. Videotape. Harley Film Foundation, n.d.
- Delano, Amasa. *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Comprising Three Voyages Round the World, Together with a Voyage of Survey and Discovery in the Pacific Ocean and Oriental Islands*. Boston: E. G. House, 1817. Chapter XVIII rpt. Richardson 95–122.
- Douglass, Frederick. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Gates 243–331.
- Gass, William H. *Fiction and the Figures of Life*. New York: Knopf, 1970.

- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., ed. *The Classic Slave Narratives*. New York: Penguin, 1987.
- Goudie, S. X. "Leavin' a Mark on the Wor(l)d': Marksmen and Marked Men in *Middle Passage*." *African American Review* 29.1 (1995): 109–22.
- Grejda, Edward S. *The Common Continent of Men: Racial Equality in the Writings of Herman Melville*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat P, 1974.
- Gross, Seymour L. *A Benito Cereno Handbook*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1965.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History." *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Ed. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989. 3–32.
- . *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Jablon, Madelyn. *Black Metafiction: Self Consciousness in African American Literature*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1997.
- Jehlen, Myra, ed. *Herman Melville: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994.
- Johnson, Charles. *Being and Race: Black Writing since 1970*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988.
- . *Oxherding Tale*. New York: Grove, 1982.
- . *Middle Passage*. New York: Penguin, 1990.
- . "A Phenomenology of *On Moral Fiction*." *Thor's Hammer: Essays on John Gardner*. Ed. Jeff Henderson. Conway: U of Central Arkansas P, 1985. 147–56.
- Melville, Herman. "Benito Cereno." *Bartleby and Benito Cereno*. New York: Dover, 1990.
- . *Moby-Dick*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1967.
- Nielsen, Aldon L. *Writing Between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1994.
- Richardson, William D. *Melville's "Benito Cereno": An Interpretation with Annotated Text and Concordance*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic P, 1987.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. "The Phenomenology of the Allmuseri: Charles Johnson and the Subject of the Narrative of Slavery." *African American Review* 26.3 (1992): 373–94.
- . "The Properties of Desire: Forms of Slave Identity in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*." *Arizona Quarterly* 50.2 (1994): 73–108.
- Travis, Molly Abel. "*Beloved* and *Middle Passage*: Race, Narrative, and the Critic's Essentialism." *Narrative* 2.3 (1994): 179–200.
- Walby, Celestin. "The African Sacrificial Kingship Ritual and Johnson's *Middle Passage*." *African American Review* 29.4. (1995): 657–69.
- Worton, Michael, and Judith Still. Introduction. *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*. Ed. Michael Worton and Judith Still. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990. 1–33.